The Virgin Vote: Young Americans in the Age of Popular Politics

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Abstract

Young people played a central role in nineteenth-century American democracy. From 1840 to 1900, young Americans joined in a boisterous political culture, to guide their nation and announce their identities. Women, minorities, and underage males – usually banned from voting – also followed politics closely, ratcheting up excitement. In an age of extreme partisanship and close elections, political parties sought young men's "virgin votes," making voting the central rite of passage of American masculinity. Each stage of youth, from childhood through young adulthood, is explained in a successive chapter, demonstrating the building involvement in public democracy as Americans aged. Finally, when young people lost interest in politics in the 1890s, overall turnout dropped precipitously. This dissertation uses accounts of children, adolescents, first-time voters, and politicians to explore the personal and structural ways young people sustained nineteenth-century democracy.

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Clockwise from top left: Oscar Lawrence Jackson, unknown South Carolina mill girl, Susan Bradford, Mattie Thomas, Uriah Oblinger, and unknown Iowa Wide Awake club member.

Introduction

Democracy out of Doors

The night before he turned twenty, Oscar gave his first big speech.

His friends called him up before the rural Ohio meetinghouse. Oscar starred out at the packed pews, crowded with fidgeting boys, respectable ladies and old farmers. He felt embarrassed by the attention.

A stranger smiled. Someone called his name. Warmed by the support, Oscar launched into his talk on the coming election. He built momentum, stomping the low stage, endorsing Abe Lincoln, and mocking the Democratic Party. He went on like that for nearly two hours. When the skinny nineteen-year-old schoolteacher was through, the crowd boiled over with applause.[1]

Five days later Oscar gave his second talk, this time shouting over a raucous outdoor assembly, his lean frame swaying on the back of a wagon. His handsome face – with its falcon nose, curious eyes, and frame of floppy brown hair – bobbed above the throng. Oscar hollered with more confidence this time, his rhetoric arcing over the roar of five hundred cheering partisans. No longer embarrassed, he went home and bragged, in his usually self-effacing diary, that his sudden fame tickled his vanity.[2]

Before these speeches Oscar was nothing special. In fact, he was strikingly ordinary, as statistically average as an American could be. He stood 5'8" and weighed

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[1] Oscar Lawrence Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary; Journals kept Before and During the Civil War*, Ed. David P. Jackson, (Sharon, PA: Privately Published, 1922), 27-8.
[2] Ibid., 28, 27.

135 pounds, typical for a northern man in 1860.[3] He lived in south-central Ohio, at the dead center of U.S. population, according to the Census Bureau.[4] And he was nineteenth years old, going on twenty, exactly average for an American in 1860.[5]

Oscar meandered into the center of American life. He left his Pennsylvania home a few years earlier, after caring for his consumptive mother. When she died, he packed a carpetbag with a diary, a bible, and a bowie knife, and set off on an aimless "wander year."[6] He tramped across Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Ohio, lodging with strangers, drinking and dancing with local youths, and keeping track of which towns had the prettiest young ladies.[7]

Oscar finally settled in Hocking County, Ohio, where he found work teaching school. Someone invited him to join the debating society in town, made up of a mix of youths and grown men. Soon he was there almost every night, arguing about slavery, temperance, or women's rights. At one meeting he and an Abolitionist preacher debated whether George Washington was in hell for owning slaves. Oscar loved to argue, with a sometimes entertaining, sometimes irritating faith in his own unbending logic. His passion won the attention of well-connected local Republicans, who pushed him forward

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[3] Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 9; Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent of Contract: The Rise and Fall of American Slavery,* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989), 141.
[4] United States Census Bureau, "Mean Center of Population for the United States: 1790 to 2010," Last modified April 19, 2013, http://www.census.gov/geo/reference/pdfs/cenpop2010/centerpop_mean2010.pdf.
[5] Michael R. Haines and Richard H. Steckel, *A Population History of North America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 702-4. Oscar was also white, Protestant, of Scotch and English descent, a northerner, and neither wealthy nor poor. He fit in with the majority of Americans in most categories. **See Appendix One.**
[6] Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 9-10.
[7] Ibid., 9-17.

as a "boy orator" in the heated 1860 race, calling him up before meetinghouses and town squares.[8]

Each exhilarating speech dragged Oscar deeper into the presidential campaign. One October day, Republicans organized the largest gathering their sparsely populated region had ever seen. Seven thousand poured into the small town of Logan, Ohio, from their villages dotting the foothills of the ebbing Appalachians. Squads of beaming young ladies, dressed in blue shirtwaists and red and white striped skirts, rode in on horseback. They mingled with companies of young men in shimmering black capes and martial caps, members of a new Republican club called the Wide Awakes. All sat at long tables to feast on four roasted bulls, their smoky meat garnet from a long night over wood coals, as well as two hundred chickens, loaves of dense white bread, pickles, relishes, jams, and two thousand homemade pies.[9]

As night fell, the crowd lit torches and the speeches began. Oscar gave a talk. Not his best, he felt, but certainly to the biggest crowd he had ever addressed.[10] He was more excited about the speaker he followed. The main attraction that night was David Kellogg Cartter, a forty-eight-year-old former congressman credited with contributing the deciding vote at the Republican convention making Abraham Lincoln the party's nominee.[11]

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[8] Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 16, 18-20, 34-36. For a useful study of debating and literary societies and their impact on young Americans' place in public discourse, see Carolyn Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[9] "Great Republicans Barbeque at Logan," *Ohio State Journal*, October 9, 1860; Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 32, 34.

[10] Ibid., 34.

[11] "Great Republicans Barbeque at Logan," *Ohio State Journal*, October 9, 1860. Though the crowds in Logan believed that Cartter's vote "nominated Mr. Lincoln," in fact he only

How was it that Oscar Lawrence Jackson, too young to vote, new in town, with little money, few connections, and a spotty education, shared the stage with this kingmaker? Why was it that none of the thousands assembled seemed to think the presence of this boy orator at all unusual?[12]

So many aspects of Oscar's life – his height, his region, and his age – were average, but was his political engagement was just as ordinary? Was Oscar Lawrence Jackson just another ambitious, partisan young American, striving and shouting in an age of popular politics?

As the speeches ended, rockets illuminated the sky, and Oscar headed home, into the dark October night. He could hardly know how fevered the election would become, or that he might need that bowie knife of his.

Rulers of the Land

Lit by blazing torches, Oscar Lawrence Jackson seems gifted and precocious – "the smartest, brainiest, wide awake young fellow I ever met" a friend later wrote – but the rally in Logan reveals something else.[13] Three other speakers shared the stage with Representative Cartter. Each was roughly Oscar's age. Those ladies in red, white, and blue were even younger. Most were probably between fifteen and twenty-one, in that age when many young women took enthusiastic interest in politics before slamming into the immovable wall of disenfranchisement. The Wide Awakes marching back and forth were

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reported the shift of other members of the Ohio delegation to supporting Lincoln. ("The Four Votes," *Chicago Press and Tribune*, May 19, 1860).

[12] The article on the barbeque mentions Jackson, but does not consider his age worthy of note. "Great Republicans Barbeque at Logan" *Ohio State Journal*, October 9, 1860; Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 32, 34.

[13] Ibid., 42.

younger still, many members were in their teens and their national leader was just twenty-three.[14] When Oscar stood up to give his talk, a sea of youths stared back.

Young people fueled America's democracy at its most popular. From 1840 to 1900, generations dove into politics, providing new votes and making each race feel vital and fresh. An engaging political culture attracted young people, who, "impelled by the vehemence of youth," amplified their democracy in turn.[15]

For nineteenth-century Americans, growing up meant going out. Out into the public square, out into boisterous marches and defiant countermarches, and out, for men at age twenty-one, to the voting window. Young Americans stepped further into public life with each stage of their development. They ventured from childhoods of partisan training, to youths spent salving angst with activism, to "virgin votes" celebrated as a rite of passage. Politicians worked to attract successive generations, hoping new voters would sustain their parties.

These young people used politics to aid their personal lives. Some cared about policy, others turned out for "fun and frolic," but nearly all used their political system as a social tool.[16] Young Americans fueled their democracy, not driven of youthful idealism or a desire to uplift their generation, but because millions of individual concerns accumulated to make them a public force. During the age of popular democracy, the political was personal.

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[14] Jon Grinspan, "'Young Men for War': The Wide Awakes and Lincoln's 1860 Presidential Campaign," *Journal of American History,* 96 (September 2009), 357-378.
[15] Phineas Taylor Barnum, *The Life of PT Barnum, Written by Himself*, (New York: Redfield Press, 1855), 138.
[16] Clay W. Anderson to William G. Beatty, June 24, 1856, *Life and Letters of Judge Thomas J. Anderson and Wife,* Ed. James House Anderson and Nancy Anderson, (Cincinnati: Press of F. J. Heer, 1904), 475.

This dissertation explores the relationship between young people and popular politics, focusing on three major topics. First, it studies young Americans' expanding interest in public politics as they age, charting the way political behavior is inherited and imparted at each stage of youth. Second, it uses young peoples' politics to assess the place of democracy in nineteenth-century America, a contentious question among scholars. Most important, it shows the role young people played in political life, and politics played in young people's lives, in nineteenth-century America. Above all else, this dissertation demonstrates a reciprocal relationship between public politics and personal development.

These young people could not stop talking about their democracy. One woman gushed, "I love politics – political life excitement & all," while an eighteen-year old apologized for not mentioning the subject in a letter, avoiding politics only because "everybody talks about them."[17] Adults developed a stereotype of politically obsessed youths, loitering in front of small-town drug stores or big city grog shops, talking politics in their dense, saucy slang. Often they were menacing "b'hoys" in garish neckties and towering top hats, but just as frequently they were oil-smudged factory hands, or a gaggle of well-informed prostitutes, or farm boys repeating rumors passed along by big siblings.[18] Partisanship buzzed in the ears of a diverse swath of young Americans.

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[17] Persis Sibley Andrews, May 5, 1850, Collections of the Maine Historical Society, Portland, ME; William Wheeler, December 23, 1860, *Letters of William Wheeler of the Class of 1855, Y.C.*, (Privately Published, 1875).

[18] "Our Best Young Men Talk It Over," *Daily Register-Call*, November 25, 1881. For the role of prostitutes, brothels, and madams in politics, see Timothy Gilfoyle, *City of Eros: New York City, Prostitution, and the Commercialization of Sex, 1790-1920*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 87, 182-195, 256-7 and Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy Gilfoyle, and Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press: Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 55-77.

Historians have grown so used to enumerating all of those left out of nineteenth-century American democracy that they often lose sight of how many were, for the first time, welcomed inside. For all its flaws, American citizens played a greater role in their government than in any other state in history.[19] Young people showed a particularly novel interest. "In no country of the known world," wrote the advice guru William Alcott, did government rely so heavily on "the activities of the young." So many young people took interest in American democracy after 1840 that while Alcott's 1834 classic, *The Young Man's Guide*, barely mentioned politics, his 1850 revision devoted many pages to the subject. Alcott claimed that the newsboys, barmaids, and farmhands who found personal meaning in their new democratic system were, "in reality, the rulers of the land."[20]

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[19] Before the twentieth century all democratic governments excluded large blocks of society from suffrage. The Athenians denied slaves, roughly half of their population, the vote. In nineteenth-century Britain three major Reform Acts left 95% of the population voteless after 1832, and still denied the vote to 40% of men and all women in 1884. In the Netherlands, the reformist Constitution of 1848 maintained very high property qualifications, though the 1887 revision reduced them significantly. Nineteenth-century America's closest democratic competitors were Switzerland, which introduced full male suffrage in 1848, the self-governing colonies of south Australia, which did so in the 1850s, and France, which extended the right to vote to all men in 1875. No state anywhere extended the full right to vote to women before New Zealand did so in 1893. By extending the vote to most classes of adult white males the United States, despite racial and gender restrictions, still enfranchised a plurality of its adult population and a larger proportion than other democracies. John A. Phillips and Charles Wetherell, "The Great Reform Act of 1832 and the Political Modernization of England," *American Historical Review*, 100, (April 1995), 413-4; Colin Pilkington, *The Politics Today Companion to the British Constitution,* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 134; Jan Willem Sap, *The Netherlands Constitution 1848-1998,* (Purdue University Press, 2000); Peter McPhee, "Electoral Democracy and Direct Democracy in France 1789-1851," *European History Quarterly*, (1986), 77-96; Australian Electoral Commission, "The Right to Vote in Australia," Last modified January 28, 2011, http://aec.gov.au/Elections/Australian_Electoral_History/righttovote.htm.

