

Free book review on the birth of modern politics a review

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If a cross section of the American population were polled today and were asked their opinion of presidential campaigns the majority of them would say somewhat that they are tired of the negative campaigning that is so common in today's politics. Many people see bipartisan politics as the end to democracy. However there was a time when politics was not as polarizing. Lynn Parsons shows that politics was also messy in the 19th century as well as he calls the election of 1828 the first modern campaign. He was not the first to coin this phrase but what he did was give a balanced readable overview of the politicians that helped create today's system of campaigning. Looking at the title of this book, one would be right in thinking that the book really is about the birth of modern politics. Parsons wrote a well-researched work of history even though it was not about the birth of modern politics. What this book is, though, is about a compelling election that changed the way politics was practiced as it steered the direction of the nation through the election of 1828 between Andrew Jackson and John Quincy Adams.

While this book succinctly tells us that it is about the elections of 1828, almost half of it is dedicated to the elections before it. This could very well be because both elections are so closely connected since it was the chaos of the 1824 elections that gave rise to the elections of 1828 - an election that had two people from two parties slug it out with all they could muster to come out victorious. In the election of 1824 there was only one effective political party in the United States called the Democratic-Republicans. This was a party that lacked a centralized party control and it showed in the way their affairs were handled. One other major reason why the elections of 1824

had a messy output was based on the fact that there were indeed no formal ways of nominating candidates for Presidential or Vice Presidential roles. 1824 marked the first election that had a popular vote even though all the 24 states did not vote. Jackson, thanks to his name recognition won the popular vote with Adams coming in second. It fell on Clay to decide who would win the electoral votes and it is generally believed that although Clay was more aligned to Adams' leadership ideology he was offered the Secretary of State Job by Adams and that swayed his vote. Adams' presidency would forever be termed the " Corrupt Bargain." Adams was faced with opposition from Jackson's supporters at every turn in Congress. Unfortunately for Adams just as the results of the 1824 elections were decided Jackson was again nominated to run for the 1828 elections and this time he was not going to allow himself get bested by Clay and Adams. When Parsons gets down to the Adams and Jacksons story he does tell a very good story. These were two men who were so different that their difference almost became legendary. These were two men who couldn't be more different even if they tried - Jackson was American mythology while Adams was American royalty, Jackson had a feel for the common man while Adams was north-eastern elite and while they were both honour obsessed, Jackson was a warrior while Adams was a diplomat. However all their differences couldn't mask their similarity and this was in their belief that the destiny of America lay in her ability to be a continental superpower and on this topic they showed support for each other. This support would prove to be short lived though as it all ended in 1824 when Jackson won a plurality of the electoral vote but Adams won the runoff in the House of Representatives.

Adams win came via the machinations of Henry Clay who was then offered the nomination of Secretary of State. His acceptance sparked talks of “corrupt bargain” and this ended up tainting the whole of the Adams presidency. For a man who had gone into duels for much less, Jackson furiously fought this duel. Their differences now once again began to rear its ugly head and Adams knew that if anything his chances of re-election were very slim.

Now Jackson and his supporters got to work with his supporters using their free postal privileges to send pieces of literature concerning Jackson to the people and this was made even easier because the majority of newspapers already supported Jackson. While Jackson did not have much of a political clout to campaign off, he chose instead to be remembered as the hero of the Battle of New Orleans. Adams supporters too started to campaign and went about this by bringing down Jackson, calling him a man whose actions could be considered as war crimes and not the hero that his supporters were painting. Mud was also slung at Jackson’s character when it was mentioned that Rachel whom Jackson had married was not completely divorced from her former husband and as such they called his wife an adulteress. This angered Jackson seriously and he was willing to fight duels to uphold her honour. Other than this mudslinging that is still very much available in today’s American politics, the 1828 elections restored the 2 party system with Adams and Clay calling themselves the National Republican Party and Jackson calling themselves the Democratic Party. Jackson won this election by a comfortable margin.

It seems almost desperate that this book ties the country’s relevance and

national evolution today in a bid to sell a story about the past. Although credit must be given to Parsons for not over flogging the issue of revolution in politics while writing about the 1828 elections of Adams and Jackson. Historians have in the past painted this election as the first truly democratic election but Parsons is not an endorser of these assumptions. While he does agree that it was more democratic than previous elections, it needs to be mentioned that many people in these times were not eligible to vote as the three-fifths rule was still in existence and affected the slaves of the southern planters.

When we consider modern politics we find out that there is very little similarity between the elections of 1828 and now. That election lacked all we know as the election procedure today with things like the internet, 24 hours news cycle, the campaign plane, stump speeches, primaries or even a single day election missing from its roster of events. He does indeed find some rudiments that he latches on to as proof but they in and of themselves reveal as little as the birth of a child will reveal about a man. What this election featured though were advances in partisan politics that was previously not available. We had strategies pioneered by Jacksonians to encourage people to get up and vote. The media was also used to facilitate this election even though Jackson and Adams were from the same party. It is true that the 1828 election was a nasty battle but history has shown us that there have been other nasty battles prior to this election.

Lynn Parsons looked at the events of the 1828 elections and saw the foundation of today's American politics claiming that election paved the way for opinion polling, opposition research and party machines. Everyone saw

from 1828 they all could partake and make a choice in the presidential elections. We may ask ourselves what occurred in the 1828 campaign for it to be seen as the birth of modern politics. In the campaign of 1800 more than half of the 16 states used state legislators and not the people to select presidential electors. This was to change drastically in the 1828 elections as the common man was now able to vote and participate in the political process in ways that were previously unheard of. While this may sound like a right step in democracy it must be noted that this period was still in the midst of slavery and there was still a lack of women's suffrage. This has led many historians to question the level of democracy demonstrated in the Jacksonian era.

Parsons does not deny all this but rather noted that times were indeed changing and the American Revolution had unleashed the spirit of the republic. He claimed that the rudimentary elements demonstrated in 1828 would be a sign of things to come: organised rallies and coordinated media, opinion polling and fund raising, smear tactics and ethnic voting blocs grew into what we have today from the 1828 electoral campaign. Credit should be given to the Jacksonians and their use of image in the elections. They ensured that everyone that was listening knew that the candidate in front of them was a war hero and a defender of the common man. It is difficult to read Parson's book and not come away with the notion that cultural divisions were evident in the American politics. Citing political fundraising as an example of a trait that began in 1828 and is still very much alive today, Parsons spoke on the \$11, 000 that Jacksonians in Massachusetts sent to a newspaper. That however could have been because these very people

wanted to read the paper. In his arguments he painted Jackson as the first presidential candidate that sought out the presidency and was not just a puppet doing the will of others and I give him that even though it was not done with the intensity that we see it done today.

At the end of the day Parsons claims that it was Jackson indeed who would come to represent the future of American politics as it is known today - a political landscape where every vote counts, a future where political campaigns are run with such precision that they begin to resemble military campaigns with field generals and foot soldiers and battleground states. However looking at our political terrain today one could almost claim that it was John Adams with his skyrocketing debt and big government and financial complexity that truly represents the future of the country. Although the title of the book claims to focus on the election and political machinations of 1828, that election was short and Parsons found himself writing on other things in a bid to complete the book. So we see biographies of Adams and Jackson and the messy elections of 1824. Parsons tried to write without bias on both men and he did accomplish that to some extent. Even though it was a bit puzzling to see him tie the greatness of Abraham Lincoln to his ability in getting the best of both men, what he did accomplish at the end of the day is that all what people generally hate about politics and campaigning are not the anomalies but rather an integral part of American politics.