



## The Expansion of Democracy during the Jacksonian Era

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### Framing Question

How did the character of American politics change between the 1820s and the 1850s as a result of growing popular participation?

### Understanding

Between the 1820s and 1850, as more white males won the right to vote and political parties became more organized, the character of American democracy changed. It became more partisan and more raucous, a turn that bred ambivalence and even discontent with politics and the dominant parties.



*The County Election* (detail)

### Images

- George Caleb Bingham, [\*The County Election\*](#), painting, 1852 (St. Louis Art Museum)
- Richard Caton Woodville, [\*Politics in an Oyster House\*](#), painting, 1848 (Walters Art Museum)
- Agrarian Workingmen's Party, New York City, [\*political cartoon\*](#), ca. 1830 (Columbia University Libraries)

### Background

From the 1820s through the 1850s American politics became in one sense more democratic, in another more restrictive, and, in general, more partisan and more effectively controlled by national parties. Since the 1790s, politics became more democratic as one state after another ended property qualifications for voting. Politics became more restrictive as one state after another formally excluded African Americans from the suffrage. By 1840, almost all white men could vote in all but three states (Rhode Island, Virginia, and Louisiana), while African Americans were excluded from voting in all but five states and women were disfranchised everywhere. At the same time, political leaders in several states began to revive the two-party conflict that had been the norm during the political struggles between the Federalists and the Jeffersonian Republicans (1793–1815). Parties and party conflict became national with Andrew Jackson's campaign for the presidency in 1828 and have remained so ever since. Parties nominated candidates for every elective post from fence viewer to president and fought valiantly to get them elected.

#### Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of images are we dealing with?
2. When were they created?
3. Who created them?
4. For what audience were they intended?
5. For what purpose were they created?

The number of newspapers exploded; the vast majority of them were mouthpieces for the Democratic Party or the Whig Party (the National Republican Party before 1834). Accompanying the newspapers was a flood of pamphlets, broadsides, and songs aimed at winning the support of ordinary voters and teaching them to think as a Democrat or a Whig. Parties also created gigantic and incredibly effective grass-roots organizations. Each party in almost every school district and urban ward in the country formed an electoral committee, which organized partisan parades, dinners, and picnics; distributed partisan newspapers and pamphlets, and canvassed door-to-door. In this way the parties got ordinary voters involved in politics, resulting in extremely high voter participation rates (80–90%). Even more than in the earlier period, parties were centrally coordinated and controlled. They expected their leaders, their newspapers, and their voters to toe the party line. Once the party caucus or convention had decided on a policy or a candidate, everyone was expected to support that decision.

The Democrats, National Republicans, and Whigs were not the only people creating a new kind of democracy, however. Several small, sectional parties promoted a way of conducting politics that was quite different from the practices of the major parties. The Workingmen's Party, for example, organized in the major northeastern cities and in dozens of small, industrial towns in New England. Workingmen's parties were part of the emerging labor movement and were made up primarily of skilled craftsmen whose trades were being industrialized. In addition, a growing movement of evangelical Christians sought to reform society by advocating temperance, an end to prostitution, the abolition of slavery, women's rights, and more.

The two paintings and the cartoon offered here capture the passion, tumult, and divisions that came to characterize American democracy at this time.

George Caleb Bingham (1811–79) was one of the most successful and important American artists of the early nineteenth century. Born in 1811 to a prosperous farmer, miller, and slaveowner in western Virginia, Bingham knew prosperity but also experienced economic hardship when his father lost his property in 1818 and again when his father died in 1823. While he was a cabinet-maker's apprentice, Bingham began painting portraits for \$20 apiece and, by 1838, was beginning to acquire a reputation as an artist. During the 1840s he moved to St. Louis, the largest city in the West, where he pursued a successful career as a portrait artist. In 1848 he was elected to the Missouri General Assembly and later held several appointive posts. With gentle humor *The County Election* captures the arguing, the campaigning, and the drinking that accompanied the masculine ritual of voting in mid-nineteenth century rural America.

Richard Caton Woodville (1825–55) was born in Baltimore. His family hoped he would become a physician, and he did undertake medical studies in 1842. However, by 1845, when he traveled to Germany to train at the Dusseldorf Academy, he had abandoned medicine to pursue a career as an artist. Although he spent the rest of his life in Germany, France, and England, he devoted himself to re-creating his native Baltimore on canvas. With humor akin to that of Bingham, *Politics in an Oyster House* depicts a “conversation” between a young political enthusiast and a skeptical old-timer. As in *The County Election*, the political realm is exclusively masculine, for the oyster house is a male-only pub.

The Workingmen's Party cartoon illustrates disillusionment with and dissent from the sharply divisive politics of the age. It suggests that the corruption of both the Whigs and the Democrats will lead to the oppression of the poor.