[20] William A. Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men on Various Subjects: Designed as a Companion to the Young Man's Guide*, (Buffalo, Geo H. Derby & Co, 1850), 16-8;

"Rulers" is a stretch. Young Americans did much to fuel their system, but almost nothing to guide it. They were only inadvertently brought into politics, lifted by the rising tide of democracy in the early nineteenth century. In a flurry of state constitutions written after 1800 new states in the Midwest and deep South, and reforming giants like New York, threw out their property requirements for voting. The process was jerky and uneven, but while three in four states required property to vote in 1790, just one quarter did by 1840. States replaced these qualifications with a jumble of rules on race, residency, criminal offenses, and mental competency, but they shared a rare consensus that no one under twenty-one should vote.[21]

This change brought young people into politics in unintended ways. Cutting property requirements allowed millions of poor men to vote and especially empowered young Americans who had not yet accumulated wealth. More important, states' voting laws turned twenty-one into a meaningful dividing line in a culture with few age distinctions. Younger men looked forward to turning twenty-one, and those who recently crossed that barrier gloried in donning "the mantle of citizenship."[22] Young women, barred from the meaningful transition themselves, still stressed its importance for the men in their lives, enshrining it as a rite of masculinity.

William Alcott, *The Young Man's Guide,* (Boston: Lilly, Wait, Colman, and Holden, 1834).

[21] States removed their property requirements in four stages, beginning with the revolutionary constitutions in states like New Hampshire, Vermont, and Pennsylvania (between 1784 and 1801), followed by those of new states in the Midwest and Deep South (from 1802 to 1821), then a series of reforming East Coast states like Massachusetts and New York (1821 to 1845), and finally the conservative hold-outs like Virginia, Rhode Island, and South Carolina (in the 1850s and '60s). Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, (New York: Basic Books, 2009), Tables A-1, 2 and 3. **See Appendix Two.**

[22] "Young Men and the War Issues," *The Century*, 33, (March 1887).

Establishing twenty-one as a distant goal meant a long political apprenticeship, a building of interest, knowledge, and passion over many years. Americans did not undergo a miraculous partisan activation when they became adults, instead they spent their youths singing campaign slogans, turning out for rallies, and hassling the children of the opposing party. Understanding young Americans' politics means exploring the ways parents, siblings, teachers, and bosses introduced public democracy into the home, the gang, the classroom, and the workplace.

This interest built to a thrilling climax. The central rite of passage for nineteenth-century American males was not wearing long pants, or smoking cigars, or learning to curse, but casting one's first vote.[23] Historians have argued that American society lacked clear age distinctions, having thrown away traditional rites with so many other old world hierarchies, but scholars have not noticed the way voting created a new dividing line.[24] Other points mattered, like marriage or parenthood, but none was attached to a specific age-boundary like turning twenty-one. The entirely arbitrary requirement allowed a young man to feel mature, no matter how stunted the rest of his life appeared.

This dissertation explores the long-forgotten rituals by which a scraggly mustache, a crumpled paper ballot, and a gauntlet of bellowing vote-challengers came together to announce this double initiation into citizenship and manhood.

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[23] Lester Bodine, *Off the Face of the Earth,* (Omaha: Festner Printing Co., 1894), 101.
[24] Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in American 1790 to the Present,* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Howard Chudacoff, *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Howard Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Stephen Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard Universty Press, 2006). Corinne T. Field's article "Are Women…All Minors? Women's Rights and the Politics of Aging in the Antebellum United States," *Journal of Women's History*, 12, (Winter 2001), 113-137, also argues for the voting age as a rare (and exclusively male) dividing line between age groups.

Many called a man's first ballot his "virgin vote" – or even his "maiden vote" – and they meant the comparison. Voting, like sexual initiation, marked a beginning and an end, a commencement and a commitment. After a prolonged campaign courtship, a young man should bestow his first ballot to a truly worthy party. Young men must also remain true; that first time should "determine the voter's politics for life."[25] In typical Victorian fashion, partisans expected monogamy.

Young women could not aspire to this same transition. With rare exceptions, American women could not vote. American democracy denied women full adulthood, as well as full citizenship, by excluding them from this dramatic rite of passage. Where young men saw progressing maturity, young women could only look forward to remaining "perpetual minors."[26]

Disenfranchisement, however, did not equal disinterest. Many women could not remain on the sidelines, neutral in the face of America's competitive, thrilling, popular political culture. Young ladies waded out into surging rallies, rubbing elbows with the men and boys associated with such events. One Kansas schoolgirl described the sensation of losing herself in a Republican rally in 1888, sinking into the "solid mass of people, blowing every manner and kind of horns and whistles, ringing bells, beating pans and doing every thing to make a loud noise." Submerged in this river of chanting, stomping,

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[25] "Political Indifference," *Daily Inter Ocean*, June 18, 1892.
[26] Corinne T. Field, *Perpetual Minors: Gender, Race, the Struggle for Equal Adulthood in Nineteenth-Century America*, (Forthcoming: Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

hurrahing partisans (many of them blowing kazoos, a cheap new political noisemaker) a young woman might momentarily forget the limits on her participation.[27]

Her best shot at influence, however, was to sway the male voters in her life. Though not old enough to have sons to instruct, young women could pressure their beaux or brothers at a time when their political convictions were still fluid. Many even used their romantic and sexual relationships for partisan ends, young ladies' flirtations and courtships often expressed their otherwise suppressed beliefs.

For all their enthusiasm, there were stark lines no woman could cross. Americans of both sexes considered elections "no place for women," even as observers.[28] Ladies spent that thrilling day stuck at home. Far more than today, nineteenth-century Americans were comfortable with the existence of uncrossable social boundaries, and most women, like most men, accepted their culture. While young men saw a series of stepping stones towards adulthood, young women waded through the murky task of deducing, at each stage of youth, how far into public democracy they could venture, which lines they could step over, and which were never to be crossed.

Other boundaries could almost never be bridged. Young African-Americans had, in most cases, very little influence on mainstream public democracy. There was certainly a vibrant black political culture in nineteenth-century America, stoked in northern cities before the Civil War and flaring into a mass movement in southern states during

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[27] Martha Farnsworth, *Plains Woman: The Diary of Martha Farnsworth, 1882-1922,* Ed. Marlene Springer and Haskell Springer, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 54. On the use of kazoos in political events in the 1880s, see Mark Wahlgren Summers, *Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 5.

[28] Richard Franklin Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 22.

Reconstruction.[29] However, this culture only rarely influenced overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly racist political parties. Most white male voters simply would not listen to the political counsel of black men, the way they might from white women or even children. Brief glimpses of racial cooperation, among Republicans in the late 1860s and early 1870s, were the exception that proved the rule; for the most part whites and blacks occupied separate political dimensions.[30] While African-American politics are worthy of close investigation, this project is an attempt to recover a mass political culture, and most African-Americans were simply too disenfranchised, too isolated, and too outnumbered to have had a significant impact on this most majoritarian of pursuits.[31]

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[29] For thorough studies of black political culture, north and south, see Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under Our Feet*, (Boston: Belknap Press, 2003); Philip Dray, *Capitol Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2008); *Southern Black leaders of the Reconstruction Era*, Ed. Howard N. Rabinowitz, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003); Daniel R. Biddle, Murray Dubin, *Tasting Freedom: Octavius Catto and the Battle for Equality in Civil War America*, (Philadephia: Temple University Press, 2010); Faye E. Dudden, *Fighting Chance: the Struggle over Woman Suffrage and Black suffrage in Reconstruction America,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); William A. Link; *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Stephen Kantrowitz, *More than Freedom,* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012).

[30] No study shows this separation more clearly than Steven Hahn's work in *A Nation Under Our Feet*.

[31] I primarily explored materials in archives at the University of Virginia, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and the Library of Congress, and read widely in *The Colored American, The North Star*, *Provincial Freeman*, *the Washington Bee*, and *The Richmond Planet* and found very little evidence of racial integration or cooperation in political parties. As for the demographics underpinning this separation, it is worth noting for the most of the age of popular politics, the great majority of African-Americans were isolated in states that denied them voting rights. In 1860, for instance, just 0.33% of African-Americans lived in states that offered black men the full vote. (Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont were the only states allowing African-Americans the full vote in 1860 , not limited by any property qualifications. Those states had a total black population, including non-voting women and underage men, of 16,084, out of a national total of 4,441,830 African-Americans. Keyssar, *The Right to Vote,* Table

Though American public democracy halted at racial lines and only tentatively crossed gender boundaries, it had an unprecedented ability to bridge class divisions. The political culture incorporated and advanced working class young Americans as no other system, anywhere in the world, managed to do. Party headquarters located in saloons, warehouses, and butcher shops invited in struggling young people, offering them mentors, networks, and jobs. Class usually had an inverse relationship to voting; the poor turned out on election day while the wealthy were more likely to retreat into private clubs, grumbling the mantra "a gentleman never votes."[32]

This study focuses on the vast middling classes in American life, running from the stable poor to the comfortable middle. There are some mansions and hovels in this story, but mostly log cabins, clapboard farmsteads, and brick boardinghouses. Regardless of home or class, politically active young people often shared a striving, struggling, bumptious ambition, a faith that their young lives could be improved with the help of a political party.

A Motive as well as a Method [33]

A-4; Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990,* Working Paper Series No. 56 [Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau: Washington, D.C. 2002]).

[32] Paul Kleppner, *Who Voted? The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout, 1870-1980*, (New York: Praeger, 1982), 34; *"*Young Men in Council*" Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 27, 1878; George Boutwell, "Young Men in Politics" *North American Review,* Vol. 129, No 277, (Dec 1879); Albion Winegar Tourgée, *Letter to a King*, (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1888), 49, 58.

[33] Horatio Seymour to Samuel Tilden, July 20, 1868, *Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden, Volume 1*, Ed. John Bigelow, (New York: Harper and Brothers Pub., 1908).

Things were getting uglier for Oscar. The 1860 race was a violent one around the country. In Indiana, a Democratic candidate for coroner murdered a young Republican. In New York, a massive brawl erupted between a Wide Awake club and southern guests at a Manhattan hotel.[34] Oscar worked to stay cordial with the adults he debated against, but young rivals in the audience became increasingly menacing. By making a name among Republicans, Oscar made himself a target of Democrats.

