Chapter 8: Northern Democracies

Reeve Huston

1828 proved a watershed in American politics. One arena of change was electoral politics. There, the movement to elect Andrew Jackson president became a vehicle for reviving partisan electioneering, turned the politics of populist insurgency into a national phenomenon, and converted the routines of great-man campaigning into a full-blown cult of personality.

This was but one element of a much wider and diverse set of developments, however. In the same years that Jacksonians began to rewrite the script of electoral politics, activists from a wide variety of constituencies developed their own, competing democratic movements, many of which expressed contempt for the sort of politics practiced by Jacksonians and Adams men. This plurality of democracies was an entirely new phenomenon. The partisan democracy that developed before 1815 enjoyed a near-monopoly of public life: other ways of practicing politics either tended to reinforce political deference and elite influence (voluntary associations, for example) or were quickly crushed by the Federalists and absorbed by Republician activists (as happened to the Democratic Republican societies, the Whiskey Rebellion, Fries's Rebellion, and squatter rebellions in Maine and New York). The 1820s were a different story altogether. They witnessed the first appearance of some of the most important political movements of the nineteenth century: evangelical reform, third party movements, working-class mobilization, a new kind of African American radicalism in the North, an unprecedented mobilization of a variety of native peoples in movements for Indian autonomy. Unlike earlier movements, these mobilized particular *constituencies*—evangelicals, journeyman artisans, African Americans, native Americans--not the broad public that most political insurgencies of the late 1810s and early 1820s brought into public life. Historians have studied these mobilizations in depth, but few have studied them as *political* phenomena, as part of a broader American public life. Most have depicted these

mobilizations in isolation from one another and from electoral politics, as episodes in the history of

evangelicals, reformers, women, Native Americans, African Americans, and American workers. As a

result, historians have missed the *political* importance of these movements, ignoring each movement's

particular vision and practice of democracy and the cumulative effects that these movements had on

American public life.[1]

These varied movements appeared almost exclusively in the North. The South gave rise to

benevolent and other reform movements, but unlike their northern counterparts, these did not

promote widespread mobilization or challenge existing social hierarchies or political exclusions. There,

partisan electioneering retained a monopoly on democratic mobilization. By 1825, southern and

northern economic, social, and religious life had grown so far apart that they gave rise to strikingly

different political environments. Southern public life will be addressed in a later chapter. This chapter

examines the emergence of fragmented democracy in the North. examining the diverse political

practices and ideals of several movements. Doing so casts "Jacksonian democracy" in dramatically new

light, showing it to be just one—and one of the most cautious—versions of democracy to emerge in the

1820s.

---

[1] There are exceptions to this generalization. Richard S. Newman has explored the development of black politics in the 1820s and 1830s as a response to and selective appropriation of party politics, while John Brooke has traced the development of a multifaceted public sphere in Columbia County, New York. This chapter builds on their interpretations, but differs from them in scope and in interpretation: I see the new black radicalism of the late 1820s more as an outgrowth of older organizing traditions in the black community than as a borrowing from party politics; and I interpret the multiple movements that emerged in the 1820s as competing rather than as converging to create a multifaceted public sphere. The idea that the 1820s and 1830s gave rise to multiple democracies was first floated by Sean Wilentz. I owe a lot to Wilentz's interpretation. But where he sees in each competing democracy a particular constituency, social vision, and set of demands or policies, I probe each movement for its everyday political practices and its ideas about how public life ought to be conducted. Newman, "Protest in Black and White: The Formation and Transformation of an African American Political Community during the Early Republic," in Jeffrey L. Pasley, Andrew Robertson, and David Waldstreicher, eds., *Beyond the Founders: New Approaches to the Political History of the Early American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 180-205; John L. Brooke, *Columbia Rising: Civil Life on the Upper Hudson from the American Revolution to the Age of Jackson* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: Norton, 2006).

Why did so many democratic movements, with their diverse political practices, make their appearance in the North between 1825 and 1828? Democratization was in part a trans-Atlantic phenomenon. The new democracies drew heavily on a political repertoire first developed in England and Europe: voluntary associations, public meetings, petition campaigns, public mobilizations of the "body politic" to symbolize public opinion. Some of these practices had been transplanted in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and taken firm root in North America. Others—especially evangelical associations, with their powerful mode of organizing, printing, and raising money—were more recent transplants. The proliferation of northern American democracies predated a similar upsurge in mass mobilizations in Britain and Europe, but only by a few years. (More on this later.) As with so many changes, democratization was a trans-Atlantic phenomenon.

As in Britain and Europe, the rapid expansion of the transportation and newspaper networks played an essential part in the proliferation of democratic movements in the northern U.S. These technologies facilitated the movement and dissemination of activists, print, ideas, and practices over a wide territory.[2] In addition, a number of conditions peculiar to the US facilitated the creation of new movements. Americans shared a growing sense of crisis, as more and more people came to believe that public life had come to be dominated by a self-serving and unresponsive political elite. Democratic activists also built on the decade of political experimentation that followed the War of 1812. Many movements after 1825 accepted as an axiom anti-Compensation and Middling Interest activists' belief that policy could and should adhere to the aggregated will of "the people," while evangelical reformers founded their movement on earlier evangelicals' and public meetings' hope to change society without the aid of government, through collective citizen action. Beyond these broad conditions, a number of developments affected specific constituencies, pushing them toward political experimentation. The

---

[2] Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*; Richard John, *Spreading the News*; Jeffrey Pasley, *"The Tyranny of Printers."*

subdivision of work, widespread hiring of unskilled women, boys, and immigrants in urban workshops, and other attacks on journeymen's skill-privilege created a sense of crisis among urban journeymen, many of whom founded trade unions and America's first labor party. The separation of "home" and "work" and the cult of domesticity that grew up around it inspired white, northern, middle-class women to think of themselves as the moral guardians of their families—and, through them, of society. Along with a desire to stretch the confines of private domesticity, this new identity led some such women to act collectively, in public, in the name of defending society's morals. Hardening white racial practices generated enormous hardship for African Americans in the North. Most importantly, the Finneyite revivals of the 1820s instilled in converts a new sense of power and duty to remake the world in accordance with God's will.

The Politics of the Savior

Evangelicals were hardly new to public life. Congregationalists and Presbyterians led the expansion of voluntary associations in the years after the War of 1812, forming regional and national organizations to promote missionary work, the training of ministers, Sunday schools, and the distribution of bibles and religious tracts. These were mass membership organizations, but they discouraged grass-roots activism beyond raising funds for the central organization. Founded and supported by orthodox Calvinists in the Congregational and Presbyterian church, they sought to "temper and redeem what they feared was an increasingly anarchic democracy" and to rebut the false teachings of populist sects like the Methodists and Cambellites. Though supported financially by a large and widely dispersed membership, benevolent organizations kept decision-making in national and regional boards of directors that were dominated by educated ministers and their genteel allies in Boston, New

York, and Philadelphia. Their leaders' vision of politics mirrored their internal governance: in the face of disestablishment, democratic mobilization, and the declining power of orthodoxy, they sought to re-establish the covenanted, Godly, orderly, and deferential social and religious order that they ascribed to their forefathers. But they sought to do so not through established religion and the legal regulation of morals, but through voluntary association.[3]

Benevolent evangelical movements grew dramatically during and after Jackson's extended bid for the presidency, bearing witness to the staying power of conservative restorationism in this democratizing age. At the same time, the Yankee diaspora in Western New York gave birth to a new kind of evangelical politics. Where the conservative New England revivals and the bible, tract, and missionary societies that grew out of them sought to restore order, the revivals that began with the preaching of Nathan Beeman and Charles Finney bore witness to a sacred *dis*order, as young converts came to see obedience to God's will as requiring the eradication of sins that were embedded into the very fabric of their communities and nation. As Robert Abzug has observed, the Finneyite revivals in Western New York contained within them a strident youth rebellion. Converts were disproportionately young men and women whose zeal was fueled by rage at the cold intellectualism and emphasis on outward conformity preached by the orthodox ministers and lay partisans. Their dead theology could offer neither assurance of salvation nor a clear blueprint for navigating the unbearable social, economic, and cosmological uncertainty that young seekers faced.[4]

As befitted a movement of young men and (especially) women, the Finneyite revivals sought to create a sacred community that was inclusive, egalitarian, and comparatively free from institutional and customary restraints. The orthodox resurgency sought, in the face of the collapse of a united civil-

---

[3] Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press), 39-56*;* Michael P. Young, *Bearing Witness against Sin: The Evangelical Birth of the American Social Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 56-73 (quotation on p. 57).
[4] Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*,

church authority, to rededicate individuals to their place in an organic, hierarchical community. The Finneyites, in contrast, embraced the autonomous liberal subject that served as the foundation of antebellum conceptions of citizenship and sought to free him (or, more likely, her) to receive God's grace. They rejected the doctrines of human depravity, which held that humans were destined to think and act in ways that displeased God; and of election, which proclaimed that humans were predestined for salvation or perdition before they were born, and that no choice, no action could change their everlasting fate. In place of these doctrines, they substituted the simpler and sunnier principle of free will. Human beings had the capacity to choose between sin and righteousness. Jesus's sacrifice was already made, opening the way to salvation for everyone. All a man or woman had to do was to accept that sacrifice and the unearned favor it carried, and his or her salvation was assured. Making this decision began a process of purification, in which the unstoppable flow of God's love gave the convert the desire and the power to forswear sin and devote his or her life to God, however imperfectly.[5]

This model of conversion dramatically lightened the claims that tradition, institutions, and established authority held on the exercise of individual conscience. Salvation required no mediation by any institution or human authority; everything hinged on the relationship between the sinner and her God. Finney's autobiography portrayed his local minister and church as *obstacles* to his conversion. Reconciliation with God took place while he was alone in the woods. In the realm of salvation, at least, the Finneyites untethered individuals from the restraints of institutions and authorities. The model of a simple, unmediated choice between Christ and sin, salvation and perdition, became the Finneyites' model for all human action. All that was needed, in every situation, was to do God's will. If institutions, customs, or authorities stood in the way, the choice was clear: Christians were to live for God, not for the world. Nor did it matter if the Christian were male or female, young or old, socially marginal or a

---

[5] Finney autobiography—pages where he details his conversion experience. What other sources do I need to read/cite?

pillar of the community; all were equally capable of discerning God's will, all equally responsible for carrying it to fruition.

The Finneyites did not suddenly free themselves from all conventions and established institutions. All the ministers remained men; no one sought to imitate the community of property that the Jerusalem church had practiced, at least not at first. Still, the belief that every Christian was free to choose God's will, even in opposition to established usages and authorities was there for everyone, front and center.

The result at first was an all-out attack on established religious usages—and a remarkably egalitarian, activist, and iconoclastic movement. Finney and his supporters flaunted the traditional restraint and intellectualism of the Presbyterian churches by adopting the methods of Methodist and Baptist revivals: mass conversion techniques; a privileging of feeling over doctrine; an insistence on a direct experience of the sacred; a vision of conversion as voluntary, sudden, and transformative. They rejected their church's habit of shunning of the popular sects, opening their revivals to Baptist and Methodist preachers. These innovations were shocking enough to the Presbyterians and Congregationalists of western New York. Worse still was the militance of rank-and-file converts and their flaunting of gender and generational norms. Young men and women organized prayer meetings. The women spoke at them, even when men were present. They moved in packs through the cities and towns, reprimanding sinners in their homes, in stores, and in the streets. They condemned their elders: "'You old, grey headed sinner, you deserved to have been in hell long ago'—'this old hypocrite'—that old apostate'—that old grey headed sinner, who is leading souls to hell'—'that old verteran servant of the devil.'" In short, redemption empowered wives to assume spiritual authority over their husbands,

children over their parents, lay people over their ministers, young people over their elders. The young, largely female converts were laying the groundwork for a new order of things.[6]

Converting the heathen and reviving the lukewarm was at the center of the Finneyites' call to action, and tract, bible, and Sunday school societies flourished in the wake of the revivals. Still, converts believed that God demanded more of them. Once converted, Christians were expected, as the congregation of the Brick Church in Rochester promised, "to make it the great business of our life to glorify God and build up the Redeemer's Kingdom in this fallen world." The second aim required, as it did for orthodox reformers, ridding the world of sins which stood in the way of God's kingdom on earth. By bringing the world into conformity with God's will, Christians could prepare the way of Christ's second coming. In addition to joining the efforts of the Benevolent empire, the new converts helped found several new organizations aimed at eradicating particular sins and turned them into mass, activist organizations. Most notable among these was were the American Temperance Society, founded in 1826, and the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Sabbath, which began its existence in 1828. Both intemperance and Sabbath-breaking had been objects of organized action among the orthodox, but orthodox activists had focused only on violators' corrosive action on public morals. Through legal prohibition, church discipline, and elite influence, they sought to bring people into outward conformity with the rules of a covenanted community. Private sin remained a private matter. The new Temperance and Sabbatarian activists rejected this distinction between public disorder and private sin; they sought a thoroughgoing transformation of each individual and, through them, the world. For the first time, drinking became a sin in itself, not merely a gateway to the sin of drunkenness.[7]

---

[6] Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbing,* 68-74 (quotation on page 70); Mary P. Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 60-104.