## Image Analysis

For each image, before answering the content-specific questions listed below, we recommend that you conduct a general analysis using the following four-step procedure.

- 1. Visual Inventory:** Describe the image, beginning with the largest, most obvious features and proceed toward more particular details. Describe fully, without making evaluations. What do you see? What is the setting? What is the time of day, the season of the year, the region of the country?
- 2. Documentation:** Note what you know about the work. Who made it? When? Where? What is its title? How was it made? What were the circumstances of its creation? How was it received?

- 3. Associations:** Begin to make evaluations and draw conclusions using observations and prior knowledge. How does this image relate to its historical and cultural framework? Does it invite comparison or correlation with historical or literary texts? Do you detect a point of view or a mood conveyed by the image? Does it present any unexplained or difficult aspects? Does it trigger an emotional response in you as a viewer? What associations (historical, literary, cultural, artistic) enrich your viewing of this image?
- 4. Interpretation:** Develop an interpretation of the work which both recognizes its specific features and also places it in a larger historical or thematic context.

**George Bingham, *The County Election***



George Bingham, *The County Election*, oil on canvas, 1851–1852

1. According to *The County Election*, who participated in elections? Who was excluded?

2. How did Bingham explain the enormous popular participation in politics? What drew so many people into politics?



3. Why might elections in rural areas have become important social gatherings?

4. How important were political candidates, issues, and party loyalties?

5. How engaged are the voters?

6. Who are the men in the top hats? What are they doing? How does Bingham portray them? How do they relate to ordinary voters?

7. What do you think Bingham's attitude toward elections was?

8. Did he see them as serious exercises of democracy, as farce, or as something in between?

9. What was his attitude toward the electorate? Did he see voters as serious well informed men or as manipulated dupes?

10. What does the painting say about elections in a democracy in which common people can cast ballots?

**Richard Woodville, *Politics in an Oyster House***



Richard Woodville, *Politics in an Oyster House*, oil on fabric, 1848

11. How does Woodville draw the viewer into the painting?

12. What might the open curtain symbolize?

13. What sort of people are the men in the painting? What do their clothes tell us? Why has Woodville dressed the young man entirely in one color? What is the significance of their difference in age?

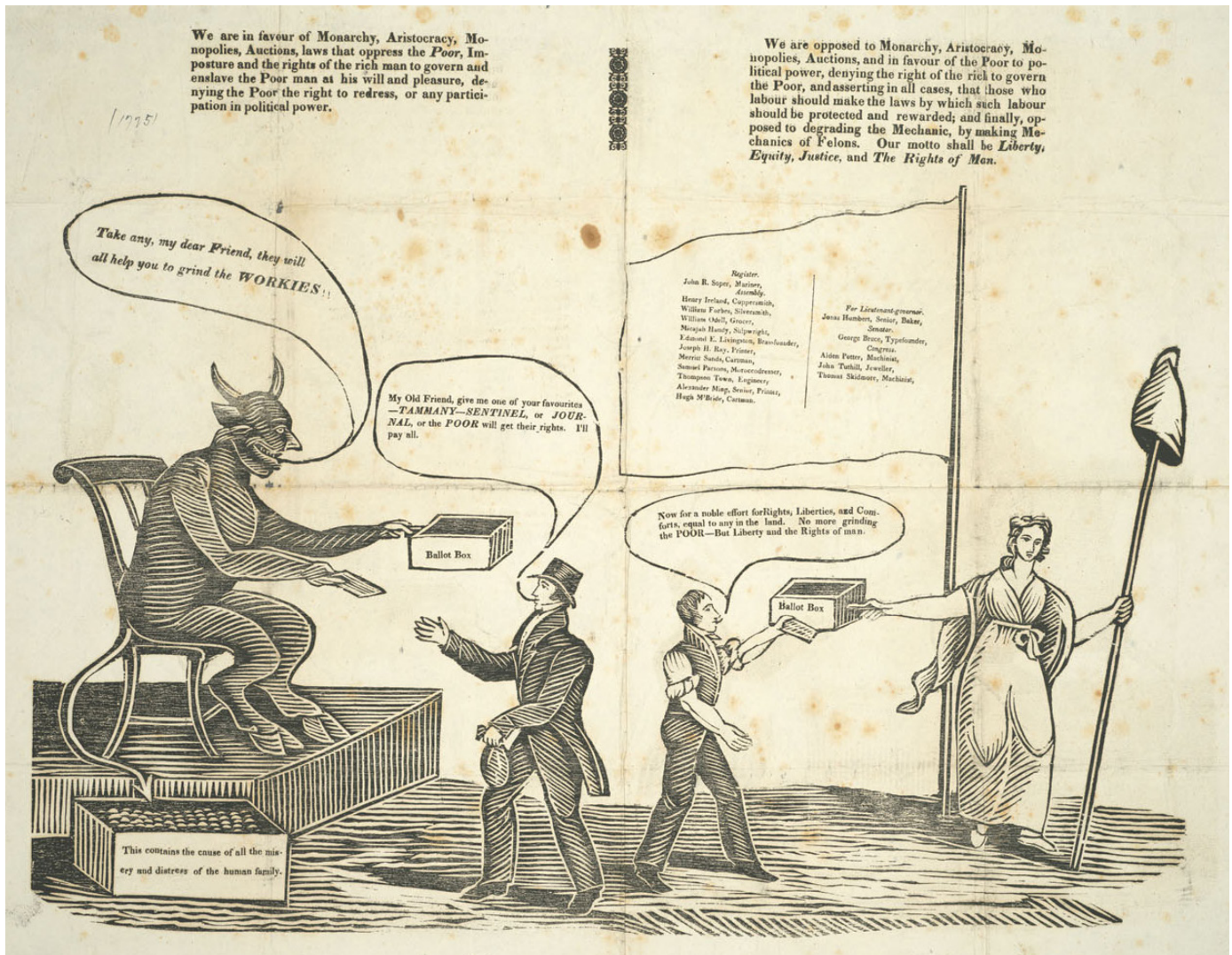
14. What is the man on the right doing? How much does he care about politics? How does Woodville signal his passion? What is the source of his arguments?