A growing crew of rowdies heckled Republican events. At one demonstration in a town square they drank whiskey, threw apples at speakers, and ran their horses down the street. Oscar had a confrontational side (he would go on to fight in General William Tecumseh Sherman's army, leading charges and surviving a gunshot to the face) and so he teased the toughs, agitating them further. A posse of unsmiling Wide Awakes eyed the Democratic troublemakers. Oscar later found out that they had revolvers and knives hidden under their capes, and "would have shot and sliced them like dogs if any one of us had been struck."[35]

Young women offered him a different kind of protection. Oscar was always careful to compliment the ladies in each audience and devoted much of his diary to his courtships. The Republican girls of a local high school proposed to stand around him in a protective wreath, linked by their handkerchiefs as he lectured. No rough would be so

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[34] "Republican Mass Meeting—Democratic Assault," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* August 27, 1860; "First Blood of the Irrepressible Conflict," *New York Herald*, September 27, 1860.
[35] Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 30.

ungentlemanly as to try to push through this bodyguard. Women, nineteenth-century Americans widely believed, calmed men's political aggression.[36]

The schoolgirls could not protect Oscar. At night he heard his name cursed in the street. When lecturing indoors, he glimpsed the furious faces of young Democrats fogging the windows at the back of the meetinghouse. Each rally or debate, each foray into the "democracy out of doors," made him more of a target. Oscar began to make an ostentatious point of lecturing with his hand gripping his bowie knife, a challenge to "the maddest set of humans" threatening him at every speech.[37]

Why did Oscar invest the energy and take the risks of this political involvement? What was in it for him? In his diary, the modest boy orator gushed – in a section "not intended for public view" – about the attention his speaking won. Though he larded his public lectures with arguments on slavery, popular sovereignty, and the tariff, in private he focused on the praise his career earned him from the adult Republicans (and "very good-looking young ladies") of Hocking county. He admitted that, ideology aside, he was driven by the "ambition of anyone my age."[38]

Like Oscar, young Americans' private aspirations pushed them into public politics. Voting, speechifying, and electioneering allowed young people to feel like they were contributing to the governance of their nation. They usually expressed little interest

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[36]Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 31. The high school girls' plan fit in with the standards of women's presence at political events. Though women were often involved in public democracy, they were usually held up as objects or symbols, rather than actors. They rarely spoke or performed any dynamic action. (Mary Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825-1880,* [Baltimore; Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992]).
[37] Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 31-32.
[38] Ibid., 28, 17, 27.

in improving the collective status of young people in America's social hierarchy.[39] Instead, most focused on individual achievement within the system.

Young people, growing up in an era of tumultuous change, needed this boost from politics. In the nineteenth century, America's population ballooned from five to seventy-five million people.[40] Sprawling cities blossomed along riverbanks, massive slaughterhouses sprouted up where deer had grazed. Patterns of work, family, courtship, education, and health changed dramatically. Americans imagine a Golden Age of carefree, small-town, nineteenth-century youth, but each death of a parent from cholera, each relocation to a distant state, each new job in a clanking, stinking factory shook the rickety bridge to adulthood.[41] The nineteenth-century was not a single moment of revolution, but a hundred years of change upon change upon change, and every new shift made it harder for youths to find their footing.

Politics anchored their unstable lives, offering a route to advancement regardless of boom or bust. Oscar saw this stability as a "great advantage to a stranger" like himself,

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[39] Young people expressed hostility toward a collective youth identity. In their addresses, petitions, and broadsides, they were careful to emphasize that they had no intention of "obtruding upon the public in collectively protesting, and calling upon the young men," and focused instead on stoking the ambition of individual young people. "Nominating Rally for Delegates to National Convention of Young Men, National Republican Party," (Baltimore: Sand & Neilson, 1831), Library Company of Philadelphia, PA; "Young men of Boston! Broadside for Charles Wells as Boston Mayor, 1832," Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress; Frederick Von Raumer, *America and the American People*, (New York: J. & H.G. Langley, S Astor House, 1841), 353; "Young men! Vote for Edgar Tehune for Congress" (Chicago, 1886), Broadside in Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress.

[40] Haines and Steckel, *A Population History of North America*, 702-4.

[41] This palpable sense of disorder is made extremely clear in Stephen Mintz, *Huck's Raft*; Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage*; Elliot West, *Growing Up with the Country: Childhood on the Far Western Frontier*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989).

who had recently wandered into a new region.[42] This steadiness may even explain why nineteenth-century democracy failed to bring about progressive social, economic, or racial change. Many young people using the system were not looking for radical reform, they wanted the very opposite from politics. What historians see as inertia, shaken and striving young people saw an inviting permanence.

Because of this satisfaction with the status quo, those who wanted to see major changes – including abolitionists, secessionists, women's rights activists, labor organizers, and socialists – all had to look outside the political system. This dissertation defines "politics" as nineteenth-century Americans usually did, as a culture bounded by the interests of the political parties and the issues they were willing to address.

Popular democracy could promise advancement because American society lacked many age distinctions. Like workplaces, churches, and saloons, "the young folks and the old folks mingled" at partisan rallies.[43] In a society with little consciousness of age, an aspiring nineteen-year old like Oscar could hope to befriend and impress the adults in his debating society and in the local Republican party. This constant mixing with older men and women made it easy for young people to look up the hierarchies of age and party, and pick out a spot they hoped to occupy.

The world's largest democracy did not run on the hopes and dreams of nineteen year olds alone. Popular politics had deep personal meaning to individual young Americans, but their intimate interests accumulated to play a structural role in American

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[42] Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 28.
[43] Mrs. Charley Huyck (first name unknown), collected by Harold J. Moss, January 17-24, 1939, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project.

democracy. Young people circulated a steady flow of new votes into the political system, and parties began to count on these infusions of "warm fresh blood."[44]

Young people could play such an important role because of the way intense partisanship shaped American democracy. Parties printed the newspapers that riled the public and manufactured the ballots that voters cast. They selected the election locations, not to mention the poll judges.[45] Membership in these parties was usually an inflexible identity, passed down through family and bound up with ethnic, religious, and regional background. It was always hard to find an Irish-Catholic Republican or an African-American Democrat. Young people were said have been "born a Whig" or to have "drank in Democracy with their mother's milk."[46] For many Americans, an allegiance to party was "as inseparable from him as his clothes."[47]

Americans rarely changed those clothes. More than ninety percent of voters endorsed the same party in election after election, stretching over long periods of tumultuous politics.[48] Occasionally the system saw massive realignments, but rigid

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[44] "Young Men to the Front," *Wheeling Register*, March 26, 1880.

[45] The two greatest books on the centrality of parties in nineteenth-century America are Joel Silbey's *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994) which details the scale and significance of parties over roughly six decades, and Richard Franklin Bensel's *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,* which makes the structural power of parties clear on the individual level on election day.

[46] David Ross Locke, *Nasby: Divers Views, Opinions and Prophecies of Petroleum v. Nasby*, (Cincinnati: R.W. Carroll & Co., 1867), 2; Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars*, 142.

[47] Frances Kemble, October 1832, in *Journal of Frances Anne Butler, Vol One,* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1835), 112.

[48] Roughly 91% of voters chose the same party between 1840 and 1852, and that number jumped to 95% from 1860 to 1892. Voters backed a single organization in almost every contest, 91.8% voted a straight one-party ticket from 1880 to 1896. Kleppner, *Who Voted?*, 26; Mark Lawrence Kornbluh, *Why American Stopped Voting: The Decline of Participatory Democracy and the Emergence of Modern American Politics*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 36. Partisans maintained these bonds over decades. Thomas B. Alexander's fascinating study of partisan "consistency" from 1840 and 1860

partisanship was far more common. Those who switched parties were mocked as shiftless "scratchers" and "bolters," or as effeminate "Miss Nancies" and "parasol-holders."[49] The result was a political system with the closest elections and most turnover in U.S. History.[50] Politicians knew how few votes they needed for victory, but also how difficult it was to change the mind of a regular party man.

Their greatest harvest came from the "large crop of new voters" turning twenty-one every year.[51] Campaigners saw what political historians have since proven: that voters in their early twenties were the most politically flexible.[52] "New voters" almost always meant "young voters."[53] The older a voter got, the more ballots he cast as a

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found that during what is widely considered the most tumultuous period in American political history, the Democratic party's share of the presidential vote shifted by less than half a percentage point. (Thomas B. Alexander, "The Dimensions of Voter Partisan Consistency in Presidential Elections from 1840 to 1860," *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840-1860*, Ed. Stephen E. Maizlish, [College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982], 75).

[49] Lydia Maria Child to Sarah Shaw, October 27, 1856, in *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, Ed. Wendell Phillips, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1882), 85.
Switching parties, according to Reverend John Mather Austin "betrays an entire destitution of moral principle and rectitude," while the youth advice author Charles Nordoff condemned: "a non-partisan government is the dream of weak and amiable men." (John Mather Austin, *A Voice to Youth*, [Utica: Grosh and Hutchinson, 1839], 230; Charles Nordhoff, *Politics for Young Americans*, [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875], 35).

[50] Three fifths of presidents elected during the age of popular politics failed to win a majority of the popular vote, and control of congress changed hands on average every four and a half years between 1840 and 1894. See John P. McIver, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition*, Ed. Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), Table EB208-259 and EB296-308.

[51] *"*Political Indifference*" The Daily Inter Ocean*, June 18, 1892.

[52] William E. Gienapp, "Politics Seem to Enter into Everything: Political Culture in the North, 1840-1860," *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840-1860*, Ed. Stephen E. Maizlish, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 54-6.

[53] I have seen no sources in which campaigners assumed that new voters – excluding immigrants – would be over thirty years old. For examples of this assumption that new voters were young voters, see: "To the Young men Who will Cast their first vote," *Daily National Intelligencer*, January 17, 1844; "The Next Presidency," *New York Herald*, May

Democrat or a Whig or a Republican, the harder it became to pry him lose. But first-time voters, a Chicago paper explained, "pay especial heed" to the campaign before their initial national election.[54] Win their virgin vote, and they would support your party for decades.

Politicians sought out young people for more than just ballots. Ambitious youths were often willing to perform the most unrewarding campaign tasks. They ran errands, spread rumors, and filled out crowds. Rowdies in the late teens and twenties often served as foot soldiers in the violent campaigning of the era, willing to intimidate ballot-distributors at or "awl" a rival with a shoemakers' spike. Wild young campaigners helped party leaders keep their hands clean.

More than just scheming bosses sent youths to do their dirty work. Abraham Lincoln left behind a trove of letters from his days as a congressman and party activist stressing the utility of aggressive young campaigners. In one letter from 1848, Lincoln advised a friend to organize a political club in Springfield. "Gather up all the shrewd wild boys about town," Lincoln wrote, "whether just of age or a little under age."[55] He then rattled off a list of suitably wild young men; it was a politicians' job to know the up-and-

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28, 1844; "To the Young Voters," *New York Times*, September 10, 1876; "The Mothers Vote This Year," *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 26, 1884; "A New Crop of Republicans for 1888," *Grand Forks Daily Herald,* September 28, 1886. Likewise, an analysis of a limited number of rosters of "new voters clubs" shows that 86% of native-born first time voters were under thirty years old, and that the large majority of older voters were born overseas. See "Their First Vote," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 29, 1888; also "Campaign Uniforms," *Milwaukee Daily Journal*, September 15, 1888; "Campaign Clubs" *The Milwaukee Journal*, May 26, 1892; **"**The Independent Twenty-Onesters**,"** *Daily Evening Bulletin***,** August 17, 1869.

[54] *"*Political Indifference*" Daily Inter Ocean*, June 18, 1892.

[55] Abraham Lincoln to William H. Herndon, June 22, 1848, *Abraham Lincoln, The Collected Works, 9 Vol.s*, Ed. Roy P. Basler, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 1: 491.

comers in his district. The club should hold noisy events to excite the men and women in town, making young people the public nucleus around which adults gravitated.