[7] The best discussion of temperance and Sabbatarianism are: Ian Tyrell, *Sobering Up: From Temperance to Prohibition in Antebellum America, 1800-1860* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1979); Richard John, "Taking

The temperance and Sabbatarian movements originated in the Benevolent Empire. Newer and older societies shared leaders, members, even printing presses. It is hardly surprising that temperance and Sabbattarian activists drew heavily on the political and organizational repertoires of the established organizations. They adopted the auxiliary structure favored by their predecessors, allowing for the rapid spread of the organization. Like the tract and missionary societies, they sent out travelling agents to spread the word, organize new auxiliaries, and raise funds. And they embraced the Tract Society's strategy of inundating the population with cheap, simple, visually arresting tracts. They also drew on the techniques of partisan organizations, founding newspapers by which to instruct and mobilize the faithful. These institutions and methods proved extremely effective. By 1829, the ATS claimed 222 auxiliaries, a number that quintupled the following year and doubled again in 1830 and 1831. For its part, the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Sabbath boasted twenty-six auxiliaries by the end of its first year of existence.[8]

Despite these borrowings and collaborations, the ATS and the GUPS departed in important ways from the politics of the benevolent empire. The new organizations attracted a new leadership, who cherished different ideas about how to fulfill God's will in the world. Leaders were younger than officers in the tract, bible, and missionary societies. Where prominent ministers and their genteel patrons dominated the leadership of the older societies, temperance and Sabbatarian leaders were overwhelmingly young men who had served as full-time professional organizers in the older organizations. These activists were more likely to have been influenced by the new measure revivals;

Sabbatarianism Seriously: The Postal System, the Sabbath, and the Transformation of American Political Culture," *Journal of the Early Republic* 10 (Winter 1990): 517-67; Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 79-116; Young, *Bearing Witness*, 86-153. The quotation is from the Brick Church Session Minutes, Rochester, NY, quoted in Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815-1837* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), 111. For the ways in which orthodox reformers approached the sins of intemperance and Sabbath-breaking, see John, "Sabbatarianism," 520-31; Young, *Bearing Witness*, 65-74; Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling*, 30-56; Johnson, *Shopkeeper's Millennium*, 79-88.

[8] Tyrell, *Sobering Up*, 64-66, 75-76; John, "Sabbatarianism,"539; Young, *Bearing Witness*, 74-85, 118-28.

they overwhelmingly embraced those revivals' confrontational, activist vision of discipleship. These

activists served in a greater number of evangelical organizations than their colleagues in the tract and

missionary societies. They chafed at the tactical timidity and the social conservatism of the older

organizations' leadership, who often seemed more interested in maintaining social order than in

reforming the world in conformity to God's will. Temperance and Sabbatarian leaders also embraced

the Finneyites' insistence that women as well as men should participate in the holy struggle. While

national and state officers were all male, women made up between a third and half of members in local

societies, and the organization's leaders followed Finney's example in actively encouraging their

participation.[9]

These younger, largely female and middle-class activists embraced a practice of politics that

differed entirely from those of the older evangelical organizations. For one thing, their campaigns were

genuinely ecumenical, not tied to any particular church or alliance of churches. Their efforts were not

intended to serve any particular church—or all churches. These activists viewed churches much as they

did individuals: as having a *choice* between submitting to or opposing God's will. Churches were not the

agents of redemption, but a battleground in a millennial struggle between sin and its opponents.

Temperance reformers campaigned to "purify" churches from the sin of drinking by badgering clergy

and laity to sign the temperance pledge, working to exclude wine from the ritual of communion, and

fighting to make temperance a condition of church membership.[10]

Temperance and Sabbatarian activists' lack of reverence toward religious institutions was a

symptom of a more fundamental difference with orthodox reformers: they rejected their elders'

corporate model of the Godly community. Instead, they envisioned reform as an ever-expanding

---

[99] Tyrell, *Sobering Up*, 58-69; Young, *Bearing Witness*,
[10] Abzug, 98; Young, *Bearing Witness*. Citations for genuine ecumenicalism and rejection of churches as the object of service by temperance and Sabbatarian movements?

voluntary community of autonomous liberal subjects. This individual autonomy allowed evangelical activists to reject orthodox reformers' emphasis on orderliness and outward compliance. What was required was an *individual* commitment to eradicating sin from one's own life. "Aquaticus" wrote to the evangelical *Western Recorder* of Utica that each individual who offered a dram of whiskey to a neighbor was implicated in the sin of that neighbor If a person offers a neighborly dram to his neighbor and that neighbor "become a drunk" and "falls into all sorts of sin, "Aquaticus" wrote, the individual had contributed to "all this vice and misery . . . and must stand before God, charged with the consequences." Can it be possible, he wrote, "that he who regards the good morals of society, will continue by his example, to countenance this evil?"[11]

Although the commitment to battling sin was an individual one, made autonomously, temperance and Sabbath reformers insisted that it required *collective* action. "The time is at hand," "Aquaticus" argued, "when the moralist, the philanthropist, and the Christian, will arise in their might, and with united efforts withstand the progress of this gigantic monster." Concerted action, aggregated across space, would bring about not just the salvation of individuals, but the remaking of the world in accordance with God's will—which, in turn, would hasten the millennium. According to a Boston Sabbatarian, "Hitherto Christians have seemed to be content, if the world would permit them to exist. But the time has now come, when they are to call upon the world, not for the privilege of existence, but that the world should submit to Christ." This demand grew as naturally out of republican citizenship as out of Christian duty. Christian agitation was "a *civil right.*" Patriotism provided "a powerful auxiliary to the higher and holier motives, which arise from a consideration of divine authority. . . . As *Christians* we should do this; as lovers of our country, having the common and equal rights of citizens, we should do it."[12]

---

[11] *Western Recorder* (Utica, NY), May 20 1828.

[12] *Ibid*.; *Boston Recorder*, reprinted in *Ibid.,* July 29 1828.

For both temperance and Sabbath activists, reform was simply the process of evangelization applied to a particular sin. The process began when an individual made a public commitment to renounce the sin. The founding of every local reform society began with a pledge like the one adopted at the Bennington, Vermont Sabbatarian meeting: "We pledge ourselves to rest on the Sabbath day, according to the commandment." "Signing the pledge" became the central ritual of the ATS. The public character of individual commitment was crucial. Like the public declaration of one's acceptance of Christ's redemption, it initiated the newcomer into the fold and subjected her to the support and the surveillance of her fellows. Many societies' constitutions established procedures for the disciplining of backsliders.[13]

Public renunciation of sin was also essential to a centerpiece of evangelical politics: "organized example." Once free of Sabbath-breaking or intemperance, a recruit must not hide his light under a bushel, but use his influence to reform others. Temperance speaker Charles Sprague insisted that abstinence "must be done before men—in the sight of our families, our friends, and the world." The first object of evangelization was the household—a critical arena for female members. The Bennington Sabbatarians promised not only to honor the Sabbath themselves, but to "have the day properly regulated in our own families." Many reformers extended their field of legitimate influence to employees as well. A Providence meeting pledged "to endeavor to the extent of our influence, to induce young men employed as clerks, assistants, &c., in counting-rooms, stores, manufacturing establishments and other like places . . . to refrain from the habitual and unnecessary use of intoxicating liquors."[14]

---

[13] *Western Recorder*, April 29, May 13, June 3, 10 1828; Daniel Frost, Jr., *An Address Delivered Nov. 12, 1828, before the Canterbury Temperance Society* (Brooklyn, Conn.: Advertiser Press, 1829), 23, 25.

[14] *Western Recorder*, April 29, May 13, June 10 1828; Charles Sprague, *An Address Delivered Before the Massachusetts Society for the Suppression of Intemperance, May 31, 1827* (Boston: Bowles and Dearborn, 1827), 16, 21-22; *First Annual Report of the General Union for Promoting the Observance of the Christian Sabbath* (New

Beyond the reach of personal influence, temperance and Sabbath reformers sought to change the world through moral and intellectual appeal. Although their employees and family members doubtless rolled their eyes at the claim, temperance and Sabbath reformers explicitly rejected "coercion" as a method of reform. Reform would change the world in the same way that individuals were brought to Christ: by changing consciences and winning individual consent.   Although conversion, whether to Christianity or to Christian reform, hinged on individual choice, the process was primarily a collective one. The central battlefield was what reformers called "public opinion," which they envisioned as both the aggregation of individual consciences and the crucible in which those consciences were forged. .   As "Antipas" put it, the world would "submit to Christ . . . not by physical force, not by legislative enactments, but by influencing public opinion, by moral suasion."

It is difficult to convey the importance of public opinion to the new evangelical reformers' political thought. Every routine and resource available to reformers--organized example, pressuring family members and employees, public pledges, voluntary associations, tracts, travelling lecturers—was geared toward changing it. Most reform writers embraced it as the key to their campaign. In doing so, they created common ground with secular political insurgents. In their embrace of evangelization through voluntary association, temperance advocates and Sabbatarians echoed anti-Compensation activists' belief of the nation was best left to the will of "the people." Where secular activists saw public opinion as an established fact, however, evangelicals saw it as needing both rational persuasion and divine grace. Evangelicals also echoed earlier voluntary associations' conviction that reform would best occur not through the agency of government, but through the voluntary action of ordinary citizens. The founding convention of the General Sabbath Union declared that God was "raising up, in behalf of the Sabbath, a public sentiment, whose decisions would be at once law and its execution." They looked

---

York: J. Collord, 1829), 10; Frost, *Address*, 22; *Report of the Committee at a Meeting of the Citizens of Providence, Friendly to the Promotion of Temperance* (Providence: F.Y. Carlile, 1828), 3, 5.

forward to the day when improved communication would facilitate "the formation of a universal public sentiment, which, under the guidance of science and the bible, shall disenthrall the world."[15]

Temperance and Sabbatarian advocates engaged in public, collective efforts to change the rules governing common life. They were, in other words, engaging in politics. But the politics they practiced departed radically from the politics that Jacksonians were seeking to enact. Where Jackson men used a combination of honor politics, insider deals, popular appeals, and party organization to win elections and control the federal and state governments, Sabbath and temperance advocates proposed to bypass the entire structure of parties, elections, and government. For them, the redemption of the nation would occur through the voluntary action of associated individuals and through pressure exerted through the influence of employers and family members. Where Jacksonians sought to mobilize a citizenry increasingly defined as white, adult, and male, evangelicals sought to make activists out of everyone who had a soul. In so doing, they began to forge a politics in which women and men of all races and all ages could seek to reshape their world. Where Jackson men began to hardened the gendered and racial boundaries of political community, evangelicals forged a much more open-ended public that could be used to both weaken and buttress patriarchal power. At the time of Jackson's inauguration, evangelicals did not denounce party politics or pose their politics as an explicit alternative to it. But as Jackson's presidency proceeded, that would begin to change.

