

INVOLVING STUDENTS IN THE HISTORICAL PROCESS  
AN ANALYSIS OF JACKSONIAN POLITICS

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In teaching history we invariably confront students who lack an understanding of the method and utilization of our discipline. The students continue to think that history is like a trunk of old facts and artifacts that some eccentric people called historians dabble in for amusement. History, they believe, is a never changing order of dates and events that correspond to dynastic or presidential successions. The students assume that the history they are learning is probably the same material that their parents learned, and that their children will learn. The only difference is that the parents had less history to comprehend, their children will have more. In contrast to history, the sciences appear to have more utility. In science laboratories, students can work with data to test hypotheses empirically. Science, students contend, deals with tangibles in a changing environment.

The material I am presenting is a laboratory exercise that historians can use in American political history to demonstrate how history can change. My intention is to help students to use data to conceptualize. I require the students to formulate a thesis, test it, and draw some conclusions. The exercise consumes about two hours and is sufficiently flexible to be used in classes with less than ten students or more than fifty.

The basic question with which the students deal is this: what is the basis of American electoral behavior? In other words, why do people vote as they do, what are the differences between the major parties, and what are the problems underlying the key political issues?

The Jacksonian era in American history offers an ideal laboratory to test this question because of the intense scholarly interest in that era's political history.<sup>1</sup> To recapitulate the scholarly debate briefly, we should note that Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s The Age of Jackson provided a conceptual framework for the period. In this Pulitzer Prize-winning book he essentially stated that economic behavior and interests dictated the political alignments and behavior. The Schlesinger thesis actually built on and climaxed the Progressive interpretation of American political history. These historians regarded the Whigs as the silk-stocking gentry, the Jacksonians as homespun-garbed pioneers. Jacksonian Democracy, they argued, was the thrust of the common people to oust aristocratic people and practices from power. In the 1950's and 1960's, Lee Benson, Edward Pessen, Richard McCormick, and a host of other Jacksonian historians tested the Schlesinger thesis in various states. Their studies concluded that the class-conflict interpretation failed to explain Jacksonian politics and, by implication, American political behavior.

The laboratory experience I offer my students corresponds with the path the historians took in their research and argument. It is an exercise drawn from the historiographical debate, and allows the students to examine evidence and frame generalizations.

I begin by choosing monographs, college and high school history texts, and popular histories that convey the economic interpretation. Especially useful are Schlesinger's The Age of Jackson, Wilfred Binkley's American Political Parties, and Claude G. Bower's Party Battles of the Jackson Period.<sup>2</sup>

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Older textbooks (sometimes found in college library storage bins are interesting sources, too. I try to provide every student with a book, though in larger classes two or three students may share.

In the first hour of the exercise I instruct the students to discern from the books the answers to these questions:

- (1) What were the differences between the Whigs and the Jacksonian Democrats?
- (2) What were the sectional, occupational, or social groups that comprised each party?
- (3) What were the underlying problems that shaped the political issues?

The students' problem, of course, is to find representative sentences or phrases that answer the questions. In Wilfred Binkley's American Political Parties, for example, the students might read: "As the party of the common man, New England Jacksonians were organized in clubs and local associations." Another sentence reads: "In the Deep South . . . Democracy included the ever faithful petty planters, owners of few if any slaves, and the grain-growing farmers . . ." (125-126). In Vernon L. Parrington's The Romantic Revolution the political battles are described as lying "between homespun and broadcloth for control of the government" (139). And, Schlesinger's The Age of Jackson offers this classic definition: "The Jacksonians believed that there was a deep-rooted conflict in society between the 'producing' and 'non-producing' classes--the farmers and laborers, on the one hand, and the business community on the other" (306).

After each student has examined his book, I open the floor for class discussion about the questions. We attempt to reach a conclusion about the nature of the political parties and the issues of the Jackson period. With little difficulty, the students agree that the Whigs were wealthy merchants and planters, and that the Democrats were middle-class or poor farmers and mechanics. They conclude that the political battles of the Jackson period were between the "haves" and the "have-nots." The class draws a hypothesis that for the Jacksonian Era economic motivation was the basis of political behavior.