Young partisans could help in other ways. A decade later, Lincoln defended twenty-two year old "Peachy" Quinn Harrison in court. Peachy had a feud running with a hulking, redheaded young man named Greek Crafton, and had threatened to kill Greek repeatedly, calling him a "damned speckled-faced son of a bitch." When Greek tackled the defendant in a drugstore brawl, Peachy pulled out a silver-handled bowie knife and plunged it into Greek's chest.[56]

Greek died. Lincoln not only won Peachy an acquittal, arguing self-defense against a much larger opponent, but sought to turn him into a political activist. The future president begged the young murderer to "pitch in" and recruit Republican voters for a congressional race, reasoning: "a young man before the enemy has learned to watch him can do more than any other."[57] Nineteenth-century politics prized cunning and aggression, and Peachy's shrewdness, as a brawler or as a political operative, appealed to Lincoln.

Campaigners like Lincoln relied on young Americans, but rarely hoped to improve their status in society. Though doing away with many deferential hierarchies, American politicians still looked down at young men and women. They were usually happy to accept supporters, but mocked young rivals as "babies" and complained that

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[56] People of the State of Illinois versus Peachy Quinn Harrison, Indictment for Murder, August 31, 1859 – September 3, 1859, Circuit Court of Sangamon County, Lincoln Legal Papers, Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, Springfield, IL, p. 33.
[57] Abraham Lincoln to P. Quinn Harrison, November 3, 1859, in *Lincoln, Collected Works*, 3: 492.

virgin voters were easily "swayed and befogged."[58] Like the youths who participated in politics without any thought of communal uplift, adult campaigners rarely hoped to alter age-relations when they riled up "shrewd wild boys."

The young people fueling this democracy and the adults driving it used the system for entirely different reasons. While ambitious novices sought social power in their personal lives, politicians saw structural authority in those waves of hopeful first-timers. Youthful exuberance and adult cynicism blended at every rally. Nineteenth-century American democracy tells fascinating story of two groups using the same institution for very different goals. This dual use of politics, for the personal and the structural, for the young and the old, for entertainment and for governance, explains why the age of popular politics could last so long.

The study of politics usually assumes a consistency throughout society, an agreed-upon "fit" of democracy into public life.[59] But this study shows that the meaning and practice of politics shifted with each stage of youth and adulthood. Participation looked fundamentally different at sixteen and sixty. The central debate among historians of nineteenth-century American politics has supported this false faith in consistency, with scholars arguing over whether American democracy was popular and well informed or

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[58] "A Triumph of Young America," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, May 14, 1867; "The Grand Army Anniversary," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 5, 1891. For further examples of adult campaigners criticisms of young partisans, see Raumer, *America and the American People*, 353; "State Legislature Remarks," *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette*, February 24, 1843; Edward Everett, Diary, October 20, 1853, Everett Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA; "Letter by Charles E. Coffin," *The Tariff Review,* 11, 1893; Andreas Ueland, *Recollections of an Immigrant*, (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1929), 50.

[59] Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 5.

artificial and superficial.[60] Young people show that it was both; at the same time it could be grassroots and top-down, intimate and public, deeply felt but shallowly reasoned.

The overlapping uses of the same system leave one wondering: is this the story of ordinary young people's surprising agency, or of elite politicians' self-interested cunning?

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[60] This debate has defined the last several decades of nineteenth-century political scholarship. In the 1980s and '90s William Gienapp, Jean Baker, Joel Silbey, and Michael McGerr produced studies stressing the centrality and accessibility of democracy in American life. Glenn Altschuler and Stuart Blumin pushed back in 2000 with *Rude Republic*, a polemic challenging this rosy view of American democracy and arguing that a small number of party activists foisted popular politics on an ambivalent and poorly informed public. In the 2000s historians Mark Summers and Richard Bensel implicitly supported *Rude Republic* by highlighting the ways party activists manipulated voters. The supporters of the popular politics school lashed out at Altschuler and Blumin in a number of reviews and articles (my own included). In 2005 Mark E. Neely attempted to bridge this divide, attacking Altschuler and Blumin's dismissals of popular interest but acknowledging that "politics did not enter into everything." Instead he portrayed uneven boundaries between politics and the rest of American life as "more like a beach than a sea-wall." This project attempts to expand upon Neely's middle ground. I endorse the earlier historians' work on the intense interest in popular politics in American life, but challenge their (occasional) assumptions that this involvement meant a "deeper understanding" of the issues. While I consider Altschuler and Blumin's work misguided on the question of popular interest in politics, I have concluded that *Rude Republic* was nonetheless a convincing, insightful, and badly needed exploration of the superficiality often underpinning nineteenth-century democracy. I embrace their argument – supported by Richard Bensel – that "party loyalty, for some…served as an alternative to a thoughtful absorption in public affairs." The two sides seem to be talking past each other; this study attempts to show that, for young people in particular, politics could be popular and poorly informed at the same time. William E. Gienapp, "Politics Seem to Enter into Everything," *Essays on American Antebellum Politics;* Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party*, *The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the mid-Nineteenth Century*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Silbey, *The American Political Nation*; Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, *The American North 1865-1928*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Altschuler and Blumin, *Rude Republic,* 2, 5 ; Summers, *Party Games*; Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century;* Mark E. Neely Jr., *The Boundaries of American Political Culture in the Civil War Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 21.

The Age of Popular Politics

Take another step away from those torch-lit rallies, throwing dancing shadows on Oscar Lawrence Jackson's earnest face, and the 1860 campaign seems less peculiar as one notices the luminous elections on either side. 1860 was a particularly exciting year, but young people played a crucial role in the 1856 race before it and the 1864 one that followed. The same was true of the contest in 1840, and 1896, and every race between. Each election was a flaring torch, unique and thrilling, but together they bathed a long era in a shared light.

Politics never played a greater role in American life, and Americans in political life, than between the 1840s and the 1890s. Eligible voter turnout reached unprecedented peaks, averaging 77% for those fifteen presidential elections. The least excited election during this era drew a far higher turnout than the most popular campaign in recent memory, in 2008.[61]

This intense enthusiasm was not some momentary upsurge by a fickle public; voter turnout was a towering plateau running for six decades, with steep slopes on either side. Until the 1820s only a quarter of eligible voters bothered to cast a ballot. In the 1830s that number shot up to roughly half of the enfranchised, and by 1840 four in five went to the polls. Historians have wondered why the bitter politics of the early 1830s resulted in this jump in turnout a few years later, in 1840.[62] Youth politics explains the lag-time. New voters had to mature in this agitated climate for a few years of political socialization. The three highest turnouts in American history, in 1840, 1860, and 1876, all

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[61] Turnout statistics drawn from McIver, *Historical Statistics of the United States,* Series Eb62-113. **See Appendix Three.**
[62] Kleppner, *Who Voted?*, 30.

follow this same formula. First, a half-decade of angry conflicts divided the nation, then three years of the devastating economic downturns (in 1837, 1857, and 1873), mobilized young people, and finally virgin voters poured out to vote their passions in record numbers.

After the thrilling 1840 campaign, the massive plateau stretched over the next six decades – with peaks in 1860 and 1876, and valleys in 1852 or 1872 – but always bringing out more than sixty-nine percent of eligible voters. This mesa suddenly fell away around 1900. Turnout plummeted consistently over the next few decades, bottoming out in 1924 at just 48.9% of eligible voters. Scholars have proposed a number of explanations for this cliff, but none has realized the crucial role young people played.[63] When the youths who sustained popular politics lost interest in 1890s, failing to turn out for their virgin votes around 1900, the plateau fell to earth.[64]

These turnout statistics chart, like elevation points, the age of popular politics, an extended era stretching over the usual periods used to divide the nineteenth century. The Jacksonian and Antebellum eras, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and the Gilded Age are like mountain ranges partitioning this massive plateau. Each dramatically altered American life, but shared basic political patterns. Over this sustained period, political

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[63] Michael McGerr's *The Decline of Popular Politics* and Mark Kornbluh, *Why American Stopped Voting* offer the two clearest studies of this question.

[64] Historian Paul Kleppner observed "The younger age cohorts entering the active electorate after 1900 participated at lower rates that the older cohorts they replaced, and they participated at lower rates than their young counterparts had when they entered the active electorate during the 1870s and 1880s," and calculated a 53% drop in new voter turnout, in the northeast and Midwest, between the 1888 and1924 period. Kleppner, *Who Voted?*, 68-9.

movements emerged and declined without fundamentally altering the place of politics.[65] In the words of one Iowa electioneer who saw the plateau, not just the peaks, "we work through one campaign, take a bath, and start in on the next."[66]

Even if no turnout statistics existed the age of popular politics makes itself felt throughout American culture. Nineteenth-century democracy did a strange double duty, simultaneously electing leaders and providing the most popular form of entertainment. American democracy bound governance and entertainment together in a three-legged race awkwardly stumbling across the century. The result was a captivating contradiction: an idealistic experiment in popular government inextricably linked to a brassy, sleazy, fleeting form of show business.

These wild campaigns provided the greatest entertainment nineteenth-century America had to offer. They drew together a mostly rural society for "fun election times," often united around barrels of whiskey, or cider, or lager, or gin.[67] In a culture that consumed several gallons of pure alcohol per capita each year, political drinking often went on with what William Dean Howells later called: "a devotion to principle which is

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[65] The idea of a prolonged political period running from the antebellum era through the Gilded Age is not new. Michael McGerr called this a period of "popular politics," Morton Keller referred to it as the "Party-Democratic Regime," and Joel Silbey labeled the specific period from 1838 to 1893 the "American political nation." Scholars of youth and aging, including Joseph Kett, Steven Mintz, and David Hackett Fischer also see similar patterns for youth from the 1840s at least through the 1880s. McGerr, *Decline of Popular Politics*, Morton Keller, *America's Three Regimes,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 67-200; Silbey, *American Political Nation*; Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 5; Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 75-200; David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

[66] Morton Keller, *Affairs of State,* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977), 241.

[67] Rutherford B. Hayes, January 6, 1838, *Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes*, (Columbus: The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1922), 17.

now rarely seen."[68] One bored Welshmen, mining coal in West Virginia, wrote home that he looked forward to the next presidential race, when "the Americans will be happy again."[69]

Along with the drinking, the parades, and the barbecues, a broad swath of Americans – from "sporting men" to schoolgirls – gambled on elections.[70] Their bets could be revealing. In the 1880 election, for instance, two very different men took the same losing wager. In New Haven, the impoverished, Irish-born, twenty-year old Michael Campbell bet his factory foreman a one dollar necktie that the Democrats would win the election. Eighteen hundred miles due west, the wealthy, middle-aged Wyoming rancher John Hunton bet a fifty dollar suit on the same proposition. Both lost. But these two men of different ages, different regions, and different classes participated in the political system in the same way.[71]

Their shared wager points to the power of democratic culture. Popular politics entertained the nation in a way no other endeavor could. Nineteenth-century America

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[68] W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 232-236; William Dean Howells, *A Boy's Town: Described for Harpers Young People*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1890), 129.

[69] John R. William to William Thomas, November 10, 1895, in *The Welsh in American, Letters from the Immigrants*, Ed. Alan Conway, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961). British audiences were often treated to reports of crazed American campaigns. (Frances Kemble, October 1832, *Journal of Frances Anne Butler*; Charles Dickens, *American Notes for General Circulation*, [London: J. M. Dent & co.,1907], 7)5.

[70] Anne L. Youmans Van Ness, November, 1868, in *Diary of Annie L. Youmans Van Ness, 1864-1881*, (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2004); Edmund Keyser, October 5, 1868 through October 13, 1868, Edmund Keyser Journal, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; Rolf Johnson, *Happy as a Big Sunflower: Adventures in the West, 1876-1880,* Ed. By Richard E. Jensen, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 120; Wilson Lee Spottswood, *Brief Annals*, (Harrisonburg: Publishing Department M.E. Book Room, 1888), 40.