A New Black Radicalism

In northern cities, the liberatory possibilities of evangelical reform emerged just as hardening white racial practices were creating a sense of crisis among African Americans. The result was an outpouring

---

[15] *Western Recorder*, May 13, June 3 1828. See also Ibid., June 3, July 29 1828; *First Annual Report of the General Union*, 10; Sprague, *Address*, 4-7, 23.

of political activity. This new activism simultaneously rested on and sought to transcend the political

work of the two previous generations

During the 1810s and 1820s, a visible hardening of the racial regime in the North placed

enormous strain on black communities. This strain, in turn, inspired large numbers of African Americans

to intensify, and in some ways change, their political project. Songwriters, performers, politicians, and

ordinary whites systematized and elaborated older ideas about black incapacity, broadcasting them far

more ubiquitously than before through print, speech, and stage performances. In many cases, these

cultural producers explicitly declared black savagery and ignorance to be biological and immutable.

Armed with these ideas, white northerners added a new element to the racial regime: spacial

separation. Certain occupations, neighborhoods, celebrations, and places of amusement, whites

became convinced, should be reserved for whites; by applying pressure to landlords and employers and

physical violence to African Americans, they made their idea a reality.   At every turn, whites reinforced

black subordination and separateness with violence. Personal insult and assault became a regular part

of African American life; after 1828, this low-level violence came to be punctuated by large-scale,

collective attacks on black people and their institutions. Abductions of fugitive slaves and the legally free

accelerated as well. [16]

At first, one way that African American activists responded was by promoting collective

emigration. Black Philadelphians, along with a large number of African Americans elsewhere, rejected

the efforts to colonize them to Liberia, but in 1824-26 some six thousand African Americans moved to

Haiti. An unfamiliar climate, poor soil, cultural differences with the locals, and a lack of capital made the

experiment a disaster. By mid-1826, a third of the emigrants had returned to the United States, bearing

tales of hardship. Black activists everywhere quickly abandoned the emigrationist project. A new

---

[16]

consensus emerged among African Americans that their best hope was to remain in "this land which we have watered with our tears and our blood" and fight for their rights as Americans.[17]

With emigration off the table, African American activists intensified their older campaign of institution-building, antislavery and anti-racist publicity. In the process, they continued promoting black solidarity and trying to forge African Americans into productive, self-respecting, and racially aware citizens. In cities large and small, missionary societies, mutual relief organizations, debating clubs, antislavery societies, and associations devoted to the education, moral instruction, and economic betterment of African Americans proliferated. *Freedom's Journal*, the first newspaper published by and for African Americans, opened its doors in 1827. It quickly became a clearinghouse for antislavery and anti-racist ideas, as well as for news about black people's political initiatives from Ontario to Baltimore. Two other newspapers began publishing over the next few years. African Americans produced a steady stream of antislavery and anti-racist pamphlets as well.[18]

As activists' focus on institution-building, collective self-cultivation, and publication indicate, the core aims and tactics of African American politics did not change. Instead, the old efforts intensified. African American schools, churches, and voluntary associations proliferated and spread to smaller cities like Hartford, Albany, and New Haven. In the process, they trained countless new pupils and citizens-in-the-making. Black-run newspapers, as well as sermons and pamphlets, reported regularly on racial conditions in localities throughout the Northeast, rebutted racist slanders in the white press, and denounced racial discrimination and slavery. They published historical and ethnographical essays that aimed at refuting ascendant notions of white superiority. And they reported on the burgeoning political

---

[17] Hinks, *To Awaken*, 82-84, 98-104; Nash, *Forging Freedom*, 223-27, 233-45. Philadelphia African Americans turned against emigration and colonization in 1817, long before an anti-emigrationist consensus emerged elsewhere.

[18] *Freedom's Journal*, March 16, 20, 30, April 6, 30, May 11, June 1, 29, July 13, Aug. 17, Sept. 17, Dec. 7 1827, Jan. 11, Feb. 1, 22, May 9 1828; Hinks, *To Awaken*, 75-76, 104.

initiatives among African Americans from Baltimore to Ontario. In the process, they encouraged black

people in other towns and cities to follow the example of activists elsewhere. Both implicitly and

explicitly, they sought to create an "imagined community" among black people, insisting that all African

Americans shared mutual interests, a common bond of oppression, and a collective destiny. Civic

celebrations proliferated as well, as activists arranged to commemorate a growing number of occasions:

American independence, the federal abolition of the slave trade, the abolition law of each state, Haitian

independence, and the like. The processions, dinners, toasts, songs, and decorations at these occasions

all reinforced the newspapers, speakers', and pamphleteers' messages about the evils of slavery, the

injustice of racial prejudice, and the common destiny of the African race.[19]

     For all of their dedication to old political aims, the outpouring of political activity that shook

northern black communities after 1825 could not help but change the character of their politics.   The

addition of newspapers to activists' arsenal gave African Americans' denunciations of slavery and their

messages of racial uplift and solidarity an unprecedented continuity in public life. Where antislavery

polemics appeared only occasionally before 1827, in that year they began to appear weekly.

Newspapers also permitted what were once scattered local movements to communicate easily, making

possible a regional black public. *Freedom's Journal* reached readers and received reports from Virginia,

Maryland, Ohio, and Ontario, as well as from the New England and Mid-Atlantic states. The circulation

of information allowed activists in these widely scattered states to learn one another's arguments, to

emulate one another's methods, and to participate in a political movement and a racial collectivity that

was self-consciously national in scope. In 1828, activists in Boston founded the General Colored

---

[19] On the activities of churches, schools, and voluntary associations, see the citations in note 21 and *Freedom's Journal*, March 20, April 6, July 13, 20, 27, Sept. 17, Dec. 7 1827. Literary attacks on racism and slavery appeared in every issue of *Freedom's Journal,* as well as in pamphlets. See especially Ibid., March 6, 13, 20, May 11, 18, June 29, July 27, Sept. 7, 14, Nov. 9, 16 1827; Feb. 2, 29, April 18, June 27, July 18, 25, Sept. 19, 28, Oct. 17 1828; David Walker, *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World.* On civic celebrations, see Ibid., March 20, April 30, June 29, July 6, 13, Aug. 10 1827; July 11, 18 1828; Hinks, *To Awaken my Afflicted Brethren*, 74.

Association. One of the founders, David Walker, declared the purpose of the Association to be "to unite

the colored population . . . through the United States of America." Samuel Cornish of New York echoed

Walker's national vision, calling for a network of associations and traveling lecturers which would link

"together, by one solid chain, the whole free population, so as to make them think and feel, and act, as

one solid body." Walker and Cornish failed to realize their vision of a nationally united people their

lifetimes, but the publication of black newspapers and, after 1830, the Colored Convention movement,

made those aims seem achievable.   Like the Jacksonians and evangelical reformers, "the people" whom

black activists sought to organize was defined by national boundaries as well as by race; "the nation"

constituted both the scope and the object of political action.[20]

A second change was equally momentous: after 1825, increasing numbers of black activists

sought to create a viable politics that did not depend on white patrons. The open deference that had

marked black leaders' relationship with white philanthropists became much rarer after mid-1827. In its

place was an insistence on black intellectual and political autonomy. In their inaugural issue, the editors

of *Freedom's Journal* listed their first motivation for starting the newspaper: "We wish to plead our own

cause. Too long have others spoken for us." Of course, African American activists had long spoken for

themselves, in pamphlet, speech, sermon, and parade, on behalf of their "bretheren." Although they

minced no words in describing the injustice of slavery and racial prejudice, they had done so in a

language calculated to placate white patrons: measured, accommodative, often deferential. After 1826,

black antislavery writers were less careful of white feelings; their writings took on a more trenchant,

uncompromising, declamatory tone. An 1827 letter to *Freedom's Journal* suggested that, given each

state's commitment "to support oppression" in the form of slavery, the United States, were "leagued in

a criminal association." Another correspondent pointed out how slavery and America's "sinful" racial

---

[20] Get citation on frequency of pamphlet publication before 1827.

practices violated by Divine law and the Declaration of Independence.   "Tell it not in America, publish it not in the streets of our cities, lest Mohaomedan Turkey bring us into *reproach*, and make us a hissing and a by-word. When such reflections lead us to contemplate the Eternal as a 'jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children unto the third, and fourth generation,' *we tremble for our country.*" For the first time, black writers chose to ridicule their white opponents. In responding one editor's view that slaves were happy, *Freedom's Journal* suggested that this conclusion was the product of "a mind enfeebled by old age."[21]

African American activists even began to criticize their patrons and allies among white reformers. In their inaugural edition, the editors of *Freedom's Journal* lamented that "our friends . . . have fallen into the current of popular feeling . . . , living in the practice of prejudice, while they abjure it in theory." A few months later, they chastised white school trustees for their low expectations of black children:

> A little smattering [of knowledge], and a few words recommendatory from his teacher, are all they look for . . . . The very idea of his colour, is enough to elicit praise . . . .

> We are . . . skeptical . . . that almost *any one* is qualified to keep a school for our children. Enemies may declaim upon their dullness and stupidity; but . . . have they not had dull and stupid instructors; who, if placed in any other than a coloured school, would hardly be considered as earning *their salt*.[22]

The new willingness to criticize white reformers reached its peak in the controversy over colonization. More than anything else, the growth of that movement convinced African American activists that they could no longer defer to their white "friends" and must act independently of them. Although opposition to the American Colonization Society started with its founding in 1817, that opposition peaked during the late 1820s. Much opposition to colonization took place through private

---

[21] Ibid., March 16, June 29, Sept. 7 1827 (quotations). See also Ibid., May 11, July 27, Sept. 14, 28 1827.
[22] Ibid., March 16, June 1 1827. See also Ibid., Sept. 14 1827.

argument and entreaties. A New York activist visited a New Haven abolitionist, "whose feelings have long been warmly enlisted in our cause." After discussing topics of mutual agreement, "the conversation . . . turned on African Colonization; but vain were all our efforts, to convert 'l'un au l'autre': as I found him, so I left him." Such private entreaties comported well with the etiquette of patronage, but for one detail: the client publicized his failed efforts in the newspaper and went on to publicly lambaste the cause of his patron. The Society's greatest sin, he suggested, was its lack of interest in the will of its erstwhile beneficiaries. It had duped the public with "the foolish *idea* that we are all longing to emigrate to their land of '*milk and honey,*' and a thousand other Munchausen stories, too trifling and inconsistent to be repeated." It was "high time," he wrote, "that our friends . . . should know . . . that we are all, to a man, opposed . . . to the Colonization Society." He also accused colonizationists of bad faith. Slaveholder members "care not whether the emigrants die the next day after their arrival in Liberia; having obtained . . . our removal from this country—for their own personal safety, and the better security of their slaves." Others accused the society of trafficking in racial stereotypes, which helped "keep us in our present degraded state." For their part, colonizationists responded with the outrage of a paternalist betrayed, writing letters of protest to the editors of *Freedom's Journal* and denouncing its editors from the pulpit.[23]

Increasingly freed from the habits of deference and newly possessed of a weekly newspaper, African American politics took on an increasingly communal and collaborative character. Although a (comparatively poor) middle class dominated the membership of anti-slavery and moral reform organizations, political activity permeated all sectors of African American communities. Black women were active in education, moral reform, and charitable activities, all of which domestic writers deemed appropriate outlets for women's energies. Until the 1830s, women seem to have avoided involvement

---

[23] Quotations are in Ibid., August 17 and Sept. 7 1827. See also Ibid., Aug 31, Sept. 7, 21, 28, Oct. 5, 19, 26, Nov. 2 1827.

in antislavery and anti-racist publicity. Community discussions about schools tended to take place in mixed-sex meetings; otherwise, women participated in politics through all-female organizations like New York's Dorcas Society, which sought to increase attendance rates in the city's black schools by providing pupils with warm shoes and clothing. Exclusively female service organizations seems to have become widely practiced and accepted.

