Electocracy in America and the Atlantic World:
Elections and Their Alternatives
Fall 2023 Conference Sponsored by the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy
Call for Papers
Deadline: December 15, 2022

Throughout the world, disinformation, political violence, and other attacks on established political norms are inspiring citizens to defend open and competitive elections, fact-based political debate, and the rule of law. But what is it, exactly, that we are defending?

The favored term is "democracy." The ideals behind this word are worth embracing, but the term itself is normative and hard to define. As an analytical term, "democracy" does little to clarify how electoral systems actually function. What if we approach such regimes instead as "electocracies," which we define as systems in which political power is allocated primarily through competitive public elections? A brief account of the rise of electrocracy in the United States might go like this: Building on a colonial tradition of elites buying off landowning settlers with representative institutions, America's gentleman revolutionaries expanded the electoral principle of the English Parliament to every conceivable jurisdiction, while leaving actual standards of representation and inclusion up to local circumstances. The result was a patchwork, in which the makeup of the electorate and the underlying principle of representation varied from place to place, usually predicated on exclusions by gender, race, wealth, and other factors. What had been a community ritual of allegiance became an unpredictable game without set rules, played for enormous stakes on a shifting and varied terrain. Through recurring struggle, the democratic values of majoritarianism, transparency, equality, and inclusivity were gradually applied to this process, but in a wholly uneven and open-ended manner. Over time, electocracy gave rise to a roller-coaster of democratization and retrenchment, often inextricable from racial, class, and gender hierarchies but always marked by a search for electoral advantage at almost any cost. The process continues to this day.

Seen in this light, the history of politics in electoral regimes may become more legible. "Democracy" and elections would represent one among many tools that particular groups have used to win power and/or realize their visions of the just society. Mass participation, racial and gender exclusions, violence, gerrymandering, secret ballots, and other practices would appear less as plot elements in a morality play than as strategies to win advantage in intertwined systems of political and social domination. In the end, political historians might be better able to discern and trace the histories of individual practices that came to make up the political arsenal of "democracy": the design and regulation of ballots and voting procedures; the mapping and restructuring of constituencies; the rise and evolution of party nominations; mass appeals through the media; public events like speeches, rallies, parades, and barbecues; mobilization through unions, churches, and social clubs; the recruitment and training of political operatives; the fundraising and expenditure to pay for all of this, and most of all, the manipulation of voter qualifications according to citizenship, residence, wealth,

race, and gender. All of these elements emerged at certain moments, changed over time, fell in and out of favor, spread across the globe, and played out differently in different social and economic contexts.

Test-driving "electocracy" as an historical concept, this conference seeks to stimulate interdisciplinary and cross-national discussion of election-based regimes as systems of power. Gathering scholars of electoral and governmental practices and institutions, organized dissent, and contextualized political thought, it seeks to deepen our understanding of electocracies and their operations in the U.S. and elsewhere. We welcome papers that explore how political actors have sought power through mass organization and appeal, mastering and manipulating electoral rules and techniques, targeting or excluding subaltern groups, and other tactics. Eschewing the assumption that elections as we know them are the inevitable conclusion of political development, we also welcome papers that explore discontent with electoral regimes and the alternative ways of arranging public life that dissenting parties, movements, and insurgencies have practiced and proposed.

We are also interested in recovering the intellectual history of electocracy. Participants might tease out the changing assumptions and ideas that motivated or were used to justify electocratic politics. What standards defined or undermined the legitimacy and effectiveness of competitive elections as politics? When and if did such modern democratic values as majoritarianism, constitutionalism, equality, fairness, inclusiveness, non-violence, transparency, and anti-racism come to guide or be imputed to electocratic practices and discourse, or contrasted with them? What were the major alternative forms that electocracy took at different places and times, and what alternative forms of mass politics were offered in opposition to it?

***

The "Electocracy in America and the Atlantic World: Elections and Their Alternatives" conference is sponsored by the Kinder Institute on Constitutional Democracy at the University of Missouri and will be held in Columbia, MO, on September 29-30, 2023. Presenters will be eligible to have their travel and lodging expenses paid by the Kinder Institute and the best papers will be included in a scholarly volume to published in the University of Missouri Press series, *Studies in Constitutional Democracy*.

To apply, send a 1- to 2-page abstract along with a short-form c.v. to Mackenzie Tor, **mltmq5@mail.missouri.edu**, by December 15, 2022. For further information, or to discuss ideas, contact conference co-conveners: Reeve Huston, Associate Professor of History Duke University, **rhuston@duke.edu**, or Professor Jeff Pasley, Kinder Institute Chair of Early American History, **PasleyJ@missouri.edu**, 573-529-3163.