[71] Michael F. Campbell, November 4, 1880, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT; John Hunton, September 5, 1880, Diary, Special Collections, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

lacked many celebrations, aside from the Fourth of July. Most citizens had lost touch with the diverse village festivals of their Old World ancestors and practiced a form of Protestantism with little interest in holidays.[72] Entertainment media and professional sports were still in their infancy. At the same time, a growing mass of citizens expressed a belief in a united national identity, but could see little evidence of it in their daily lives. The federal political system provided a shared, competitive, engaging pastime, allowing Americans to enact the idea of their nation as a tangible, entertaining practice.[73]

The age of popular politics is therefore a national story, driven by the ordinary, average, uniting aspects of American culture. Too often nineteenth-century American history is told from Washington, Boston, or Charleston, unique and unrepresentative places where elites governed. But politics was most vibrant, parties most competitive, and turnouts highest in the vast middle of America, that massive swath of settled, rural land stretching from New York to North Carolina and New Jersey to Kansas, where two-

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[72] French visitor Michael Chevalier noted the absence of a folk culture in the United States in the 1830s, but added that American democracy was, slowly, beginning "to create everything afresh." Looking back from the 1920s, Charles Murdock agreed. He reflected that as a boy in the 1840s "holidays were somewhat infrequent" and "there were no distractions in the way of professional football or other games," so he found his entertainment in the excited campaigns of the era. (Michael Chevalier, *Society, Manners and Politics in the United States*, [Boston: Weeks, Jordan and Company, 1839], 316; Charles A. Murdock, *A Backward Glance at Eighty*, [San Francisco: P. Elder and Company, 1921], 6-7).

[73] It is no coincidence that the first generation of young Americans raised with this new embrace of nationalism cast their virgin vote in 1840, the first election in which federal turnout surpassed the local vote. The peak of voter turnout also coincided with a crescendo of national pride during the 1876 centennial celebration. In a country with a relatively small central government, politics allowed citizens to enact their national identity.

thirds of the population lived.[74] This narrative will explore the entire nation, but is ultimately anchored in Oscar Lawrence Jackson's backyard.[75]

American democracy ran smoothly across eras, landmasses, and even party lines. Though extremely intense, partisan identity rarely determined *how* citizens participated. Between the parties, Americans with contradictory views behaved in nearly identical ways, and within them, partisans with strong ideologies mingled with those who did not know the name of the candidate. If the banners were blanked out and the slogans unintelligible, few nineteenth-century Americans (or historians since) could identify the party behind a demonstration from the crowds, the uniforms, the barbecue, or the music.[76]

The age of popular politics bridged ideologies because "nonsense carried the day" at public events.[77] Campaigns could be strikingly superficial. A shocking number of Americans acknowledged their ignorance of their party's platforms, or got major aspects

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[74] Between 1840 and 1890 the states and territories of Delaware, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia made up an average of 66% of the total U.S. population. Gibson and Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals,* Working Paper Series No. 56.

[75] Different regions certainly engaged in politics at different rates. On average, voter turnout was highest in the Mid-Atlantic, Midwest, and Upper South, and lowest in the West, New England and especially the Lower South. Regions with more cultural diversity and multi-party competition usually had the highest turnouts and the most intense popular enthusiasm. McIver, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, Table Eb52-113. **See Appendix Four.**

[76] Historians often throw up unnecessary divisions between extremely similar parties. Some careful studies, like Jean Baker's exemplary *Affairs of Party*, focus on one party, without conclusively showing a fundamental difference from the other political organizations of the era. Others go as far as to endorse their preferred party, as Sean Wilentz's *The Rise of American Democracy* and Daniel Walker Howe's *What Hath God Wrought* have done.

[77] Parmenas Taylor Turnley, *Reminiscences of Parmenas Taylor Turnley,* (Chicago: Donahue & Henneberry, 1892), 23.

wrong without knowing it.[78] Some were willing to admit that their deeply felt politics grew from shallow roots. One sixteen-year-old girl wrote in her diary that, though she looked forward to the 1864 election, "the only reason I have for wishing Lincoln to be re-elected is because I do." Comedian David Ross Locke joked that his characters had to regularly visit Washington, to "find out what we wuz expected to b'leeve."[79]

Campaigners knew what motivated voters. Though they supplied platforms for those who cared, they often led with extremely superficial appeals. In 1884 the parties debated which candidate – the massive Grover Cleveland or the surprisingly large-headed James Blaine – had the thicker neck.[80] Just as often, illiterate voters were "firing in the dark," tricked into voting for the wrong side.[81] Even impassioned speeches went unheard. Oscar Lawrence Jackson loved addressing crowds, but those audiences often went away

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[78] For a brief survey of glaring errors and willful ignorance see: Lester Ward, *Young Ward's Diary,* Ed. Bernhard J. Stern, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935), 39; John Parsons, *A tour through Indiana in 1840,* (New York: R. M. McBride & Co., 1920), 5; William Dean Howells, *Years of My Youth,* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1916), 160; Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men*, 253-260; William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1963), 8; Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado; or, Adventures in the Path of Empire*, *Volume Two,* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850), 189.

[79] Van Ness, November 8, 1864, *Diary of Annie L. Youmans Van Ness*; Locke, *Nasby*, 36.

[80] Looking back on the 1884 campaign, a San Francisco newspapers man sighed "Cleveland's head and neck have occupied a large place in the past campaign." See "The Physical and Phrenological differences between the Presidential candidates," *Saint Louis Globe-Democrat*, November 1, 1884; "Heads and Necks in Congress, Senators and Representatives with Thick Necks," *Daily Evening Bulletin*, December 27, 1884; "The Heads of Great Men," *Galveston Daily News,* September 10, 1893. The Brooklyn young Republican's campaign songbook of 1888 contains similarly superficial appeals. Almost all of the catchy ditties make the same two arguments: that Republican candidate Benjamin Harrison's grandfather William Henry Harrison lived in a cabin, drank cider, and was president, and that Grover Cleveland, his opponent, was very fat. (Brooklyn Young Republican Club, "Young Republican Campaign Song Book," Compiled by Henry Camp, [Brooklyn: Harrison & Morton Press, 1888], Library Company of Philadelphia, PA).

[81] William G. Johnston, *Life and Reminiscences from Birth to Manhood,* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1901), 263.

wondering what all the shouting was about. William Dean Howells, though an intense partisan, admitted that he had never "heard a political speech to the end."[82]

The words were immaterial. What mattered was the sensation of gathering with hundreds of like-minded Americans while someone hollered, and torches flickered, and alcohol flowed, looking forward to competition and victory and importance.

The Waking, Thinking, Purposeful Age

Unlike Lincoln's friend Peachy, Oscar never used his bowie knife. He finished out the victorious campaign as a local celebrity – delivering eighteen speeches, in four counties, to roughly ten thousand people – and the "drunken crew" who hassled him melted away.[83] Soon after, Oscar enlisted in the Union army, and younger men and women took his place at rallies. There were always plenty of nineteen year olds craving identity and importance. This steady supply of new partisans means that rather than corralling young Americans into a distinct generations, it is far better to see them as a fluid reservoir, with bubbly adolescents replacing washed out adults.[84] Because young people only mature once, with little knowledge of the previous round, the system seemed, for a time, endlessly self-perpetuating.

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[82] Howells, *Years of My Youth,* 160. For speeches going unheard, through poor acoustics or lack of interest, also see Joseph J. Mersman, *The Whiskey Merchant's Diary*, Ed. Linda A Fisher, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 137; Lyman Abbott, *Reminiscences* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 107-110; Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, 7-10.

[83] Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 34, 32.

[84] Almost all studies of youth tend to fall back on a belief in segmented generations, but young people's sustained involvement in politics over sixty years makes it impossible to think in such tidy blocks. Generations do exist, as blurry overlapping blobs, but too many young people, over too long a period, dove into public democracy for historians to hope to isolate any one block as uniquely invested in politics. My previous work on the Wide Awakes made the mistake of relying too heavily upon the idea of generations.

Politicians saw this. They needed new votes and had lived long enough to understand the trajectory of political excitement. After a hard defeat in 1884, a Republican publication printed an open letter to those who would vote for the first time in 1888. In phrases too perfect to excerpt, the *American Reformer* addressed:

> My young friends, you who are in the colleges, in the manufactories, on the farms, at your books, or at your handicraft, or at the plow – you who are at the waking, thinking, purposeful age – in four years more you will be enrolled among the voters of the land. Think how many thousands of you there are; and think how, behind you, their heads reaching to your shoulders now, are pressing the boys from thirteen to seventeen, the voters at the Presidential election of 1892. This army of younger brothers behind you will be sure to follow your lead.[85]

The metaphors – of ballistics, harvests, elevations, or currents – all imply the same assumption that democratic participation had a predictable direction, an endless succession from youth to maturity.

From the 1840s through the 1890s, young activists followed a series of stages, building momentum then falling away like the fireworks sailing over the barbecue in Logan. Most Americans experienced a steady intensification of interest over roughly fourteen years of childhood, followed by a period about half as long of overheated youth. The next stage shortened to an explosive peak, for young men, when they cast their virgin vote in their early twenties. After that, another seven years of diminishing young adulthood for both genders, and then the rockets fell to earth.[86] Twelve-year-olds in 1840 shared many experiences with other age groups in that year, but when it came to political

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[85] "Young Reformers Club," *The American Reformer*, November 8, 1884, 364.

[86] Despite having very different demographics, nineteenth-century Americans tended to define youth similarly to contemporary definitions. A person was usually considered young, in absolute terms, until around thirty years old. Abraham Lincoln to William H. Herndon, July 10, 1848, in *Lincoln, Collected Works*, 1: 497; E.L. Godkin, "The Political Campaign of 1872," *North American Review,* 115, (October 1872); Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 11-18.

participation they had more in common with twelve year olds in 1860 or 1880. Other factors determined much about American life, but age shaped political behavior most of all.

Because of these shared experiences, this dissertation traces young Americans' mounting political interests over the stages of youth, rather than following the chronology of recurring political campaigns. Each chapter follows the arcing journey out into, and eventually away from, public democracy, made by an American at a new stage. They include the stories of a curious southern girl on the eve of the Civil War, a struggling eighteen-year-old trapped in a stifling factory, a talkative cowboy going to superhuman lengths to cast his first ballot, twenty-something lovers and gangsters intent on persuading others to support their parties, and the schemes of two very different Manhattan bosses. The shared message of these disparate American stories, divided by time, region and party, is that aging presented the fundamental narrative of individual political life.

In many ways, these young Americans' experiences are recognizable to anyone who has ever been seventeen. They could grow frustratingly bored, whining about their dull hometowns or joking that they would prefer suicide to another class with a droning lecturer. They were alternately fascinated and frozen by the presence of their romantic interests. And they filled their diaries and letters with a kind of frantic self-assessments one might find in texts messages and blogs today.[87]

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[87] David Schenck Papers, September 21, 1849, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC; George Templeton Strong, *Diary: Young Man in New York, 1835-1849*, Ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, (New York: Macmillan Press, 1952), 78.

But for all their similarities, they lived in an age that seems, at times, impossibly distant. Many gloried in blood sports, loving dog-fighting, gander-pulling, or rat-baiting with a creepy zeal. Others were strident believers in phrenology and the humors, worrying about their brainpans and bile levels. A few owned slaves, receiving another human being as a gift for their eighth birthday.

Popular politics joined the universal and dissonant aspects of their lives. Unlike twentieth and twenty-first-century adolescents, they salved their anxieties and stoked their ambitions with democratic involvement, hunting for maturity and identity in throngs of cheering partisans. Beginning with birth and running well into their twenties, Americans were pushed into politics by their privates hopes, by campaign hoopla, by the unstable environment, by their peers and by their elders. At each step from childhood through young adulthood they fit into their system in ways seemed, to them, new and daring.