Politics seems to have occupied the poor as well, both male and female. An older tradition of mass meetings continued into the late 1820s. Reports of grass-roots activism multiplied dramatically in the late 1820s, though it is hard to know whether this was a sign of more intensive activity or simply an artifact of the appearance of black run newspapers. Perhaps the most common form of engagemen was collective self-defense. In mid-July, 1828, a white man stabbed an African American woman and her son on Sullivan Street in New York. Some neighbors raised an alarm, a crowd surrounded the house into which the attacker had run. The neighbors broke open the door, captured the assailant, and carried him to jail.   Even more frequently, free African Americans of all classes sheltered fugitive slaves, kept watch for kidnappers, and punished those who betrayed the former by aiding the latter. In 1827, Philadelphians created a "Protecting Society" to prevent kidnappings and to rescue those already caught. On several occasions, free African Americans raised money buy particular enslaved people. In the fall of 1828, Prince Abduhl Rahaman, who claimed to be an African Prince, toured the major cities of the Northeast to raise funds to buy his family. Boston African Americans honored him with a public procession, a public dinner, and toasts and songs written for the occasion.[24]

Black politics involved both a division of labor and united community efforts. Middle-class men dominated efforts to address a broader public, while women took charge of most efforts involving education or charity. Only the campaign for moral reform and collective uplift seems to have divided

---

[24] Ibid., Dec. 14 1827, May 2, July 18, June 27, Sept 12, Oct. 3, 24 1828; Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 78-79, 85.

African American communities: middle-class people embraced it, while a large portion of the black poor

sought to evade it. Defending communities from kidnappers seems to have brought forth the

coordinated efforts of the entire community, however. Prosperous and poor harbored fugitives, looked

out for informants and slave catchers—and sought to punish them. In October of 1828, after several

New Yorkers were captured and transported southward, *Freedom's Journal* took on a new role: as

clearinghouse and advocate for fugitives and a coordinator of community punishment of black

informants. The middle-class editors advised "our bretheren who have been so lucky as to escape from

bondage" to leave the city for the time being. A week later, they reported that the captives had been

"betrayed by *coloured persons*."   They promised to reveal one informant's name to anyone who

inquired and called on all black people in New York to shun him. Over the next week, some people

accosted the informant, but he escaped. *Freedom's Journal* praised the crowd's action, and called for

"our brethren . . . from Maine to Georgia" to "do something to arrest this infamous business." The

editors left the question of how to punish informants "to older and wiser heads," but expressed

confidence that they would "find but little peace if they remain in the city." They also called on black

people outside of New York to keep an eye out for these outcasts. Accusations of informing were no

minor matter. When George Hicks of Washington, D.C. faced charges of betraying several fugitive slaves

to slave-catchers, he requested and received a trial before a committee of community members. Hicks

and his accusers presented their cases, and the committee declared him innocent.[25]

      Collaborative defense of fugitives bore witness to a distinctly collective vision of politics. For

free African Americans, politics was not an arena for the play of individual interests or preferences. The

basic unit of politics was a racially bounded *collectivity:* "the people of color" of a city, state, or nation.

Different individuals or sexes or classes of people had different tasks to perform, but all were expected

---

[252525] Ibid., 78-79, 85; *Freedom's Journal*, Oct. 31, Nov. 7, 14 1828.

(in theory, at least) to act as agents of community sentiment and group interests. Major decisions affecting black people fell under the jurisdiction of mass meetings. One the first actions that Philadelphia's black leaders took in response to the formation of the American Colonization Society was to call such a meeting. There the audience rejected colonization in no uncertain terms. From that point forward, the city's leaders abandoned all interest in emigration. The imperative that leaders were agents of the community at large remained strong after 1825. Early in their tenure, the editors of *Freedom's Journal* declared themselves to be "guardians for the public welfare of our brethren." Several months later, they declared that "in advocating or opposing plans, which concern us, we have always endeavoured to express the sentiment of the majority of our brethren from Maine to Georgia." Since their paper was "the only channel of public communication," they insisted, "it ought as nearly as possible to speak their views." Such declarations probably included no small measure of ventriloquism; there is reason to question whether most black people endorsed the journal's campaign for moral uplift. Still, the declarations paid tribute to a powerful shared belief that leaders and spokesmen were answerable to the people for whom they claimed to speak. After a year of publication, activists in Boston called meetings "of the People of Colour" to determine "whether the Freedom's Journal had been conducted in a manner satisfactory to the subscribers and to the Coloured community at large." We do not know how large these meetings were or who attended them, but the ideal behind the meeting was clear: the newspaper was answerable to "the people" at large.[26]

The rejection of paternalism, the uncompromising denunciation of slavery and racism, the overriding emphasis on forging a new black political subject and a powerful black peoplehood—all of these developments in black politics shaped and were in turn clarified and consolidated in the pre-eminent political work by an African American in the 1820s: David Walker's *Appeal to the Colored*

---

[26] [26] Ibid., April 25 1828; Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren*, 75; citation in Nash, Winch on 1817 meeting.

Citizens of the World. The son of a free mother and an enslaved father in North Carolina, Walker moved

first to Charleston and later to Boston, where he ran a used clothing shop and rose quickly to leadership

in the African American community. Walker participated energetically in Boston African Americans'

political struggles, serving as a public speaker and an agent and correspondent for *Freedom's Journal*.

The few speeches and letters that can be attributed to him reveal him as occupying a vanguard position

in black politics, trenchantly championing racial solidarity, collective uplift, black political autonomy, and

an uncompromising war on slavery and racial prejudice. In 1828, he published the first edition of his

Appeal . . . to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to those of the

United States. The *Appeal* ran through three editions and scores of reprintings, was [write about its

influence and distribution!—see Hinks].

The *Appeal* powerfully encapsulated the state of African American political thought and strategy

in the late 1820s. Like his fellow activists, Walker embraced the dual campaigns for uplift and liberation

that had marked black politics since the 1790s. But he tied this agenda to an explicit vision of black self-

determination and revolutionary struggle. As its title suggested, the *Appeal* was directed primarily to a

black audience.   Walker rejected earlier activists' (and many contemporaries') appeals to whites as

potential "friends." When he did address white people, he did so in a prophetic voice, cataloguing their

sins and warning them to repent.

> Americans! Notwithstanding you . . . treat us more cruel than any heathen nation ever did a
> people it had subjected . . . . I mean you of the United States, whom I believe God designs to
> save from destruction, if you will hear . . . . There are some . . . who will never be able to repent.
> God will surely destroy them. . . . Give us education, and teach us the pure religion of our Lord
> and Master . . . Remember Americans, that we must and shall be free and enlightened as you
> are, will you wait until we shall, under God, obtain our liberty <u>by the crushing arm of power?</u> [27]

---

[27] *David Walker's Appeal . . . to the Coloured Citizens of the World, But in Particular, and Very Expressly, Those of the United States of America* (find publication information), 69-70.

Unlike his predecessors and contemporaries, Walker rejected the notion that black liberation depended on the support of white people. "Let no one suppose," he wrote, that white abolitionists' defences of black capabilities against the denigrating speculations of Thomas Jefferson "are enough— they are *whites*—we are *blacks*. We, and the world wish to see the charges of Mr. Jefferson refuted by the blacks *themselves."* Walker's concern was preparing African Americans to liberate themselves.[28]

When many black writers still chided African Americans for failing to live up to white people's standards of respectability, Walker reprimanded them for their "ignorance." Drawing on the Bible and on Enlightenment faith in human reason, Walker imbued this fault with special significance. In the first place, ignorance signified a lack of knowledge of one's proper relationship to God and to other men. "Are we MEN?," he asked his fellow African Americans. "Did our Creator make us to be slaves to dust and ashes like ourselves? . . . . Have we any other Master but Jesus Christ alone? Is he not their Master as well as ours?—What right then, have we to obey and call any other Master, but Himself?" As the passage shows, ignorance implied a lack of knowledge of one's rights and interests--both of which Walker conceived of as inhering in the group rather than the individual. Above all, ignorance suggested a lack of racial solidarity, the most grievous sin among both the free and the enslaved. Too often, he wrote, his African American brethren "court[ed] favour with, and [told] news and lies to our *natural enemies*, against each other—aiding them to keep their hellish chains of slavery upon us."[29]

The solution was education—a remedy which he envisioned as a collective, racially bound enterprise, both the source and the result of black solidarity. At a moment when northern African Americans were, for the first time, beginning to establish black-run schools, Walker called on "men of colour, who are also of sense" to *go to work and enlighten your brethren!—*Let the Lord see you doing

---

[28] Ibid., 14-15.
[29] Ibid., 11, 16 (quotations) and 19-33.

what you can to rescue them and yourselves from degradation." Walker's vision of education included

literacy, numeracy, and more advanced skills like composition and accounting. It also encompassed a

knowledge of black people's collective rights, interests, and capacities—one that would explode black

people's own collaboration with their oppressors. Education would also expand their ambitions for

themselves, aspiring to high learning and work that transcended the menial. Education, Walker insisted,

would make African Americans unfit to be slaves or members of a degraded caste.[30]

In short, education would prepare African Americans for revolution. Walker embraced his

contemporaries' and earlier black leaders' efforts to forge a new black political subject and, in an

important departure, tied that subject to a vision of revolutionary transformation under God's care and

command. Walker worshiped the God of Exodus—a God of justice and wrath, committed to liberating

the oppressed and punishing the oppressors. Just as He had delivered the Israelites from Egyptian

bondage, so too would he liberate the slaves of America.

> "Remember . . . to lay humble at the feet of our Lord . . . . Let our enemies go on with with their butcheries, and at once fill up their cup. Never make an attempt to gain our freedom . . . until you see our way clear—when that hour arrives and you move, be not afraid . . . ; for . . . Jesus Christ the King of heaven and of earth who is the God of Justice and of armies, will surely go before you. And those enemies who have for hundreds of years stolen our *rights,* and kept us ignorant of Him and His worship, He will remove.[31]

Black people would not be the passive recipients of God's deliverance, Walker insisted; instead,

they would act as agents of the God of armies. He urged God's people to remain united and to be

prepared to fight: "if you commence, make sure work . . . . they want us for slaves, and think nothing of

murdering us . . . . therefore, if there is an *attempt* made by us, kill or be killed."

---

[30] Ibid., 28, 31-32 (quotations) and 19-33.
[31] Ibid., 11-12; see also 20,69-70.

David Walker was a Christian. He urged white Americans to repent, and offered a shining vision of a society in which former slaves and former masters would "live as brothers." But he urged his black brethren to prepare for a more difficult liberation. Although most black leaders of his generation avoided publicly embracing violence, in most other respects Walker codified and extended the new developments in northern African American politics during the late 1820s. Even as they continued to combine collective uplift with prophetic denunciations of slavery and racism, a new generation of black leaders threw off the mask of deference, increasingly speaking truth to power. They worked to build political autonomy, insisting on black people's ability to speak and think for themselves. Above all, they worked to create a new black political subject—educated, morally upright, politically assertive committed to racial solidarity. Unlike Walker, who promoted a distinctly masculine vision of black self-assertion, most activists practiced a politics of community, in which women and men, rich and poor each had his or her place. And they insisted that everyone, leaders and followers alike, was bound to carry out the collective will of the community.

Anti-Masons

The anti-masonic movement has been characterized in many ways: as an example of the "paranoid style" in American politics, as a Christian, communitarian revolt against capitalism, as a pioneer of partisan electoral competition. The movement did end up as a partisan organization, though this was a departure from its original aims. There's little evidence that it was anti-capitalist, but it's hard to argue with its paranoia, even though anti-masons were sorely provoked. Historians have paid little attention to a central feature of the movement, however: it was a modern mass mobilization with a distinct vision of democratic rule. By exploring this facet of the early movement in New York state, we can gain greater insight into the broad, contested terrain of democratization in the antebellum North.