In the second hour I divide the students into six groups. I inform them that I shall give them data from which they are to test their hypothesis about the nature of American political behavior. I then hand them charts of quantitative data, maps, and some summaries of articles that scholars have published to test the Schlesinger thesis. Rather than allowing the students to read the entire articles I provide only the data. It is each group's responsibility to analyze the data and reach a conclusion. Some data is from articles that represent the consensus school of American historiography, other data defends the economic interpretation, and a third kind reflects the ethno-cultural conceptual framework. The areas from which I have collected the data include Baltimore and Maryland; New York state and city; Boston; Wayne County, Michigan; Alabama; and Kentucky.<sup>3</sup>

This part of the exercise is the most revealing and instructive phase. Students have before them data which, in most cases, refutes the economic interpretation. They have contrary evidence to what they found in the books in the first hour. For most students the attitude is that if a book says it is so, then it is. But now the books are questioned. Initially the students are puzzled as they determine that the evidence fails to support their hypothesis. Some students categorically reject the evidence simply because it contradicted the original hypothesis. At one time a student dissuaded his group from accepting the conclusion from the data because he thought the professor wanted the

class to prove the economic interpretation. In time, however, most students are willing to use the data to question, if not refute, the economic interpretation of Jacksonian politics.

With the older interpretation undermined the class now has to devise a new hypothesis. From the evidence before them the class advances a tentative new hypothesis. This is an excellent opportunity to offer insights from political scientists who have advanced other explanations for electoral behavior. It is also an appropriate time to discuss historiography and explore with students how a prevailing intellectual milieu affects the writing of history.

The exercise is a practical and useful laboratory experience for history students. With a minimum of difficulty and a manageable investment of class time the history professor can offer his class a chance to frame an hypothesis and test it with empirical data. Simultaneously students are introduced to an assortment of historical methods and questions. The exercise is useful in a variety of courses. It can be implemented in an elective course in Jacksonian America for the historiographical problems. A professor might use the exercise in a history methods course for methodological and historiographical purposes. I have used it in a survey American history course and found that it encourages students to conceptualize from historical data. At whatever level, the exercise offers the students an opportunity to engage actively in the processes of historical thinking.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Recent historiographical essays on Jacksonian Democracy and politics include Edward Pessen, Jacksonian America: Society, Personality, and Politics (Homewood, Ill., 1969), 384-393; and Benjamin C. Rader, "Jacksonian Democracy: Myth or Reality?" The Social Studies, LXV (June, 1974), 17-22.

<sup>2</sup>Other useful works include Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought (New York, 1954), II; Charles and Mary Beard, The Rise of American Civilization (New York, 1934); Marquis James, The Life of Andrew Jackson (Indianapolis, 1938); J. W. Burgess, The Middle Period 1817-1858 (New York, 1907); Dixon Ryan Fox, The Decline of Aristocracy in the Politics of New York (New York, 1919); and William MacDonald, Jacksonian Democracy, 1829-1837 (New York, 1907).

<sup>3</sup>For Maryland, W. Wayne Smith, "Jacksonian Democracy on the Chesapeake: Class, Kinship and Politics," Maryland Historical Magazine, LXIII (March, 1968), especially 60-65; for New York state and city, Lee Benson, The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy (Princeton, N.J., 1961), 140, 149, 185; Edward Pessen, Riches, Class, and Power Before the Civil War (Lexington, Mass., 1973), 176; Walter Hugins, Jacksonian Democracy and the Working Class (Stanford, 1960), 204-206, 209-212; and Frank Otto Gatell, "Money and Party in Jacksonian America: A Quantitative Look at New York City's Men of Quality," Political Science Quarterly, LXXXII (June, 1967), 243, 247, 248, 250; for Boston, Pessen, Riches Class, and Power Before the Civil War, 190, 194; and Pessen, "Did Labor Support Jackson: The Boston Story," Political Science Quarterly, LXIV (June, 1949), 264, 271-273; for Wayne County, Michigan, Alexandria McCoy, "Political Affiliations of American Economic Elite," in Joel H. Silbey, Political Ideology and Voting Behavior in the Age of Jackson (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1973), 145, 147, 148, 150-152; for Alabama, Thomas B. Alexander et al., "Who Were the Alabama Whigs?" The Alabama Review, XVI (1963), 5-10; and Grady McWhiney, "Were the Whigs a Class Party in Alabama?" Journal of Southern History, XXXIII (November, 1957), especially 514, 517, 520-521; for Kentucky, Lynn L. Marshall, "The Genesis of Grass-Roots Democracy in Kentucky," Mid-America, XLVII (October, 1965), 273-274, 276, 278, 283.