For decade after decade running across the age of popular politics young Americans left their homes, wandering further into, as Oscar put it, “the democracy out of doors.”

1

Violent Little Partisans

It began at home. For Susan Bradford that home was a green-roofed, whitewashed country mansion at the center of the Pine Hill Plantation. There she lived with her father, mother, extended family, and one hundred and forty-two enslaved "servants." Beyond the mansion and slave cabins stood three thousand acres of the finest red land in Florida, planted with flower gardens, fields of cotton and dense stands of pine.[88] For Susan, a curious girl growing up with the partisan intrigues of the 1850s South, that family, those slaves, and those woods all seemed to contain adult secrets.

Susan first discovered the mystery as an eight year old in January 1855. Though the weather was unusually cold for Leon County, her father and several local leaders gathered outside the house for a hushed conference in a frosted rose garden.[89] The brown-eyed, square-jawed girl watched through a low window. She did not know that the men were all prominent Southern Democrats, spreading conspiracy theories about abolitionist agitators in the region. She knew only that "there is something wrong somewhere" and wished, more than anything, that someone would explain "what they were talking about."[90]

A few months later Susan observed another confusing scene. A visiting northerner gave her father a copy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Susan noted the way his face flushed when he recognized the cover. Over the next day she studied him as he read it repeatedly.

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[88] Joseph D. Cushman Jr., "Introduction," *Through Some Eventful Years,* (Macon, GA: J.W. Burke Co., 1926), IX-XXVI.
[89] Diary of a Trip to Florida, January 5, 1855, in Florida State University Strozier Library Special Collections, Tallahassee, FL.
[90] Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years,* 55.

When the guest approached her father in their ornate library and asked what he thought of the gift, the dignified Doctor Bradford, the Master of Pine Hill, carefully placed the book in the snapping fireplace. Bradford looked his guest directly in face as the pages crumpled and blackened, and declared the coals "the best place for it."[91]

Susan was puzzled. "I wanted to read that book myself," she wrote in her diary that night, "but it must have been a bad book for Father, who loves books, to have treated it that way."[92]

Her nanny, a slave woman named Fannie, began to whisper terrifying rumors about an "Abolition crew" lurking in the woods nearby.[93] Susan did not know what "Abolition" meant, but worried that someone planned to hurt her father. Another slave, a older man known as "Uncle" Kinchen, told her a confusing story about accompanying her Grandpa on a trip north, where they observed a rally of abolitionists. It is not clear what Fannie and Kinchen intended when they told Susan these illusive rumors, but they had the effect of terrifying the girl. She had nightmares that abolitionists – monstrous "devils" with horns and cloven feet – "were after me," chasing Susan through the Florida pines.[94]

Soon she began to push her parents to explain the ominous references to "Abolitionists" and "Republicans." One evening she awoke from a nap on the parlor sofa to hear her mother and uncle anxiously discussed the North's plans "to make trouble for us." She listened for a while, pretending to sleep, but could not contain her nagging curiosity. Susan bolted up and blurted: "Oh, uncle Daniel, please tell me all about it!" Her

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[91] Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years*, 61.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., 55-6.
[94] Ibid, 64.

mother sent her straight to bed.[95] All she knew was that "there is trouble in the air but I cannot find out just what it is."[96]

Susan filled her precocious diary with an outsized version of questions that intrigued most American children. Sons and daughters observed adult political passions long before they understood what it all meant. They first learned that their family supported a party, or sensed a rivalry with another movement, and only grasped the ideological differences between these organizations when much older. Adults taught children to ape their politics, sing campaign songs, hurrah popular leaders, and jeer the rival party. It was only after years of such instruction that teens began to read the partisan press, and even longer before young men could legally vote. The American Political Nation did not emerge, fully formed, at age twenty-one. Instead, many virgin voters were veterans of at least a decade of popular democracy.

Politics seeped into children's consciousness in a pervasive but sloppy manner. Most children experienced something like Susan Bradford's haphazard education. They overheard a debate at the dinner table or received a confusing lecture from a towering adult, which piqued their interest but left little knowledge.[97] Predictably, elders who warned curious children to stay out of worldly affairs only heightened the mystery, especially for determined little detectives like Susan. From a child's perspective the unevenness of different adults' political attitudes – some exuberant and others dismissive – added texture to their strange fixation. This untidy education, by turns cagey and thrilling, led American children to view politics as alluring and mature.

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[95] Susan Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years,* 56.
[96] Ibid.*,* 62.
[97] Ibid.*,* 56; Catherine Elizabeth Havens, *The Diary of a Little Girl in Old New York,* (New York: Henry Collins Brown, 1919), 72-80.

Adults seemed to know a secret. Americans could never agree on how to formally introduce partisanship to their children, so they framed their politics as a slowly unfolding mystery.[98] Children learned new clues at each stage of their passage into the public world. At home, kids eavesdropped on political debates and took note of their parents' heroes and villains. In the semi-public realm of the classroom, children puzzled over the slogans chanted by older students and the partisan lectures of their biased teachers. By twelve or thirteen, boys and girls were allowed to inspect, unsupervised, the "democracy out of doors" at rallies, parades, bonfires, and barbecues. Eventually some found their way into smoke-filled party headquarters, running errands for bosses. Along the way, boys and girls pieced together evidence about what politics actually meant. Their version stressed jollification, not explanation, and saw democratic participation as the hallmark of adulthood.

I know a little bit now

"My earliest recollections are of endless political discussions," Sally McCarty reminisced about growing up in Leesburg, Virginia in the 1840s. Like Susan Bradford, Sally grew up with political talk, but her folks let her in on the secret. The stridently

[98] Authors of child-rearing literature debated the topic, with some writers endorsing an early and enthusiastic partisan education and others largely denouncing popular politics. For the former, see Reverend J.M. Austin, *A Voice to the Youth: Addressed to Young Men and Young Ladies*, (Utica: Grosh & Hutchinson, 1839), and Albion Winegar Tourgée, *Letters to a King*, (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1888). For a more censorious tone, see William A. Alcott, *A Young Man's Guide*, (Boston: Lilly, Wait, Colman, and Holden, 1834); William A. Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men on Various Subjects: Designed as a Companion to the Young Man's Guide*, (Buffalo: Geo H. Derby & Co, 1850), and Augustus Woodbury, *Plain Words for Young Men*, (Concord: McFarland & Jenks, 1858).

Whig McCarty family indulged Sally, an only child with few playmates, letting her "sit up with my elders when I should have been in bed."[99]

From that perch Sally absorbed the exploding political culture of the early 1840s. She claimed to be "tolerably conversant with the great questions of the day" by age seven, when she led a squad of little girls in a torchlight procession for William Henry Harrison. She learned to sew by watching ladies stitch Harrison banners, a new form of political expression for women in Virginia.[100] And she felt, viscerally if superficially, the ups and downs of partisan commitment. Sally remembered refusing to dance "the hop" with a boy at a party one late summer evening in 1841, claiming she was upset because "Tyler had vetoed the Bank Bill."[101] Whatever that was.

Sally's education was typical. For most children, partisanship was overheard before it was taught, and performed before it was understood. Sometimes information was deciphered, as in Susan Bradford's case, but for other children it was thrust deliberately into their consciousness. Elders led the way, though due to early deaths and frequent dislocations, this might be a stepfather, an aunt, or a talkative neighbor.[102] Historians have long acknowledged the link between family background and party allegiance, but few have looked inside the home, at the political socialization of seven or

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[99] Sally McCarty Pleasants, *Old Virginia Days and Ways, Reminiscences of Mrs. Sally McCarty Pleasants*, (Menasha: George Banta Publishing Company, 1916), 6.
[100] Elizabeth Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia," *Journal of American History,* 82 (September 1995).
[101] Pleasants, *Old Virginia Days and Ways,* 10.
[102] Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in American 1790 to the Present,* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 4.

eleven year olds, to uncover the fitful yet abiding mechanisms that taught boys and girls to be Republicans and Democrats.[103]

Some adults imbued children's lives with partisanship from the very start. Those parents who named their sons for favored leaders proclaimed the depth of their political zeal. There were plenty of little George Washingtons in the Early Republic, but this tradition peaked with the high tide of political enthusiasm and fell off suddenly around 1900. Starting in the 1830s, Andrew Jackson Smiths and Henry Clay Joneses proliferated in the census rolls. The popularity of such names often says more about a parent's views than it does about the quality of the namesake. There were twenty-five times more little boys named Rutherford in 1880 than there had been in 1870, for instance.[104] Children with such names carried the marker of partisanship from birth.

More children began their political education, like Sally and Susan, by eavesdropping. In a society with little separation by age many boys and girls happened to be present when their elders talked politics. As "the main subject of conversation," adults often discussed upcoming elections, especially when traveling with strangers, and few noticed their children listening in on the deck of a steamboat or while lodging at an

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[103] For the best examples of the ethnocultural interpretation of nineteenth-century politics see Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Text Case*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); Michael F. Holt, *Forging a Majority: the Formation of the Republican Party in Pittsburgh, 1848-1860,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969); Joel Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991). For more intimate studies of how family influenced individual party identity, see Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party*, *The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the mid-Nineteenth Century*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Richard Franklin Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[104] The 1876 election, disastrous for the democracy, was probably the best thing that ever happened to the name Rutherford. Census data drawn from *HeritageQuest Online,* http://persi.heritagequestonline.com. Last accessed 6/14/2013.

inn.[105] Once they noticed adults' interest, many kids wanted to participate. The writer and activist Lydia Maria Child mentioned a bright little five-year-old girl who made it her mission to "to keep me booked up" on events in the 1856 election. Whenever the girl overheard political news she would dash over to Child's house, holler "Miss Child! Pennylvany's all right" under her window, then sprint away again.[106]

Children of politically divided households often found themselves drawn into adults' disagreements. Mattie Taylor, Susan Bradford's cherubic nine-year-old cousin, witnessed such a "hot fight" between her Whig father – the black sheep of the family – and otherwise Democratic relatives that she felt compelled to defend him. Her aunt Susan wrote: "Mattie is so cute…she shakes her golden curls and turns up her pretty little nose" when the family sang Democratic songs, which "to Mattie is like shaking a red rag at a bull."[107] Some debates grew too fierce; another southern girl moaned: "I wish there was not any such thing in the world as politics, for they are a never-ending source of warfare in the house."[108]

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[105] Frances Anne Kemble, *Journal of Frances Anne Butler, Volume One*, (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blandchard, 1835), 112; Charles Plummer Diary, September 1, 1840, Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia PA; John Parsons, *A Tour Through Indiana in 1840: The Diary of John Parsons of Petersburg, Virginia*, Ed. Kate Milner Rabb, (New York: R.M. McBridge & Co. 1920), 26; Emily Chubbuck Judson, *The Life and Letters of Mrs. Emily C. Judson*, (New York: Sheldon & Co. 1860), 101.

[106] Lydia Maria Child to Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, October 27, 1856, in *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co. 1882), 280.

[107] Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years,* 125.

[108] Eliza Frances Andrews, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl 1864-1865*, Ed. Spencer B King Jr., (New York: Appleton-Century Crofts, 1908), 308. Also see Anna Ridgely, May 20, 1860, "A Girl in The Sixties," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society,* Ed. Octavis Roberts Corneau, 2, (October 1929); Sarah Ida Fowler Morgan Dawson, June 1862, in *A Confederate Girl's Diary,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1913), 79-81.