Originating in the canal district of western New York, antimasonry developed where both the Bucktails' grass-roots partisanship and evangelical reform were particularly strong, and it bore the influence of each. Although they framed their arguments in secular terms, Antimasons, like evangelical reformers, sought to change the world through voluntary collective action rather than through state power. They sought change by appealing to a public opinion that they imagined as sovereign and nearly infallible. Antimasons also entered electoral politics; in doing so, they drew on much of the repertoire of the Bucktails and Clintonians, even as they articulated a systematic critique of those parties' practice of politics. Party politics proved a source of deep conflict, however. One way of reading the history of Antimasonry is as a playing out of the tensions between the democratic aspirations of the rank-and-file and the realities of partisan revival.

Antimasonry emerged as a response to a kidnapping and cover-up in Batavia, New York. In 1826, a stonemason by the name of William Morgan parted ways with Batavia Freemason's lodge. By summer, he was writing an expose of the order's secrets and had lined up David C. Miller, the editor of the *Batavia Republican Advocate*, as his printer. Local masons sought to prevent Morgan and Miller from publishing Morgan's work-- first with threats, then with trumped-up lawsuits for debt. When these measures failed, the county sheriff, himself a Mason, arrested Morgan, while crowds of fraternal brethren twice tried to burn Miller's office. On September 11, several members of the order arrested Morgan a second time and carried him to jail in the nearby town of Canandaigua. The next night they released him into the hands of yet another group of Masons, who spirited him away. Morgan was never heard from again.[32]

---

[32] Ronald Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1850s*, 98-99; Formisano and Kathleen Smith Kutolowski, "Antimasonry and Masonry: The Genesis of Protest, 1826-1827," *American Quarterly* 29 (1977): 147-49; *Republican Advocate* (Batavia, NY), Sept. 29 1826.

The response to Morgan's kidnapping came immediately. Miller published his account in the *Republican Advocate*, and local men began investigating the event. Two weeks after the abduction, activists in Batavia held a meeting where they presented the results of their research. Nine depositions were read aloud, establishing the sequence of events; after a speech, the meeting condemned the abduction as an attack on the rule of law and the rights of citizens. "Born in this free Country," the assembled citizens had seen the law as "a sacred shield" for the "protection of our property, our personal liberty, and our lives." Morgan's abduction, they declared, had exposed their faith as an illusion. Their liberty and safety it was now clear, were "at the mercy" of "a standing Mob . . . , organized and disciplined, and directed by persons . . . unknown."[33]

State and local governments, in other words, were failing to preserve their rights as citizens. The remedy, they believed, was for citizens to act for themselves, as a body. Participants charged a committee with making a "full investigation" of the crimes against Morgan and to lay the facts "before the American people." And they vowed to "hold themselves ready at all times" to "protect the members of said committee from all outrage and violence." Similar meetings were called in nearby towns and counties; there, too, the assemblies promised to investigate Morgan's kidnapping, bring the guilty to justice, and interpose themselves between investigators and the conspirators.[34]

These early antimasons were drawing on a tradition of citizen activism that stretched back to the colonial era and to early modern England. Englishmen in the metropole and in the colonies knew that when the magistrates failed to defend the public interest, the people themselves had a duty to do so. This was the logic behind *posse comitatus*, in which local magistrates could corral locals into helping them enforce the law; it was also the common sense that justified crowd actions. The early antimasons

---

[33] *Republican Advocate* (Batavia, NY), Sept. 29 1826.
[34] Ibid, Sept. 29, Dec. 22 1826 and 1826-28, *passim*.

were, in a sense, a *posse* or a crowd, stepping in on behalf of the community when officials failed to protect its interests. The only difference was that they used facts and publicity rather than threats, violence, and ritual humiliation to do so.[35]

Under public pressure, grand juries in several counties handed down indictments on dozens of suspects. Local Masons closed ranks, unleashing a campaign of threats, ostracism, rumor, break-ins, and economic boycotts against their critics. Newspapers declined to report Morgan's abduction and the new movement, save to dismiss the one and ridicule the other. The trials of Morgan's accused abductors, in the meantime, gave rise to accusations of obstruction of justice. Masons were empanelled onto juries; five of the seven judges presiding over the trials in Genesee county belonged to the order. Witnesses disappeared; others refused to testify; still others were later indicted for perjury. In Genesee only six of eighteen indicted Masons went to trial; four were convicted and given light sentences.[36]

Those who had mobilized against Morgan's kidnapping saw in these developments the outlines of a coordinated campaign to obstruct justice, stifle investigation, and silence dissent. Where they once attributed criminality to a handful of particular Masons, the nascent antimasonic movement now began to see Freemasonry itself as a threat to the rule of law. The order, one meeting claimed, had "spread itself through our whole country" and "interwoven itself in all our Institutions. Its adherents may be found in the Executive chair, in the Legislative hall, on the bench of Justice, in every civil office down to the very lowliest." Masons controlled much of the press and used it to "control public opinion." Solemn

---

[35] Pauline Meier, *From Rebellion to Revolution*; E.P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century"; what else? This tradition of community self-defense evolved differently in other situations during the early nineteenth century. See Huston, *Land and Freedom;* Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy*; Taylor, *Liberty-Men and Great Proprietors.*

[36] Kathleen Kutolowski and Ronald Formisano, who offer the best analysis of the early antimasonic movement, reject previous historians' depiction of the antimasons' fears of Masonry as paranoid delusion; Masons in upstate New York, they argue, systematically obstructed justice in the Morgan case. My account of the Masonic counterattack is from their work. See Formisano and Kutolowski, "Antimasonry and Masonry"; Formisano, *For the People*, 99-100.

oaths, which bound members to keep the order's secrets, to aid one another in all cases, and to give

each other preference for public office maintained the Order's power, shielding it from outside scrutiny

and encouraging secret interference in public affairs. Freemasonry constituted an "invisible power"

within a republican polity, accountable only to itself. As a Randolph, Vermont meeting put it, the

institution tended "to paralyze justice—to trample on our rights—to establish an unnatural and

ummerited distinction—a species of exclusive favoritism and aristocracy, derogatory to the equality of a

free and independent people." A minority of antimasons also denounced the Order and its oaths as anti-

Christian.[37]

To fight this threat, antimasons elaborated on the methods employed by the initial Batavia

meeting in September 1826. Historians of antimasonry tend to focus on the antimasonic party, treating

their non-electoral efforts as a brief and unimportant predecessor to the political party. Movement

participants saw things differently. At least through 1828, the main work of the movement depended

on the voluntary, collective action of ordinary people. In these early years, electoral politics and appeals

to the government were an afterthought. The main work of the movement was the same as that

outlined by the initial meetings in the Fall of 1826. Through committees of correspondence, reports and

letters to newspapers, and pamphlets—many of them based upon the testimony of former Masons--

antimasons sought to investigate and publicize the character and the purported crimes of

Freemasonry.[38]

In addition, masons continued to interpose themselves as a community against the actions of

the Order. In November 1826, the Baptist Church of Christ in Covington wrote to the Batavia *Republican*

---

[37] Ibid., May 30 1828; *North Star* (Danville, Vermont), Sept. 9 1828 (quotations). See also *Republican Advocate*, Oct. 13, 27, Nov. 17 1826; May 13, Sept. 21 1827; *Watch Tower* (Cooperstown, NY), Sept. 15 1828, *North Star*, Sept. 9 1828.
[38] *Republican Advocate*, 1826-28, *passim*.

Advocate that local Masons were spreading "calumny" about an elder who had just resigned from the order.   The congregation sprang to his defense, announcing "to the Christian world" that he was "a *good and peaceable citizen*" and a upright "*Christian minister.*" Similar letters appeared periodically in the antimasonic press. By mid-1827, antimasons in several counties pledged to boycott newspapers that refused to report on the Morgan case and withhold their votes from members of the order. These actions, they insisted, were defensive actions against Masonic manipulation of public life. The silence of many newspapers on the Morgan affair, a Georgetown meeting proclaimed "calls for the interposition of an insulted community, to openly and publicly disapprobate and limit as much as possible the circulation of these prostituted papers."[39]

Much of the antimasons' political repertoire drew heavily on the methods of evangelical reformers, whose own campaign coincided with that of the antimasons. The former's emphasis on gathering and broadcasting facts may have come directly from the latter. The two movements shared a common language of prophetic denunciation and relied heavily on personal appeals and public shaming. When the Freemasons paraded in Batavia in July 1827, antimasons gathered along the route and cried out, "Where is Morgan? Where is Morgan?" A letter to the *Republican Advocate* made public the "criminal connexion" that a clerk and masonic brother in Batavia maintained "with a married woman." Antimasons also adapted the central ritual of the revivals—a public conversion—to their own uses. Almost every issue of movement newspapers included advertisements from former Freemasons declaring their withdrawl from the Order. A typical advertisement denounced Freemasonry as "incompatible with the duties of a good citizen," "at war with the pure and holy principles of genuine

---

[39] *Republican Advocate*, Dec. 1, 8, 29 1826, July 27, Nov. 16 1827.

piety and Christian charity," and "destructive of all equality between man and man." Like evangelicals, antimasons agitated within their churches to get them to break with the Order.[40]

Most of the antimason's methods--public appeal and moral suasion, the gathering and broadcasting of information, public conversion, public shaming—aimed at winning over public opinion. Like temperance and Sabbatarian activists, the antimasons regarded public opinion as both the means and the object of their struggle. Their purpose, a meeting in Victor, New York declared, was to "find out, hold up to public view, and, if possible, to bring to justice, all those who were concerned in the late villainous transactions." This was sufficient, because public opinion was infallible and all-powerful. A meeting of the citizens of Wheatland and Chili, New York, warned that "The public have a law, the judgement of which [the Morgan conspirators] cannot evade. . . . The grave itself cannot shield them, for so long as memory lives, so long shall their punishment endure. Should you ask what the law and that judgment is; we answer, public sentiment and public opinion. Its torrent, who can evade or withstand? Its influence who can control?" Once "the People" were properly informed, the *Republican Advocate* declared, "Woe be to the Society or party that would dare to interfere with their sovereign will or pleasure." [41]

Even more than evangelicals, antimasons championed a vision of democracy first revived in the political insurgencies of the 1810s and 1820s and narrowly endorsed by the Jacksonian campaign: a vision of a sovereign people whose will was law. But where the Middling Interest, the Reform party, and opponents of the Compensation Act saw that sovereignty as something to be fought for, the antimasons

---

[40] On public shaming, see *Republican Advocate*, Nov. 10 1826, Jan 26, July 27 1827. On public renunciations of Masonic membership, see Ibid., Dec. 22, 29 1826, Jan 26, Sept. 7, 28 1827, Sept. 2 1828 (quotation is in Dec. 29 1826). On agitating within churches, see *Jamestown Journal*, Sept. 3 1828; Paul Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic: Antimasonry and the Great Transition in New England, 1826-1836* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 93, 105-06.

[41] Quotations are in *Republican Advocate*, October 13, December 1, 8, 1826, Sept. 28 1827. See also Ibid., Oct. 6, 20, 27 1826, Feb. 9, Sept. 21 1827, July 20 1828.

took it to be already accomplished: "the people" *already* ruled; all that was needed was to inform them of their true interests, and those interests would be preserved.   No institution could survive their scorn; no public servant could long defy their will.