15. How does the man on the left feel about his companion's political arguments and passion? Do you think he agrees or disagrees? Does he care?

16. What attitude does Woodville take toward the political passions of the man on the right? Does he think they are good, bad, ridiculous? Compare his attitude toward the politics of his age with that of Bingham.



## Agrarian Workingmen's Party, political cartoon



Agrarian Workingmen's Party of New York City, political cartoon, ca. 1830

### Captions

- **Upper left:** "We are in favour of Monarchy, Aristocracy, Monopolies, Auctions, laws that oppress the Poor, Imposture and the rights of the rich man to govern and enslave the Poor man at his will and pleasure, denying the Poor the right to redress, or any participation in political power."
- **Satan:** "Take any, my dear Friend, they will all help you to grind the WORKIES [workingmen]!!"
- **Box in Satan's hand:** "Ballot Box"
- **Man in top hat:** "My Old Friend, give me one of your favourites — TAMMANY — SENTINEL, or JOURNAL, or the POOR will get their rights. I'll pay all."
- **Box in lower left foreground:** "This contains the cause of all the misery and distress of the human family."
- **Upper right:** "We are opposed to Monarchy, Aristocracy, Monopolies, Auctions, and in favour of the Poor to political power, denying the right of the rich to govern the Poor, and asserting in all cases, that those who labour should make the laws by which such labour should be protected and rewarded; and finally, opposed to degrading the Mechanic, by making Mechanics of Felons. Our motto shall be Liberty, Equity, Justice, and The Rights of Man."
- **Liberty's banner** [Candidates of the Agrarian Workingmen's Party, Nov. 1830 election]: "Register, John R. Soper, Mariner. Assembly, Henry Ireland, Coppersmith; William Forbes, Silversmith; William Odell, Grocer; Micajah Handy, Shipwright; Edmund L. Livingston, Brassfounder; Joseph H. Ray, Printer; Merritt Sands, Cartman; Samuel Parsons, Moroccodresser; Thompson Town, Engineer; Alexander Ming, Senior, Printer; Hugh M'Bride, Cartman. For Lieutenant-governor, Jonas Humbert, Senior, Baker. Senator, George Bruce, Typefounder. Congress, Alden Potter, Machinist; John Tuthill, Jeweller; Thomas Skidmore, Machinist."
- **Worker:** "Now for a noble effort for Rights, Liberties, and Comforts, equal to any in the land. No more grinding the POOR — But Liberty and the Rights of man."
- **Box in Liberty's hand:** "Ballot Box"

17. Compare the party man's clothes with those of the working man. What do their clothes say about each man?

18. What is the politician trying to accomplish?

19. What function does the cartoonist think the parties and their newspapers served?

20. What was the cartoonist saying about the character of the Workingmen's Party?

21. Which figure — the workingman or the party politician — did the cartoonist think was the legitimate protector of the accomplishments of the Revolution?

22. What is the cartoonist saying about the nature of politics as conducted by the major parties?

23. What solution does the cartoonist offer to solve the problems of political corruption and working class oppression?



## Images

- George Caleb Bingham, *The County Election*, oil on canvas, 1852. Saint Louis Art Museum, gift of Bank of America, 44:2001. Reproduced by permission.
- Richard Caton Woodville, *Politics in an Oyster House*, oil on fabric, 1848. Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland, 37.1994. Reproduced by permission.
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