The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century

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The American Ballot Box is the latest of a series of important books by Richard Bensel, one of the leading practitioners of ‘American Political Development’ (APD), a subfield within the discipline of political science in the United States. Two other leading APD scholars, Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, recently published what amounts to a manifesto in which they defined their subfield as the search for ‘connections between politics in the past and politics in the present’. It aspires, Orren and Skowronek argued, to build ‘theories of politics that are more attentive than others available to specifically historical processes of change and the political issues that those processes pose’ (1). Although within the politics of American political science, APD scholars are methodologically allied to comparativists, the subfield is concerned, as its name implies, only with the past politics of the United States. When they speak and write about their methodology, APD scholars have two negative reference groups in mind. The first are their rational-choice theorist departmental colleagues to whom they feel the need to defend the entire project of historicizing past politics. The second group are historians, who, in the imagination of political scientists, are generally theoretically impoverished and narrow in focus. Political historians in history departments, for most of whom the ‘search for patterns’—that is, the identification of what is distinctive and what common about historical phenomena, and the effort to classify and identify linkages and processes of change—is the basic aim of their research, may well raise a quizzical eye-brow at such claims. Notwithstanding the slightly paranoid tendency—elaborated most fully by Orren and Skowrenk—to provide an intellectual ‘creation myth’ for APD which largely ignores the contribution that historians have made to the study of past politics, political scientists like Bensel have in fact made a substantial contribution to the revival of political history in the last fifteen years or so.

In The American Ballot Box, Bensel tackles one of the critical questions preoccupying a generation of political historians: how to explain the apparently very high levels of political participation in the Civil War era. From the perspective of a historian, Bensel’s approach to this familiar issue neatly illuminates some of the distinctive strengths and weaknesses of APD.

The crux of the analytical problem Bensel tackles is the extent to which the mid-nineteenth century electorate responded rationally to public policy choices. Were voters informed and engaged in the political process, weighing up party platforms and listening critically to stump speeches? Did this era of near-universal white manhood suffrage represent, in the words of Walter Dean Burnham, a ‘lost Atlantis’ of participatory democracy? Or did popular partisanship merely reflect ethno-cultural identities? The ‘New Political History’ of the 1960s and 1970s was essentially an application to the study of politics of the new social history with its quantitative methodology. To the new political historians, the mass parties of the 1830s onwards were coalitions of ethnic and religious groups in American society. This ethnocultural approach fitted well with the ‘critical election’ theory that influenced a generation of political historians—and despite recent challenges displays a remarkable resilience (2). Historians like Joel Silbey painted a compelling picture of nineteenth-century politics in which voters’ partisanship remained fixed over many years until a ‘critical election’ signified a realignment of the electorate. For Silbey and many other historians, the purpose of electioneering was essentially to get known supporters to the polls (3). Elections were determined by whichever side did the best job of getting the vote out.

There is undoubtedly a tension between the ethnocultural interpretation of voter behaviour and the tendency in the literature to stress the importance of conflict over public policy choices in legislatures and among political elites, although Bensel’s description of the literature on nineteenth-century politics as ‘almost schizophrenic’ pushes this point a bit too hard. In any case, Bensel’s purpose is not so much to challenge this apparently bifurcated view of politics as ethnocultural at the grassroots and policy-driven at the top, so much as offer a practically-rooted explanation for it. In methodological terms, Bensel’s contribution is that he tackles this old question using a surprisingly under-used source; the testimony from witnesses at special hearings conducted by Congress into disputed elections. Contested election hearings are a valuable source because they are about the only direct testimony we have from ordinary voters discussing their experiences and perceptions of the act of voting. Typically, historians wanting to get at that most elusive of issues—what politics meant to the mass of voters—have to infer motivations from behaviour, rely on the second-hand and inevitably partisan reports from newspapers, or glean what they can from scattered references in private
letters and diaries. The contested election hearings, in contrast, feature the verbatim words of voters who were not officeholders or committed partisans. It can fairly be pointed out that contested election testimony, by definition, arises out of unusual elections so there are legitimate questions to be asked about the representativeness of the sources. But in arguing over whether an election had been fairly conducted, witnesses typically testified to what they considered normal.

Using this particularly rich source base, Bensel has created a more detailed and colourful description of the practice of voting than any other recent historian. Since, unlike most historians who have tackled this topic, Bensel is content to rely only on this one type of evidence, he does not concern himself with the campaigns but only with polling day itself. If this seems an unduly narrow focus, it is also a welcome corrective to most of the rest of the literature, which, because it draws on campaign ephemera and newspapers, tends to assume that the electoral process on polling day was a reflection and culmination of the preceding campaign. Bensel, in contrast, draws attention to such factors as the physical setting of the polling place, the sociological composition of the crowds, and the laws regulating the elections as factors that might have influenced voters. This was the era before election registration was necessary, making the electorate much more fluid and contributing to the highly-charged atmosphere, since every voter could potentially be challenged. Formal legal eligibility to vote was of course circumscribed by age, gender, and often race. Informally it was also limited by ethnicity, perception of loyalty or patriotism, literacy, and ‘mental competency’. Fundamental to the character of mid-nineteenth century elections was the complete lack of anonymity. It was a very physical, public, masculine occasion. Indeed voting often took place in locations where respectable women were seldom found: saloons and livery stables, as well as court houses and private homes. The ballot boxes were placed behind a window. Rather than directly depositing their ballots, voters would hand them over to election officials through a window. A low platform outside the voting window became the site of contestation. Voters would have to ascend to this platform, attracting the attention of the crowd outside, in order to hand their ballot to the election officials. The street outside became a bacchanalian festival. Under the informal conventions of the period, election etiquette required that ‘men of ordinary courage’ be able to make their way to the voting window. Those too timid to brave the brickbats did not deserve to vote.