Overheard debates filled children with misconceptions. Growing up in the 1840s, Andrew Dickinson White watched his Whig father quarrel fiercely with his maternal grandfather, an old-school Jeffersonian Democrat. The two stubborn men insisted upon reading competing speeches and pamphlets aloud at family gatherings, and argued ceaselessly over Van Buren's plan for an Independent Sub-Treasury.[109] Like Sally McCarty, the eight-year-old White sided with his dad. He parroted his father's declaration that the plan was "the most wicked outrage ever committed by a remorseless tyrant," but later admitted that he had "not the remotest idea" what a Sub-Treasury was.[110]

This confused political education, all outrage and no instruction, led to a moment of genuine panic for poor Andrew. Early one April morning in 1841 his mother shook him awake. She told him, breathlessly, that President William Henry Harrison had suddenly died. The eight-year-old White panicked. His parents' hero was dead, and he anxiously wondered "what would become of us?" No one, it turned out, had told White that there was a vice president.[111]

Adults also made deliberate efforts to educate children. Fathers usually took the lead. The majority of men had strong political affiliations and hoped to pass a partisan inheritance on to their children. But fathers were often distant from their preteen offspring. Girls and infant boys lived in a mostly maternal sphere, and young boys were not much help to their working fathers before age ten or so. Over the second half of the nineteenth century children spent more time in school and fathers worked further from

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[109] Andrew Dickinson White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickinson White, Volume 1,* (New York: The Century Co., 1904), 45.
[110] Ibid., 52.
[111] Ibid., 52.

home.[112] This combination of patriarchal authority, partisan zeal, and paternal aloofness meant that fathers' political instructions were often muffled and unclear, coming down like the decrees of a distant king. Boys and girls attentively followed this guidance, which did more to excite than inform.

Fathers tended to lead by example, bringing their children to political rallies but providing little explanation. At such events, adults chatted and drank while their sons and daughters ran alongside processions or helped assemble bonfires.[113] Older siblings provided some explanation. Nineteenth-century families tended to space out births over many years, so ten year olds frequently looked to siblings in their mid-twenties to interpret what their fathers' were trying to communicate.[114] Many children came to see their fathers as individual embodiments of politics, a tendency helped along by their role in relaying political news. Election day entries in children's diaries frequently report waiting for "Father" to return from the political scrum, or local saloon, bearing an update

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[112] Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft*: *A History of American Childhood*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 75-154; Kett, *Rites of Passage,* 16.
[113] William Fletcher King, *Reminiscences*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1915), 52; White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickinson White*, 52; Jackson A. Graves, *My Seventy Years in California*, (Los Angeles: The Times Mirror Press, 1927), 33; Rolf Johnson, *Happy as a Big Sunflower: Adventures in the West, 1876-1880,* Ed. By Richard E. Jensen, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 31-33; Sylvester Barbour, *Reminiscences*, (Hardford: Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1908), 17.
[114] Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage,* 14. For examples of political socialization by older siblings, see Charles Plummer Diary, Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA; David Schenck Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC; Frances E. Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of and American Woman*, (Chicago: Women's Temperance Publication Association, H.J. Smith & Co., 1889), 69; Benjamin Brown Foster, *Downeast Diary*, Ed. Charles H. Foster, (Orono, ME: University of Maine at Orono Press, 1975).

about the margin from a key state.[115] This link between paternal figures and partisan politics led many children to connect voting with masculinity and adulthood.

William Dean Howells recalled the direct but confusing education he received from his father. William Cooper Howells was a struggling Ohio newspaper editor, with zealous views and a strong nonconformist streak. The family moved frequently, usually after Cooper Howells argued with his publishers about politics.[116] Though an attentive father, he was also a bit of a crank. He raised his son, a precocious boy with a slick brown pompadour, to view Democrats as "enemies of the human race."[117]

Yet Howells' father shattered this commitment when his son was eleven, abandoning the Whig Party over their nomination of the Mexico-invading, slave-owning Zachary Taylor for President. His father's bolt was "a terrible wrench" for young William, who recalled feeling "ashamed of his father for opposing the war, and then, all at once, he was proud of him for it, and was roaring out songs against Taylor."[118] The break was stressful nonetheless; the irrational, partisan socialization most children received could turn parental realignments into existential crises.

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[115] Annie Youmans, November 1868 in *Diary of Annie L. Youmans Van Ness, 1864–1881* (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2004); Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years*, 69; Rolf Johnson, *Happy as a Big Sunflower*, 31-33; Rutherford Birchard Hayes, *Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes,* Ed. Charles Richard Williams (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State Archeological and Historical Society, 1922), 17.

[116] William Cooper Howells, *Recollections of Life in Ohio, From 1813 to 1840*, (Cincinnati: Robert Clarke Company, 1895).

[117] Howell's image of partisan rivals as sub-human monsters parallels Susan Bradford's fear of abolitionist "devils." Parents seemed not to realize the effect their partisan tirades could have on imaginative children. William Dean Howells, *A Boy's Town: Described for Harpers Young People*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1890), 228.

[118] Ibid., 131; William Dean Howells, *Years of my Youth*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1916), 26.

Fathers sometimes gave clearer political information to their daughters. There are more accounts of father-daughter political talks than father-son, and daughters seem more attentive to these partisan instructions.[119] Sally McCarty lived in awe of her father's political wisdom, particularly his knack for thinking up campaign songs. She was especially impressed when he rhymed the ungainly name of the 1844 Whig Vice Presidential candidate, Theodore Frelinghuysen, with "Loco-foco poison."[120] Other young women admitted that they had "quietly adopted fathers' views," or simply proclaimed: "I am a Democrat because my father is one."[121] Fathers may have made more of an effort to instruct their daughters because they trusted their sons to form their own party alliances, whereas a woman might adopt those of her future husband. If a Democratic father wanted Democratic grandchildren, he had to make sure his daughter would pass on the lineage. Ironically, this patriarchal view meant that some daughters received better political instruction than their brothers.

While fathers talked politics with their daughters, mothers used their sons to express their political voice. Building on the culture of Republican Motherhood, which

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[119] It is possible that daughters simply did a better job documenting their political talks with their fathers. Except during wartime, girls were more likely to keep diaries than boys. This difference probably stems from the fact that boys enjoyed wilder, outdoor pastimes, while many nineteenth-century girls were stuck at home with their journals. This difference, discussed in detail below, may over-represent daughters' political talks with their fathers.

[120] Pleasants, *Old Virginia Days and Ways*, 13.

[121] Sarah Ida Fowler Morgan Dawson, May 1862 in *A Confederate Girl's Diary: Sarah Morgan Dawson* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin., 1913), 53; Annie Burnham Cooper, October 18, 1888 in *Private Pages, Diaries of American Women, 1830-1970,* Ed. Penelope Franklin, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 173. Amanda McDowell Burns, May 6, 1861, in *Fiddle in the Cumberland*, Ed Amanda McDowell and Lela McDowell Blankenship, (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1943); Charlotte Howard Conant, November 4, 1880; November 11, 1883; June 1, 1884, in *A Girl of the Eighties at College and at Home*, Ed. Martha Pike Conant, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1931), 261.

taught that civic education and good citizenship began with maternal instruction at home, many women saw it as their duty to be sure that their sons were conversant in politics.[122] In the 1884 election the *Salt Lake Tribune* highlighted the belief that sons' enacted their mothers' politics, announcing: "the mothers of 1863 are going, through their sons, to vote."[123] Some mothers saw no tension between political instruction and more domestic roles. Almira Heard's letters to her traveling son mixed furious criticism of the Know Nothings with maternal notes hoping that he lodged in "a good room and got a nice breakfast this morning."[124]

Susan Bradford's mother had not been that helpful. She sent her daughter off to bed rather than explain who planned "to make trouble" for the masters of Pine Hill. But tempted by this mysterious topic and aided by several years of eavesdropping, Susan came to "know a little bit" about the secret. By her early teens she figured out that the Bradfords were Democrats and began to refer to the party's candidates as "ours." She learned what abolitionism meant and deduced that a new Republican party was working

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[122] On maternal political instruction, see Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Voices Without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England*, (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010); Elizabeth Varon, *We Mean to be Counted*: *White Women & Politics in Antebellum Virginia*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Jean Baker, *Affairs of Party*; Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). For examples of mothers' guiding their sons' views, see John Albee, *Confessions of Boyhood*, (Boston: Gorham Press, 1910), 259; Isaac Stephenson, *Recollections of a Long Life, 1829-1915*, (Chicago: Privately Published, 1915), 152.

[123] "The Mothers Vote This Year," *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 26, 1884; "A New Crop of Republicans," *Grand Forks Daily Herald*, September 28, 1886.

[124] Almira Heard to J. Theodore Heard, October 2, 1855, Letters of J. Theodore Heard, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

towards "the freeing of the Negroes and the downfall of the South," though she admitted: "I am only a child but reading the papers, that is the way it seems to be."[125]

Susan's beloved father finally let her in on the mystery. One spring day in 1860, Doctor Edward Bradford happened upon his fourteen-year-old daughter in their library, inscribing her confusion in her diary. In the very room in which he had incinerated *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Susan's father asked: "What is my baby writing? It has brought a real grown-up frown to her face."[126]

Susan let her father – "the very best man in all the world" – read her diary. After a prolonged silence, Doctor Bradford said: "You are getting to be quite a politician. I didn't know you felt such an interest." He then explained the coming presidential campaign, the division of the Democratic Party, and calls for secession to his daughter. He also advised her to read partisan newspapers and the speeches of John Calhoun. Bradford ended the conversation by telling Susan that men and women were obligated to stay informed about political affairs, and that she should come to him with questions.[127]

Doctor Bradford answered the questions that nagged his young daughter for five long years. During that time, Susan viewed politics as a secret preserve of adulthood, and she wanted in on the mystery. That her parents proved incapable of shielding her from politics, or even keeping quiet about it when she was in the room, speaks to the frequency with which Americans discussed their democracy. On top of this, Susan learned that her family was Democratic, and that Republicans and abolitionists were their enemies, half a decade before her father explained the meaning of this difference. Most American

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[125] Bradford Eppes, *Through Some Eventful Years,* 125.
[126] Ibid., 126
[127] Ibid., 126.

families similarly teased their children with the allure of partisan politics while failing to deliver clear explanations about what it meant.

24 *very bad* scholars

Children first realized that other people shared their parents' politics in the classroom. There, students taught each other campaign songs and teachers often failed to hide their biases. Yet most historians have believed that, in the words of Jean Baker, "Americans did not learn their partisanship in school."[128] The idea that politics stopped at the schoolyard is largely based on a reading of nineteenth-century educational theory, but Baker candidly admits that "it is a long way" from this advice literature to the actual classroom.[129] Historians have put too much faith in scholarly works on formal education and ignored what was actually going on in American schoolyards.

Nineteenth-century schools acted as a petri dish for popular politics. Local districts drew together children of all ages, mixing uninformed toddlers with virgin voters.[130] They also combined the sons and daughters of Democrats, Whigs, Republicans, Know Nothings or other parties in one big room, repeating songs and slogans picked up from parents or siblings. Teachers were often young men, at the peak of their political

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[128] Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party*, 28. Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 11.

[129] Ibid., 91. Baker's book is still the best work on political socialization and should be commended for its honesty, freely acknowledging that politics did not enter into everything. Baker's argument that America's schools overtly taught republicanism is indisputable. The point here is that Baker and many others privilege written literature on educational theory over the daily socialization at work in American schools. Baker does highlight the overt education American children received on the subject of republicanism, but misses the unofficial initiation into partisanship.

[130] Kett, *Rites of Passage,* 11-12; Jacob Heffelfinger Diary, December 8, 1859, in Letters of J. Theodore Heard, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.

excitement and not subtle about their beliefs. On top of this, few instructors followed official curriculums or educational theory. Schools were disorganized, teachers were untrained, and students learned more from the social environment than from their textbooks.[131] American schools were better at encouraging the social mixing on which popular politics thrived than they were at keeping out partisanship. This casual political education expanded upon the haphazard but zealous instruction begun at home.