For this sovereignty to operate, however, citizens had to act in particular ways. Like the Jacksonians, antimasons cultivated a masculine political subjectivity, centered on submission to the laws, enlightenment about one's rights, and a readiness to hazard all to protect them. A Genesee county meeting expressed confidence that "the irresistible energies of freemen" would deliver the nation "from a thralldom worse than Egyptian bondage. . . . When the magistracy of the land becomes the pliant engine of oppression and outrage, when the ministers of justice slumber upon their posts, then it is time for the people to rise in the majesty of their strength and hunt the proud usurpers from their imagined thrones." This was a distinctly masculine subject, usually referred to as "manliness." In the antimasons' political imaginary, men were actors in both daily labor and politics, preserving their rights and providing for passive and unproductive wives and children. "Plain Truth" invoked a common theme in a letter to the *Republican Advocate* when he worried, "Where is the widow and helpless orphan children of William Morgan? Who sustains and supports them . . . ? Do their cries of distress, and want, and sorrow . . . reach the ears of the charitable fraternity . . . ?"[42]

Limited evidence about antimasonic women before 1829 suggests that at least some of them embraced the ideal of a rights-bearing and rights-defending masculine political subject. Women, however, could be political helpmeets. Before evangelical women did so, female antimasons drew on evangelical notions of women as "rational and accountable creatures" and domestic writers' vision of the home and religion as women's proper sphere to claim a limited, auxiliary, but nonetheless active place for themselves in the movement. Women called separate, gender-segregated meetings to

---

[42] Quotations are in Ibid., Oct. 13 1826, Jan. 12 1827, Feb. 6 1828. See also Ibid., Oct. 13, Dec. 1 1826, Feb. 9 1827.

support the cause, and they often led efforts to convince church members, clergy, and entire congregations to cut their ties to the Order. Like men's gatherings, a meeting of "the Ladies" of Wheatland, New York began with a reading of affadavits concerning the Morgan abduction and followed with an address. The ladies endorsed male antimasons' sentimental depiction of Morgan's wife and children as helpless victims. They acted as guardians of the domestic sphere, condemning Freemasonry for "robbing . . . families . . . of their natural and just claims" while exciting "distrust and . . . discord in families." The women made clear that Masonry would be brought to heel by men's political action. But they carved out a narrow space for women's political action, calling on mothers to prevent their daughters from marriage to Masons, and declaring their intention to "support and stimulate, as far as is consistent with the female character, all upright and lawful endeavors" to bring the abductors of Morgan to justice.[43]

For all their belief that collective citizen action could force Masons and unresponsive authorities to conform to public opinion, antimasons gradually became involved in electoral politics. That growing entanglement proved controversial, however. From the early days of the movement, activists were pulled in two directions regarding engagement with parties and elections. On the one hand, a strong majority of this Yankee movement supported John Quincy Adams as a native son of New England and sympathized with his vision of state-sponsored economic and moral progress. Antimasonic strategy also pointed toward limited electoral action. Early meetings called on their fellow citizens to withhold their votes from members of the order and to boycott the (mostly partisan) newspapers that declined to report on Morgan's disappearance. These tactics demonstrated promise: at the next election, a suspected conspirator against Morgan failed in his bid to be re-elected to the state legislature. It was a short leap from electoral boycott to electoral organizing.

---

[43] Ibid., Dec. 8 1826; Goodman, *Towards a Christian Republic*, 81-102.

On the other hand, most anti-masons thoroughly opposed partisanship and remained suspicious of political specialists. Solomon Southwick characterized "party spirit" as a kind of civic polio, rendering public life "crippled." He called on Adams and Jackson editors to "lay by their quills, and talk no more of our dear-bought liberties" while Morgan's kidnappers remained at large. David Miller of the *Republican Advocate* predicted that party politics would "soon die away." The struggle against Freemasonry, he wrote, would soon "merge" the "names and distinctions between . . . Clintonians and Bucktails . . . in the common names of PATRIOTS AND AMERICANS." Besides, there was very little that governments could do about Freemasonry except enforcing the law. The only governmental problem that concerned the movement was Masons' monopolization of office, which empowered them to tip the scales of justice. The solution was to discredit and destroy the mystical order; any further demands on the government would entangle the movement in the meaningless, amoral squabbles of partisan politicians.[44]

One key leadership group did not share in this ambivalence toward electoral politics. As the movement grew, anti-masonic newspapers proliferated. Some were loyal to the movement only, but most were Adams and Clintonian organs that embraced the new insurgency as well. Thurlow Weed, the handsome, gregarious publisher of the *Rochester Telegraph,* quickly took the lead of the Adams wing of the movement. At first skeptical of the anti-masons, Weed became convinced that Morgan had been kidnapped and killed by members of the Order. Perhaps more importantly, Rochester Masons pushed him into the arms of their enemies by launching a boycott after he published a paragraph about the abduction. As one of the leaders of the New York People's Men in 1824, he was already experienced in

---

[44] *Southwick's Observer* (Albany, NY), reprinted in *Republican Advocate,* Nov. 10 1826; *Republican Advocate*, Nov. 17 1826, Jan. 5, 12 1827.

the politics of operative-led populism, and he probably spied in the movement an opportunity to win a constituency for his faction and his failing newspaper.[45]

At first Weed and the Adams men discouraged their anti-masonic allies from toying with elections, fearing that they would draw votes from their own party. But activists persisted. In August and September of 1827, meetings representing eight counties called on antimasons in every town and elect delegates to county conventions.[46] The meetings were held, candidates were nominated, and the Adams men chose to channel what they could not stop. Adams-anti-masonic newspapers placed the party's nominees under their banners. Delegates at a congressional nominating convention urged their fellow citizens to "discourage the increase and existence of [Freemasonry] . . . by the only means in our power, a resort to the ballot boxes." Weed and his compatriot, the young lawyer William Seward became central figures in the new party.

Even as Adams men led the charge, most anti-Masons showed little interest in acting like a political party. Outside the Adams newspapers, electoral appeals were few and far between. Meetings—even nominating conventions—typically failed to mention the upcoming election in their resolutions and addresses. A Batavia convention declined to urge support for the ticket that they had just named, instead urging voters to "lay aside . . . party prejudices." Voters, they declared, should limit their suffrages "to such men . . . as are opposed to all secret associations"—a category of candidate that was numerous on the Adams and Jackson tickets as well as the anti-masonic one. Others similarly emphasized punishing Masons over electing anti-masons. "Show the masons that their secret conclaves can no longer be of any avail in raising them to office," another convention urged voters. "Make the

---

[45] Glyndon Van Deusen, *Thurlow Weed, Wizard of the Lobby* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1947), 25-30; *Rochester Telegraph,* 18 May, 15 June, 31 Aug., 19 Oct 1824.

[46] On the evolving scope of the antimason's decision to withhold their votes from certain politicians, see *Republican Advocate*, Dec. 1 1826, Jan 5, 12, July 27 1827. On calls forto conventions and for proceedings of those conventions, see Ibid., July 27, Aug. 31, Sept 7, 21, Oct. 5, 12 1827; *Cazenovia Monitor*, reprinted in Ibid., Sept. 4 1827.

institution a useless one to members . . . and it will soon tumble down and fall to ruin." The *Republican Advocate* published no evidence of any grass-roots effort to turn out antimasons or organize a party on the ground. To most anti-Masons, voting was an opportunity to break Freemasonry's power—not by gaining office or building a new party, but by casting Masons out of office and marshalling public opinion against the order.[47]

Perhaps because of the growing enthusiasm for the movement and the political resources of the Adams men, this non-campaign triumphed at the polls in November, winning fifteen seats in the state legislature. Victory, however, only deepened the tension between Adams men and movement anti-Masons. Editors trumpeted the "triumph of the people" and the "GLORIOUS TRIUMPH OF PRINCIPLE." Seward and Weed immediately saw the political potential of the new party and began making plans for the 1828 elections. Weed made a trip to Washington, where he proposed a deal to leading Clay men: if the latter would provide financing, Weed would establish a hybrid Antimasonic-Clay paper and begin working to bring the insurgents to the National Republican ticket. It is unclear whether Weed got his funding, but he did sell his interest in the *Telegraph* and began publishing the Adams-affiliated *Anti-Masonic Enquirer* in February.[48]

Most anti-Masons did not share in Weed's enthusiasm. Meeting after meeting chose not to mention the election results. Only after a last-minute intervention by Weed did a Brighton meeting officially hail the electoral victory. Antimason newspapers and meetings quickly returned to business as usual, criticizing "mercenary and calculating politicians" while emphasizing non-electoral strategies. For his part, Weed pursued a stealth policy with his allies. His new journal expressed disdain for Jacksonians and National Republicans, Bucktails and Clintonians, but it consistently labelled the Bucktails as the

---

[47] Ibid, Sept. 21, 28, Oct. 5, 12, 19, Nov. 16 1827. Quotations are in Ibid., Oct. 5, 12; *National Observer*, reprinted in *Republican Advocate*, Sept. 21 1827.
[48] Van Deusen, *Thurlow Weed*, 40-45;

"Masonic" party while reminding readers that Adams was not a member of the Order. Behind the scenes, he and Seward headed up planning to get both the Adams and the Anti-Masonic state conventions to nominate Francis Granger, an Adamsite who had participated in the early investigations in Batavia, as governor.[49]

Weed's plans soon went awry. Delegates balked at the July Adams convention, nominating Smith Granger, a non-Mason with no connection to the Anti-Masons, as governor. Granger was nominated as lieutenant governor. Anti-masons proved no more compliant, as several town meetings proposed Solomon Southwick, a movement editor unaffiliated with the Adams men, as governor. Factional conflict became so bitter that Southwick withdrew from the race in July. This did not deter the opponents of the Adams men, who dominated the state convention in August. Convinced that they could not get an endorsement of the Adams ticket, Weed and his lieutenants tried to head off any nomination of governor or lieutenant governor. In this, too, they failed. The convention nominated Granger for governor—a disaster for the Adams men, on whose ticket he appeared as a candidate for *lieutenant* governor. The convention's address proved downright schitzophrenic on the matter of electoral politics. It reaffirmed its commitment to a non-partisan approach that sought an enlightened public opinion rather than office. The anti-Masonic cause, the delegates declared, was on behalf of "no individual and of no political party." "Public *opinion*," expressed "through the people. . . in their meetings, . . . through the *press*, . . . and above all, . . . through the ballot boxes," constituted the sole weapon that could topple Freemasonry.[50] At the same time, it embraced electoral combat as the centerpiece of their efforts. "It is idle to talk about any other expression of opinion than the ballot boxes. Our public meetings—our resolutions—our indignant expressions of disapprobation will only be

---

[49] *Republican Advocate*, Nov. 16 1828, May 30, July 20 1828; Van Deusen, *Thurlow Weed*, 46-49. No reports of party organizing, analyses of the election just past, or discussion of plans for the next one appeared in the *Republican Advocate* until three months before the 1828 election. Ibid., November 1827-August 1828, *passim*..
[50] *North Star* (Danville, VT) Sept 9 1828; Albany *Argus*, Aug. 15, Sept. 2 1828; Saratoga *Sentinel*, Aug. 14 1828.

ridiculed and mocked at if we do not use the means of enforcing it which the laws have put into our hands." Resolutions called for intensive party-building: the establishment of newspapers in every county, the creation of a state General Central Committee and county committees, and a statewide fund-raising infrastructure.[51]

The remainder of the campaign became a theater of the absurd. Francis Granger quickly declined the antimasonic nomination, leaving the new party bereft of a nominee. A meeting in Genesee county took charge of this mess, nominating Solomon Southwick for governor. Antimasonic meetings and editors grumbled at the irregularity of the Genessee nomination but endorsed it nonetheless.[52] For their part, Weed and his fellow Adamsites campaigned against Southwick,[53] which turned the tensions in the movement into factional warfare. John Crary, the anti-Mason's candidate for lieutenant governor, denounced the Adams men's "*premature* and *hostile*" nominating convention and accused them of seeking to put the antimasons to a "double use." Antimasonic young men in Rochester declared that their party had been "betrayed by the men in whom they have most trusted." Weed's endorsement of the Adams ticket "calls loudly upon genuine anti-masons, to come out and act independent of leaders." By late October the backlash proved so fierce that the Adamsite editor of the Jamestown *Journal* abandoned his effort to swing anti-Masons to the Adams ticket. Many Adams men, he admitted, sought to "destroy our organization as a party" and that Smith's nomination had been made to "drive us from the field."[54]

[Discuss election results]

---

[51] *North Star* Sept. 9 1828; Albany *Argus*, Sept 2 1828.

[52] *Evening Post* (New York City), Aug. 14 1828; *Sentinel*, Sept 23 1828; *Argus*, Sept 3, 16 1828; Salem (Mass.) *Gazette*, Sept. 16 1828.