This focus on the practical business of organizing the poll and challenging and cajoling prospective voters leads Bensel to focus on the role of party agents, a new class of political professionals, hitherto rather neglected in the literature. While other studies presume a correlation between pre-election campaigning and the results on polling day, Bensel turns his attention to the grubby business of how party officials actually turned out their supporters and tried to turn away their opponents. Elections were not a matter of persuading the undecided but mobilizing the faithful and intimidating the enemy. ‘Mid nineteenth-century voting returns’, Bensel writes, ‘should be studied as ritualized competition between party agents in which the ceremonies of democracy merely provided a context for struggle’. So according to Bensel the qualitative evidence from the contested election hearings largely backs up the predominantly quantitative-based conclusions of the ethnoculturalists; most voters’ opinions on policy issues was indeed fixed by their ethnic and cultural identities and given meaning by their previously acquired loyalty to party organizations. Agents who worked the polling place were, Bensel contends, the personification of the connection between the abstract economic interests and national policy positions of the parties on the one hand, and the ethnocultural loyalties of voters on the other. In this class of grassroots political operatives, Bensel has found, he claims, the magical solution to the paradox he has identified in the existing literature. Bensel does not reconcile the public policy and the ethnocultural interpretation. Both existed, in separate worlds. The nineteenth-century electorate, it turns out, were not so much schizophrenic as just two different classes of voter. Party platforms motivated the upper and middle classes to the polls and prompted them to fund political activity and recruit local agents. And it was the party agents who actually mobilized the great mass of the American electorate using ethnicity and religion as identifying markers of party identity. ‘The American polling place was thus a kind of sorcerer’s workshop’, writes Bensel, in which the minions of opposing parties turned money into whiskey and whiskey into votes. This alchemy transformed the great political economic interests of the nation, commanded by those with money, into the prevailing currency of the democratic masses. Whiskey, it seems, bought as many, and perhaps far more, votes than the planks in party platforms’.
The blatant corruption revealed by Bensel’s sources is matched by the matter-of-fact tone with which witnesses reported them. One voter who had intended to vote for the Democratic candidate in an 1866 election in Ohio ended up spending the night before the election being fed whiskey by Republicans and the voter later recalled that he had ‘voted the ticket they call the “boys in blue”; I didn’t read the ticket, it had a picture on… [the Republican agent] told me it was the right one and I shoved her in; it didn’t make much difference with me then how I voted’. It was the poor and needy who would be most vulnerable to this kind of manipulation. One man testified that a Republican agent had promised him five dollars if he voted Republican, and in addition would ‘buy me brick to build a chimney … give me a tree of winter apples and ten or fifteen bushels of drying apples’. He complained that he had only received a few apples.

Bensel’s roots in APD, rather than in a history department, are evident in the self-confidence with which he makes a bold argument on the basis of a narrow source base. But his familiarity with the theoretical literature on democratization generates some extremely valuable insights. The concept of ‘political incorporation’, for example, is especially useful for historians. It switches the focus from the citizen as a rational political actor and enables us to see the many ways in which voters could become tied to a political party because of personal relationships that built up with party agents, men who were ‘rewarded’ for their votes with shots of whiskey, a job for a relative just off the boat from Europe, or a small amount of money to buy shoes for their children. It enables Bensel to measure the essential differences between mobilising voters in urban areas and in rural settings. The importance of personal contacts between voters and agents meant that urban areas, where the agents were less likely to know everyone and where they lived had a very different feel to them than in the country. Agents could exert much more control on a more stable and face-to-face community, threatening retribution if necessary. In cities, ‘the politicization of the community was largely restricted to the immediate proximity of the poling place on election day’ whereas ‘rural areas could be effectively politicized for much longer periods and over much greater distances’. In cities, ethnicity served to separate potential supporters from partisan enemies, bestowing great significance on the prejudices and actions of party workers who made those judgements.

Bensel might have written an even more valuable book if he had drawn more explicitly on the literature on comparative democratization. Thinking about nineteenth-century American politics in terms of theories of state building and stages of democratic development is, at the very least, an important corrective to the widespread assumption that nineteenth-century America was suffused with a robust democratic ethos. It may, for example, be profitable to compare and contrast nineteenth-century American democracy to contemporary India—if only in the striking sense that in both cases the wealthiest classes are less likely to turn up at the polls.

The most important contribution this book makes is to add weight to the view that nineteenth-century American democracy was fundamentally different in its underlying assumptions from that of the twentieth century. It was not pluralist but was based on a very clear concept of communal identity. Rather than elections being seen as the sum of multiple private choices, they were communal events. Historians of political culture are familiar with the notion imported from anthropological theory that elections should be studied as a form of civic ritual. Bensel argues that in the period under consideration, the United States was at a stage of democratic development in which the rituals of election time did not necessarily lead to the kind of social cohesion that is normally ascribed to it. An intolerance of opposition was embedded in the rough and tumble election practice. ‘The social practices associated with the act of voting’, argues Bensel, ‘probably weakened those freedoms commonly associated with democracy, rather than vice versa … although popular voting is the quintessential characteristic of a democratic political system, the poling place, in nineteenth-century America, was often one of the less democratic sites in the nation’. As many scholars have noted, the irony is that as barriers to democratic participation have fallen—in other words as race and gender ceased to be the defining characteristics of citizenship—the extent and depth of political participation has also declined. In fact Bensel’s work adds yet more evidence to the intriguing argument that democracy in the United States was made possible by its being rooted in an exclusionary communal identity.
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