

# The Historiography of Jacksonian Democracy

## Where Historians Disagree - The "Age of Jackson"

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To many Americans in the 1820s and 1830s, Andrew Jackson was a champion of democracy, a symbol of a spirit of anti-elitism and egalitarianism that was sweeping American life. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, however, historians have disagreed sharply not only in their assessments of Jackson himself, but in their portrayal of American society in his era.

The "progressive" historians of the early twentieth century tended to see the politics of Jackson and his supporters as a forerunner of their own generation's battles against economic privilege and political corruption. Frederick Jackson Turner encouraged scholars to see Jacksonianism as the product of the democratic West: a protest by the people of the frontier against the conservative aristocracy of the East, which they believed restricted their own freedom and opportunity. Jackson represented those who wanted to make government responsive to the will of the people rather than to the power of special interests. The culmination of this progressive interpretation of Jacksonianism was the publication in 1945 of Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Age of Jackson*. Schlesinger was less interested in the regional basis of Jacksonianism than Turner's disciples had been. He saw support for Jackson not just among western farmers, but also among urban laborers in the East. Jacksonian democracy, he argued, was the effort "to control the power of the capitalist groups, mainly Eastern, for the benefit of non-capitalist groups, farmers and laboring men, East, West, and South." He portrayed Jacksonianism as an early version of modern reform efforts (in the progressive era and the New Deal) to "restrain the power of the business community."

Richard Hofstadter, in an influential 1948 essay in *The American Political Tradition*, sharply disagreed. He argued that Jackson was the spokesman of rising entrepreneurs— aspiring businessmen who saw the road to opportunity blocked by the monopolistic power of eastern aristocrats.

The Jacksonians opposed special privileges only to the extent those privileges blocked their own road to success. They were less sympathetic to the aspirations of those below them. Similarly, Bray Hammond, writing in 1957, argued that the Jacksonian cause was "one of enterpriser against capitalist," of rising elites against entrenched ones. Other historians, exploring the ideological origins of the movement, saw Jacksonianism less as a democratic reform movement than as a nostalgic effort to restore a lost (and largely imagined) past. Marvin Meyer's *The Jacksonian Persuasion* (1957) argued that Jackson and his followers looked with misgivings on the new industrial society emerging around them and yearned instead for a restoration of the agrarian, republican virtues of an earlier time.

Historians of the 1960s began examining Jacksonianism in entirely new ways: looking less at Jackson himself, less at the rhetoric and ideas of his supporters, and more at the nature of American society in the early nineteenth century. Lee Benson's *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy* (1961)—a pathbreaking work of quantitative history—emphasized the role of religion and ethnicity in determining political divisions in the 1830s. If there was an egalitarian spirit alive in America in those years, it extended well beyond the Democratic Party and the followers of Jackson. Edward Pessen's *Jacksonian America* (1969) revealed that the democratic rhetoric of the age disguised the reality of an increasingly stratified society, in which inequality was growing more, not less, severe. Richard McCormick (1963) and Glyndon Van Deusen (1963) similarly emphasized the pragmatism of Jackson and the Democrats and deemphasized clear ideological and partisan divisions.

Scholars in more recent years have also paid relatively little attention to Jackson and the Democratic Party and instead have focused on a series of broad social changes occurring in the early and mid-nineteenth century which some have called a "market revolution." Those changes had profound effects on class relations, and the political battles of the era reflected only a part of their impact. Sean Wilentz, in *Chants Democratic* (1984), identified the rise in the 1820s of a powerful class identity among workers in New York, who were attracted less to Jackson himself than to the idea that power in a republic should be widely dispersed. Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy* (2005) also portrays Jacksonian politics as a broadly democratizing force. John Ashworth, in *"Agrarians" and "Aristocrats"* (1983), and Harry Watson, in *Liberty and Power* (1990), also saw party politics as a reflection of much larger social changes. The party system was an imperfect reflection of a struggle between people committed to unrestricted opportunities for all white men and those committed to advancing the goals of capitalists, in part through government action.

Other scholarship turned the focus of discussion away from Jackson and the Democratic Party and toward the larger society. But its success in revealing inequality and oppression in antebellum America has produced some withering reassessments of Jackson himself. In *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (1975), Michael Rogin portrays Jackson as a man obsessed with escaping from the imposing shadow of the Revolutionary generation. He would lead a new American revolution, not against British tyranny but against those who challenged the ability of white men to control the continent. He displayed special savagery toward American Indians, whom he pursued, Rogin argued, with an almost pathological violence and intensity. Alexander Saxton, in *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic* (1990), likewise points to the contradiction between the image of the age of Jackson as a time of expanding democracy and the reality of constricted rights for women, blacks, and Indians. The Democratic Party, he argues, was committed above all to defending slavery and white supremacy. And Daniel Walker Howe, in *What Hath God Wrought* (2007), also portrays the Jacksonians as champions of white male supremacy and sees the Whigs as in many ways more truly democratic.

But the portrayal of Jackson as a champion of the common man has not vanished from scholarly life. The leading Jackson biographer of the postwar era, Robert V. Remini, has noted the flaws in Jackson's concept of democracy; but within the context of his time, Remini claims, Jackson was a genuine "man of the people."