[53] Richmond *Enquirer*, Aug. 22 1828; *Argus*, Oct. 3 1828; *Jamestown Journal*, Sept 3, 10, Oct. 22 1828; *Seneca Farmer*, reprinted in *American* (New York City), Aug. 20 1828.

[54] *Argus*, Sept. 16 1828; *Ohio Monitor*, Oct. 22 1828; *Jamestown Journal*, Oct. 22 1828.

New York's Anti-Masons bore witness to the robustness and diversity of democratic development in the northern United States after 1825. Like many Jacksonians, evangelicals, and northern African American activists, they sought to cultivate the political efficacy of (mostly male) citizens and to bring their sovereign will to bear in a once unexamined area of common life. Much like Sabbatarians and temperance advocates, they declared sought to do so primarily through non-electoral means. Still, anti-Masons engaged in electoral politics—not to build a party or win office, but as a means to accomplishing the overriding goal of destroying the Order of Free Masons. And in doing so, they discovered that electoral politics resembled a tar pit—easy to enter, hard to leave, and filled with dangers.[55] This was because electoral politics was for most practitioners a means to office, honor, and power, rewards that inspired those practitioners to cultivate prodigious skills and resources, along with no small amount of ruthlessness, in the pursuit of them. Nowhere were these skills, resources, and ruthlessness so well developed as in New York. Even as they demonstrated the variety and robustness of democratic discontent, anti-Masons showed how, in electoral politics, that discontent could be diverted into unwelcome channels. This diversion, in turn, generated tremendous conflict between movement activists and partisan operatives, despite the fact that the two groups overlapped. In this way, the anti-Masons exemplified a recursive pattern in American electoral politics: dissident activists expressed deep discontent with existing political routines and invented their own; factional or party operatives sought to contain or channel that discontent to serve their own organizations, and their efforts create a new discontent.

---

[55] Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, and Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion*, have made similar arguments.

Journeymen Artisans and Journeyman Politicians

A second movement seeking to enforce "the will of the people" wandered into the tarpit of electoral politics. But where antimasons approached the ballot box ambivalently, as a suspect sidebar to the more important work of transforming public opinion, the Workingmen's party viewed electoral politics as the key to achieving their aims. Like the early anti-Masons, the Workingmen's party thrived in areas (New York, Pennsylvania, New England) where partisan, grass-roots organizing maintained a strong presence through the Era of Good Feelings, and their movement was driven by deep discontent with machine politics. But partisan operatives provided a political model as well as a formidable opponent. Workies sought to turn the methods of partisan democracy against the very politicians who employed them. Like the Jacksonians, the antimasons, and evangelical reformers, the Workingmen's parties of the late 1820s championed in stark terms the return of government to the control of "the people". But they forged their own, thoroughgoing vision of popular rule, in which producers would use public policy to transform the rules of political economy.

Historians have correctly depicted the Workingmen's parties as a founding moment in the history of both an American working class and an American labor movement. Although they have acknowledged the Workies' aspirations for political democracy and their deep discontent with the re-emergent partisan politics, however, they have not closely analyzed those aspirations or sought to reconstruct the Workingmen's ideas about what constituted a democratic political practice. In this matter, the Workies proved as innovative and as influential as they did in matters of class organization and political economy. Drawing on old popular distrust of lawyers and of political specialists, as well as on a revived vision of unmediated popular control over government, the Workingmen forged a new

political practice that sought to link these old ideas to newer practices of class solidarity and mass mobilization.[56]

Workingmen's parties emerged as an effort among journeymen artisans in the northern seaboard cities to grapple with the industrialization of their trades. Since the 1790s, but especially after the War of 1812, merchants and master artisans expanded production, typically subdividing the tasks that skilled journeymen had previously done, cutting wages, and hiring women, children, immigrants, and other less-skilled people to do the work. Where journeymen had been left free to work (and stop work) as they saw fit, employers increasingly regulated their behavior in the shops, . Journeymen thus simultaneously faced a flooded labor market, falling wages, a loss of control at work, and what they saw as the degradation of their trades by female, young, ethnically polyglot, unskilled competitors. More broadly, the Workis sought solutions to the emergence of wage labor, with its attendant poverty and insecurity, as a majority experience in the cities and factory towns of the early nineteenth-century north.[57]

Since the 1780s, journeymen had organized trade unions and conducted strikes to contain or reverse these changes. Their efforts were a part of the broader proliferation of voluntary associations and, through them, campaigns to bring about social or cultural change through the associated efforts of citizens. The Workingmen's parties built on this tradition of associated action, but grew out of a growing

---

[56] The historiography of the Workingmen's Parties is extensive. The most important works are John R. Commons, *et. al., History of Labour in the United States* (New York: MacMillan, 1926), 1: 195-332; Louis Arky, "The Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations and the Formation of the Philadelphia Workingment's *Movement," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 76 (1952): 142-76; Walter Hugins*, Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class: A Study of the New York Workingmen's Movement, 1829-1837* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1960); Edward Pessen, "The Workingmen's Movemment of the Jacksonian Era," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 43 (1956): 428-43; Idem, "The Working Men's Party Revisited," *Labor History* 4 (1963): 203-26; Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1780-1850* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), (get page numbers); idem., *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 282-83, 354-58.
[57] Wilentz, *Chants Democratic*, pages on metropolitan industrialization; David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker;* Christopher Tomlins, *Law, Labor, and Ideology*, pages on emergence of wage labor as a system.

sense that trade unions were failing to arrest the decline of conditions in the trades. In 1826 a group of

Philadelphia activists led by William Heighton, an English-born shoemaker and trade union activist,

began to lay plans for a citywide association of all manual laborers. In April 1827, Heighton published *An

Address to the Members of Trade Societies, and to the Working Classes Generally*, in which he analyzed

workers' declining conditions and proposed a plan "by which they may gradually and indefinitely

improve their condition."[58]

Heighton is best known for his social and economic prescriptions, but his vision of politics was

equally influential. The Englishman placed unlimited faith in electoral democracy, which, if used

intelligently, would empower laborers to end their exploitation. "In this favoured nation we enjoy the

inestimable blessing of 'universal suffrage,'" he wrote, "and constituting, as we every where do, a very

great majority, we *have the power* to choose our own legislators." Those legislators, he assumed, had

the authority to pass any law and revise any institution as they saw fit. The problem, as Heighton saw it,

was that the producing classes were ignorant of their rights and collective power and allowed their

votes to be controlled by non-producing classes, who used them "against our prosperity and welfare."

Echoing anti-caucus criticism of partisan nominations, Heighton argued that the transfer of political

power from workers to non-producers took place in the process of nominating candidates. "The *first

choice*, which is that of *nominating*, is always assumed by the useless and accumulating classes . . . ; and

after that the *second choices* (election) is but a mere matter of form." As a result, legislators and other

officials were invariably "*consumers only,* producing nothing." As a result, they "will ever consider it

their *interest* to keep us in a state of continual toil and poverty; that they may thereby reap the benefit

of our labors."[59]

---

[58] Heighton, *An Address to the Members of Trade Societies, and to the Working Classes Generally* . . . .(London: Co-operative Society, 1827), 3 (quoration), 3-25; Arky, "Mechanics' Union," 144-149; Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 282-84.

[59] Heighton, *Address*, 26-27.

Like David Walker (as well as the Englishman's hero, Tom Paine), Heighton understood oppression as a result of ignorance. Like Walker, he sought to fashion a new political subject: conscious of his (yes, his) rights, ready to assert them, schooled in solidarity. Thus enlightened, workers would become the agents of social and economic reconstruction. Heighton called for workers in every city and large town to establish a newspaper and a library, with rooms set aside for reading, lectures, and debates. Through these institutions, "working people of all descriptions" would "assemble to acquire and communicate useful information." In the process, they would "learn to *speak for themselves"* and "*writ[e]* for themselves."   As they came to recognize the men of talent within their ranks, workers would "*nominate* candidates for public offices *from among themselves*; men who, being their *equals* and *associates*, would be intimately acquainted with their wants and necessities; men who live *by their own labor* . . . and who *therefore* have an interest perfectly in accordance with their own." "Superior in numbers, with 'universal suffrage,'" this working-class electoral movement would "*overcome all opposition*." Producers would have "*real representatives,* and a public opinion of their own, through which to direct and control them." As a result, their "*true interests"* would be promoted in the legislature, resulting in the abolition of the unholy methods—rent, interest, salaries, profit—by which non-producers seized the products of others' labor. "Social institutions shall be established . . . under which the few shall no longer *enjoy* without producing, nor the *many produce* without enjoying."[60]

Heighton embraced the simple, radical vision of popular sovereignty championed by many democratic insurgents and put it to new uses. The producing majority, he proclaimed, must dictate not just policy, but fundamental social and institutional arrangements. More than his predecessors and contemporaries, his vision rested on a naïve view of American politics, ignoring the Constitutions' protections to private property and contractual obligations and its explicit intent to curb the power of

---

[60] Ibid., 26-35.

popular majorities.   It also showed little appreciation for the institutional resources available to political

machines like those in Philadelphia. It was nonetheless widely shared, and inspired thousands of

Philadelphians to begin the work of remaking the political order in producers' interest.

In the months after the publication of his *Address*, Heighton and other activists met every week

to devise ways to put his ideas into action. In November, he laid out the results of their deliberations to

a packed Universalist Church.   Recapitulating the main ideas of his pamphlet, the Englishman declared

that strikes "at best are poor patch work to cobble up a condition so tattered as ours." What was

needed was class solidarity that crossed trade lines. After months of deliberation with others, however,

he emphasis trade-union action alongside longer-term efforts at education and class solidarity.

Heighton proposed a new organization, the Mechanics' Union of Trade Associations, which would unite

workers in all occupations. Among its first tasks was to start a newspaper, open a workingmen's library,

and create a fund to support striking workers. The organization's constitution was approved, and in

April it opened a library. At the same time, Heighton helped found the *Mechanics' Free Press*, the first

labor newspaper in the United States.[61] The Mechanics' Union and the *Mechanics' Free Press* adhered

closely to Heighton's blueprint. The MUTA coordinated a burst of union organizing, collected money for

its strike fund, and organized support for a citywide strike of house carpenters. For its part, the *Free

Press* served as a clearinghouse and educational organ for the city's journeymen, who used its pages to

debate the sources of their exploitation and to report on their efforts to overcome it. Consistent with

Heighton's enlightenment faith, correspondents argued widely about the sources of workers'

exploitation and the proper way to defeat it. At first, all of their activities and proposals focused on

workers' collective, voluntary efforts--trade unions, producers' cooperatives, a labor exchange--not on

efforts to influence the government. In late May, however, the MUTA called on the city's unions to

---

[61] Arky, 152-161.

discuss whether to nominate "suitable persons to represent the interests of the working classes in the city councils and state legislature" at the October election. Most unions did so and sent representatives to a citywide meeting in July, where they voted to move forward with independent nominations. Over the following months, journeymen, laborers, and others held meetings throughout the city.[62]

As they held meetings, nominated candidates, and campaigned, activists in what came to be known as the Working Men's or the Working People's party articulated deep discontent with the existing political order. As they saw it, the heart of the problem was that politicians constituted a separate class whose interests were incompatible with those of the producing majority. Like other members of the "idle and useless classes," one editorial declared, politicians' wealth "proceeds from [working people's] toils and privations." Workers' prosperity depended on ending expropriation of others' labor through rent, interest, profit, salaries, and litigation; as such, it was "inimical to the personal aggrandizement" of politicians. "How then, we ask, can the increase of our prosperity, or the advancement of our happiness, be rationally anticipated at the hands of these men?"   Activists took special aim at the lawyers who had come to predominate among political operatives. Men of the legal profession, one correspondent wrote, sought to "blow up the flames of contention" in order to create "vexatious suits" and extracted generous fees from the contestants. Producers had an interest in simplifying the law so that anyone could act as his own advocate; lawyers had a pecuniary interest in keeping the laws complex, opaque, the province of specialists.[63]

According to Workingmen's activists, deception lay at the heart of lawyer-politicians' power. Lawyer-politicians were confidence men, skilled in winning workers' support and using it to advance

---

[62] *Mechanics' Free Press,* May 31, June 7, 14, 28, July 5, 19, Aug. 16, 23 1828 and April-October, 1828, *passim*; John R. Commons, *et. al.*, *Documentary History of American Industrial Society* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1910), 5:90-92; Arky, "Mechanics' Union," 163-171.
[63] *Mechanics' Free Press*, June 21, July 19, Aug 16, Sept. 6, 20 1828.

their own careers. When one met a producer at a tavern, "a Sufferer" wrote, "he will shake hands with

you, make the world and all of you, and says [sic] such an acquisition to his acquaintance does him

honour. . . . " The object of such flattery became "enraptured", but when the two "meet in the street,

and you in working clothes, he will brush past you, as if a serpent crossed his path." The same sort of

deception applied in matter of policy and class interest:

> I have known such an one to attend our meetings, and our celebrations, . . . address the people, speak of oppression, the rights of suffrage, the equal distribution of labour, the low prices for it, &c., &c. and finally propose himself as a suitable candidate to support them, in whatever situation their votes would place him. Thus blinded by his supposed zeal for their welfare, the large body of voters composing the mechanical portion of our city, vote for him, and lo! He is elected, and . . . their wrongs, and grievances are totally disregarded.[64]

Worst of all, politicians had institutionalized bamboozlement. They whipped up partisan

enthusiasm to "divide and distract" working people, teaching them to identify with false interests and

loyalties. This, in turn, "render[ed] them subservient to the . . . whims and . . . caprices" of aspirant

office holders. "Party," an editorial declared, "is the madness of many for the gain of the few."

By allowing themselves to be duped by lawyer-politicians, Workingmen's activists argued,

producers opened the way for a train of injuries. They perpetuated the existence a political aristocracy,

"dressed . . . at other people's expense, strutting thro' our streets like lords."   They fastened the chains

of their own mental and political oppression, becoming "subservient tools" who were "ruled . . . as

completely as Lord Wellington rules the clerks of the exchequer." They empowered this aristocracy to

fasten unwise and unequal policies upon the body politic: "lotteries and monopolies," conspiracy laws

that rendered labor strikes a crime, legislative subsidies for "monopolizing labor saving machinery,"

---

[64] Ibid., July 19, Aug. 9, 16, Sept. 27 1828.

permissive liquor licensing, impoverished public schools, discrimination in public works and the courts. Worst of all, they perpetuated their systematic robbery by non-producers.[65]

Workingmen's spokesmen directed their criticisms against a political order that had predominated in Pennsylvania since the first decade of the nineteenth century. But the specific elements that they criticized—the domination of public life by a class of political specialists, the prominence of lawyers in that class, politicians' unresponsiveness to constituent demands, the promotion of partisan identity and party loyalty, insider control of nominations—were at the heart of the political practices that Van Buren and his allies sought to revive throughout the United States. In responding to local conditions and grievances, the Philadelphia Workingmen's party developed a trenchant critique of the emerging partisan revival.

Workingmen developed a clear alternative to the emerging political order. Consistent with William Heighton's blueprint for a working-class politics (and much like northern African American activists), they sought to cultivate an enlightened, militant political subject, devoted to defending his group's interests. Although the Workies' self-description varied between "Working Men" and the gender-neutral "Working People," the movement's publicists (like David Walker and the Jacksonians) depicted this subjectivity as distinctly masculine. "Archimedes" called on his fellow workers to "show those who consider us their inferiors . . . that we are men, determined to assert our rights, and not to be trampled upon by *self-thought superior beings.*"

Although Heighton hoped that working-class politics would grow organically out of workers' enlightenment and solidarity, most Philadelphia Workies were too impatient to await the results of this process. They founded their party a mere month and a half after their newspaper, reading room, and

---

[65] Ibid., June 21, Aug. 9, 23, 30, Sept. 20, 27, Oct. 11 1828.

central trades' council had been established. Beyond this accelerating of the process, however, the

party's vision of politics bore the marks of Heighton's influence. Party activists agreed with their

founder that the source of workers' exploitation was the ability of a special, non-producing political class

to win workers' votes and, once in office, pass laws that permitted non-producers like themselves to live

off the proceeds of others' labor.   The solution was for workers to organize as an independent party and

"secure to themselves the political guardianship of their peculiar interests." Above all, workers had to

break the political class's monopoly on office by nominating their own candidates for office. Activists

disagreed about who, exactly, should be nominated; Heighton and others sought to limit nominations to

producers, but others suggested that the party could safely choose as candidates anyone who "pledge . .

. to support the interests and claims of the WORKING CLASSES."[66]

Perhaps for the first time in the new republic, the Workingmen placed an unapologetic appeal

to class interest at the center of their practice of electoral politics. The new party, "Mechanicus"

declared, would permit working people to "sen[d] men to the state legislature and city councils who

have a steady eye to their interests." Activists divided over how this politics of interest fit into a broader

political order, however. Some saw themselves as one constituency in a pluralist political order, fighting

"to obtain that share of influence in the administration of government our numbers justly entitle us to."

Others adopted the producerist, democratic majoritarianism championed by Heighton. Producers, they

reasoned *were* "the people," as they constituted a majority of the population, and were in constant

struggle with would-be aristocrats who sought to rob "the people" of their rights. They anticipated the

day in which the Workingmen would "raise the productive part of mankind to that station their superior

usefulness entitles them to" and "drive the money changers from the temple of freedom, and . . .

restore to its pristine purity the legacy of our fathers." Here was the democratic, Manichean

---

[66] Ibid., May 31, June 7, 14, Aug. 9, 16, 23, Sept. 27, Oct. 4 1828.

majoritarianism embraced by Jeffersonians and Jacksonians alike, now infused with class consciousness.[67]

In their day-to-day practices, the Workingmen adapted most of the methods employed by the Jackson and Adams men (as well by the factions that predated them). Although they called on workers to "drop the present contending party names," activists urged them to imitate those parties' unity and discipline.   "Have not our oppressors shown us the advantage of union, and what previous organization can do?," one asked. Their model for a party, however, seems to have been closer to that of the "original Jacksonians," not that of the Adams men or the "eleventh-hour men" who now dominated the Jackson camp. Like both Adams and Jackson men, they eschewed caucuses in favor of nominations by delegates selected by local meetings. More than either party, they sought to ensure that nominations reflected the wishes of the rank and file. The Party adopted rules requiring that all convention delegates be workers and, in many parts of the city, that nominees be approved by mass meetings of the party membership.[68]

Jacksonian operatives were less committed to honoring rank-and-file sentiment in nominations. They just wanted to stop those nominations. They crowded into ward meetings, shouting down speakers and introducing extraneous resolutions. Their efforts failed in their object, but they did enflame Workingmen's contempt for political specialists. According to "Tim Hatchett," "lawyers office seekers, petty magistrates, speculators, &c." seemed "resolved that we shall shout only when they shout, or sing patriotic airs only when they are pleased to give them out." "One of the people" saw the Jacksonians' efforts as an aristocratic attack on civil liberties. "Are we to be told by men who have been fattening on the public bounty . . . that we have no right peaceably to assemble, to take into

---

[67] Ibid., May 31, June 7, 14, Oct. 11 1828.
[68] Ibid., May 31, June 7, 14, 28, July 19, Aug. 9, 16, 30 1828.

consideration whether we will continue to employ the present persons in public situations, or to select others from our own class[?] . . . They have ridden us so long, that when we begin to manifest impatience, they are ready with the whip and spur to *gore* our sides into submission." Working people, he concluded, "must discard POLITICIANS of BOTH PARTIES, . . . and plac[e] such men in power . . . as will really act as our servants."[69]

Despite their desire to free themselves from party influence, the Workingmen were not in a position to go it alone. Many workers and activists harbored fierce loyalties toward the Adams and Jackson men, and the new party did not have the votes to elect candidates on their own. Several activists called for the Workingmen to selectively collaborate with Jacksonians and Adamsites. "A Word to the Wise" suggested that the Workingmen nominate "two or three persons from our own particular friends" and fill up the remainder of their ticket with sympathetic nominees from the Jackson and Adams tickets. Others agreed.[70]

It is impossible to discern the motivations of "Word to the Wise" and those who repeated his advice. No matter: no strategy could spare the Workingmen from being overwhelmed by the Jacksonian juggernaut. The Workingmen met after the Jackson and Adams conventions and chose thirty-one out of thirty-nine candidates from the presidential party's tickets. Jacksonians won eighteen nominations to the Adams men's eight. These results were probably the result of Jacksonian engineering. According to Heighton, the proceedings took place under "embarrassing and inauspicious circumstances" and not been conducted "in *entire* accordance with the recently developed political principles." After the election, he accused some delegates of "treasonable conduct."[71]

---

[69] Ibid., Aug. 16, 23, 30 1828; Arky, "Mechanics' Union," 166-67.
[70] Ibid., Aug. 9, 16, 23, Sept. 13 1828.
[71] Ibid., Oct. 4, 11, 18, Nov. 1 1828.

The Workingmen entered the fall campaign plagued by internal weaknesses and powerful opponents. Drawing on the example of the Jackson and Adams men, they held a series of meetings and appointed numerous vigilance committees to promote the party's ticket. Some committees signed up dozens or even hundreds of activists; others boasted only one or two members. The Adams and Jackson organizations threw considerable resources into defeating them. Newspapers from both parties attacked the new party as unnecessary or as a ruse dreamed up by their partisan opponents. Their own parties were the true defender of working-class interests, they insisted; "safety depends on our being firmly attached to the old . . . party." The Democrats enticed critical Workingmen's activists with patronage appointments. On election day, Adams and Jackson operatives printed ballots with their party's nominees, under the heading "Working Men's Ticket," and distributed them in working-class neighborhoods. Activists in Southwark accused Jackson and Adams illegally enfranchising apprentices, deaf and dumb boys, and other likely prospects, prevailing upon them to vote against the Workies.[72]

These tactics were mere insurance, however. The Workingmen's first campaign was overwhelmed by a Jacksonian tsunami. **[Analyze election returns—also draw on Arky's analysis]**

Martin Van Buren was adamant: only the Republican party was the legitimate representative of "the people" of the United States. Their electoral opponents were legitimate, even though they represented the people's aristocratic enemies. All other political organizations and ways of doing politics were illegitimate. [**Find a good quotation**] Van Buren's erstwhile allies among the Jacksonians agreed, even if they remained suspicious of Van Buren's methods. As far as the Jacksonians were

---

[72] Ibid., Sept. 20, 27, Oct. 11, 18, 25, Nov. 1 1828.

concerned, they alone spoke for "the people." As their treatment of the Workingmen made clear, they

sought to disrupt and dismantle anyone who claimed that voice for themselves.

There had been a time when party leaders succeeded in silencing outsider democratic

movements. But the democratic discontent that erupted after the War of 1812 proved too powerful to

contain within any one organization—especially one that exercised such rigid control over the rank and

file and declined to stand for any policies. Try as they might, Jacksonians could not contain the

discontent that had given rise to their own party. The "Jacksonian era" gave rise not to one, nor two,

but multiple democratic movements, each with their own blueprint for achieving political renewal and

popular sovereignty. Those that sought to enforce "the people's will" through elections were quickly

distracted or overwhelmed by their more skilled and better resourced opponents. Voluntary

associations, especially those fueled by religious fervor or enduring racial grievances, proved more

resilient: evangelical reformers and northern African Americans created a form of democracy that would

endure. Whether their experiments succeeded or failed to sustain themselves, each gave voice not only

to the social visions and grievances of their members, but to their political ideals and aspirations as well.

Just as each contained a model for a new society, every one embodied a model for a new politics.

Although each model was still in the process of formation or collapse, together they constituted a new

political order, marked above all by competing visions and practices of democracy.