During campaigns students refused to leave their partisan excitement at home. Many dragged their family's politics into class, teasing rival children with aggressive campaign slogans. "Democrats eat dead rats" was one favorite, hollered by Whig boys in the south and Midwest in the 1840s.[132] Young William Dean Howells relished the chant, before his father abandoned the Whigs. The future literary giant appreciated how it left his Democratic classmates with no obvious retort; "Whigs eat dead pigs" hurt few feelings in a nation raised on salt pork. The rhyme – catchy, competitive, and ideologically empty – summed up children's engagement with politics.[133]

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[131] In 1870 just two percent of seventeen-year-olds graduated high school. Paul Kleppner, *Who Voted? The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout, 1870-1980,* (New York: Praeger, 1982), 36; Steven Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 197.

[132] Howells, *A Boys Town,* 127.

[133] Julian A. Selby, *Memorabilia and Anecdotal Reminiscences of Columbia South Carolina,* (Columbia: The R. L. Bryan Company, 1905), 127; Frederick M. Culp, *Gibson County, Past and Present,* (Paducah: Turner Publishing Company, 1961), 41; Art Shields, *My Shaping-Up Years: the Early Years of Labor's Great Reporter* (New York: International Publishers, 1983); Louis Beauregard Pendleton, *Alexander H. Stephens*, (Philadelphia: George W. Jacobs & Company, 1907), 44; Charles Waddell Chesnutt, *The Journals of Charles W. Chesnutt*, Ed. Richard Brodhead, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 152.

Classrooms hummed with political gossip on Election Day.[134] Many teachers teased their students with the sense that something tremendously important was transpiring just outside those brick, log or sod walls. In Martha Farnsworth's Kansas classroom there was very little studying during the 1884 vote, where "politics, more than lessons were discussed." Her teacher snuck out "real often" to check the returns, further exciting his students.[135] That same year the *Newark Evening News* pointed to the popularity of politics among schoolchildren, writing that a visitor to any American schoolhouse will find "the great majority of children violent little partisans."[136]

Frances Willard, the future president of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, was delighted to see partisanship in into her classroom after the 1860 presidential election. "Frank" taught in a large school in Illinois, along with a male teacher. She idealized the political process, even though "under the present system I was not allowed

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[134] Schoolhouses, often the only public building in a community, served as makeshift political spaces. Campaigners located public debates in classrooms, and partisan clubs sometimes turned schools into headquarters. In 1868 one angry young Indiana Republican could barely contain his outrage when he lamented that the Democrats were using the local schoolhouse to organize a "young men's demicratic association." Moses Puterbaugh to Uriah Oblinger, June 26, 1868, Uriah W. Oblinger Collection, *Nebraska State Historical Society.*

[135] Martha Farnsworth, *Plains Woman: The Diary of Martha Farnsworth, 1882-1922,* Ed. Marlene Springer and Haskell Springer, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 19. Also see Bettie Ann Graham Diary, October 27, 1860, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA; John M. Roberts, *Buckeye Schoolmaster: A Chronicle of Midwestern Rural Life, 1853-1865*, Ed. J. Merton England, (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 224; Isaac Stephenson, *Recollections of a Long Life, 1829-1915*, (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1915), 152.

[136] *Newark Evening News*, October 10, 1884. The context of this quote makes an even stronger case, promising: "Go to any schoolhouse during a national campaign, and it will be a safe venture that you will find the great majority of children violent little partisans, ready to do valorous battle for the candidate upon whom their infantile affections are centered and firmly convinced that the diminutive adherents of the opposing faction are both conspirators in pinafores and traitors in short pantaloons." This poetic, hyperbolic view acknowledges that most children's enthusiasm far outpaced their knowledge.

to vote," and supported the other instructor's decision to read the election returns aloud. In her diary Willard depicted the picturesque scene as the tall teacher announced state-by-state returns to a throng of children. "All of my little girls," she wrote, "crowded around and listened attentively." One young student "dances up and down exclaiming, 'Are n't you glad, Miss Willard, that Lincoln is elected?'" Willard was glad; to her the moment captured "the genius of a Republican government, an organization in which every member, male and female, large or small, feels a keen, personal interest."[137]

The teachers who announced election results were hardly professionals. For much of the nineteenth century teaching was "considered a youthful and temporary employment" for aimless men in particular.[138] Few had formal training or intended to make education a career.[139] Some tried teaching because, in the words of one sarcastic newspaperman, "it was easier than working in a saw-mill."[140] The diaries of new teachers demonstrate how unprepared they were. One young man switched to teaching after working in his brothers' failing wagon shop, mostly because the school offered cash while his old job paid him in unsold wagon parts.[141] Another examined his new

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[137] Frances E. Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years*, 155.
[138] Theodore Sutton Parvin, *The Life and Labors of Theodore Sutton Parvin,* Ed. Joseph E. Morcombe, (Clifton, IO: Allen Printing Company, 1906), 26.
[139] Over the century teaching became increasingly professionalized and the number of amateur young male teachers fell, replaced by trained female educators. It is possible that this demographic change meant fewer politically zealous young male schoolteachers, contributing to the falling interest in partisanship among young people in the early Twentieth century. See Darrel Drury and Justin Baer, *The American Public School Teacher: Past, Present, and Future* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2011); Paul H. Mattingly *The Classless Profession: American Schoolmen in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: New York University Press, 1975.)
[140] "Pedagogues and Presidents," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, October 23, 1881, 4.
[141] Lester Ward, *Young Ward's Diary,* Ed. Bernhard J. Stern, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935), 20. Conveniently, Ward turned out to be a gifted scholar, and became an influential sociologist.

workplace and sighed: "who can get an education in such a place?"[142] It should be no wonder that these accidental educators ignored pedagogical theory and talked politics.

Students showed even less interest in the finer points of Pestalozzian or Lancasterian educational philosophy. American schools were often wild places, packed with children who deliberately made formal education difficult. Mischievous girls tortured bashful young teachers, laughing: "Oh! What a time we girls will have…we will make life miserable for him."[143] Bullies in Baltimore threw their inkstands at their teacher and wondered why anyone would take a job that "entailed so many wounds, cuts and bruises."[144] A would-be educator in Ohio asked himself that same question, noting that on his first day teaching he had "24 *very bad* scholars." He quit within a week.[145] In such a wild context, teachers were lucky if they could distract their students with politics.

To be fair, nineteenth-century American schools offered education to an unprecedented swath of society. The fruits of this success are borne out in the stellar literacy rates and impressed descriptions by European visitors.[146] The point is not that American schools were bad, but that they could not keep out partisanship. Instead, schools fostered exactly the kind of motley social space in which popular politics thrived. By gathering so many impressionable children of different ages into one classroom, often

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[142] Jacob Heffelfinger Diary, December 8, 1859, in Letters of J. Theodore Heard, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA
[143] Martha Farnsworth, *Plains Woman,* 6.
[144] Jacob Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore*, (Baltimore: Maryland Book Concern, 1893), 48; James Witham, *Fifty years on the Firing line: My part in the farmers' movement***,** (Chicago: Privately Published, 1924), 2.
[145] David Beardsley, "Birthday Commentaries on His Life," *Visions of the Western Reserve*, Ed. Robert A. Wheeler, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2000), 186.
[146] Richard L. Rapson, "The American Child as Seen by British Travelers, 1845-1935," *American Quarterly*, 17, (Autumn 1965), 520-534; "The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class American," Ed. Richard L. Rapson, (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1971), 16.

guided by a passionately partisan young teacher, American schools broadened the political socialization begun within the family. The buzzing political chatter, overheard at home, grew louder in the schoolhouse.

That Barbarous Republic of Boys

Jacob Frey was one of the students who made his teachers miserable. The son of a Swiss shoemaker and a Scottish dairymaid, Frey spent his boyhood fighting in the streets of antebellum Baltimore. During the "roaring forties" Frey's hometown experienced waves of immigration, disputes over slavery, gang warfare, election riots, and many raucous political conventions. It developed a reputation as "Mobtown," the wildest city in the nation.[147] Frey, a truculent terrier of a boy, spent his early years hanging around tough young apprentices on Baltimore's docks. He was repeatedly arrested for fighting. He could not have guessed that he would grow up to become the city's Police Marshall. Nor did he see the link between his rough boyhood and his growing interest in party politics.

But it was there. During the age of popular politics, American boys lived in a pugnacious subculture that prepared them to become energetic partisans. For Jacob Frey, looking back over a lifetime of fighting crime in one of America's toughest cities, it was turning seven that thrust him into "the rougher experiences in life."[148]

In his compelling, humane work, *American Manhood*, historian E. Anthony Rotundo examined the "boy culture" Frey experienced. According to Rotundo,

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[147] Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 134.
[148] Jacob Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore,* 47. Frey's storied career ultimately ended in his highly partisan dismissal for corruption. "Baltimore Police Changes," *New York Times*, July 12, 1897.

nineteenth-century Americans defined manhood as the ability to control aggressive instincts, but allowed boys between eight and fourteen to temporarily inhabit a "free nation" that indulged such impulses.[149] This culture encouraged them to get the rowdiness out of their system. William Dean Howells agreed, reflecting on his own childhood scrapes among "that barbarous republic of boys."[150] Howells published a memoir with *Harper's Young People* at the end of this period, beautifully recreating the world of mid-century boys, the kind of barefoot scamps who spent their wild years hunting, swimming, stealing, setting fires, chewing tobacco, and throwing rocks. Though boys moved on by their teens, many of the skills their subculture taught – boldness, aggression, the ability to organize groups – reappeared in popular political campaigns designed to appeal to excitable young men.

Boy culture emerged because of changes in parenting, work, and environment. Most boys lived in a maternal sphere for the first few years of life, and fathers took responsibility for their sons' instruction in their early teens. For in the half decade in between, male children were usually allowed to get into trouble.[151] On top of this, Americans' style of childrearing astonished European visitors as radically democratic and undisciplined, allowing boys the freedom to operate within a distinct subculture.[152] Additionally, the growing predominance of wage labor meant there were fewer

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[149] E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era,* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 31.
[150] Howells, *A Boy's Town*, 65.
[151] Edward Bok, "The Boy in the Office," *Before he is Twenty: Five Perplexing Phases of Boyhood Considered,* (New York: F.H. Revell, 1894), 55; Kett, *Rites of Passage*.
[152] Rapson, "The American Child as Seen by British Travelers," *American Quarterly*, 520-534.

apprenticeships to occupy boys' time, and more parents who worked away from home.[153] Finally, burgeoning urban spaces and the growing school system gathered together larger groups of boys, enabling complex gangs and rivalries.[154]

Few girls enjoyed such independence. Most young women were expected to take on more of their mothers' domestic responsibilities as they grew. The fact that men were increasingly exchanging their labor for wages heightened this disparity. Few employers wanted to hire ten-year-old boys, but mothers could assign their daughters unpaid housework. Both girls and boys worked throughout their childhoods, but boys were allowed more free time outside the home.[155] As a result, girls usually developed along a linear path to adulthood, without the period of wilding boys enjoyed.

The rites and practices of boy culture varied over time and place. In the earlier parts of the century, and in rural regions, boys focused far more on outdoor pursuits. In cities, groups of boys were often larger and spent more time hanging around adult male

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[153] Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 165; Walter Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840-1950*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[154] Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 39.

[155] This gendered difference also has roots in Americans' fear of the destructive capabilities of young men, which they hoped a few years of play might exorcise. Girls, supposedly less dangerous to society, were offered less independence. See Bok, "The Boy in the Office," *Before he is Twenty,* 55; G. Stanley Hall, *Youth: Its Education, Regimen, and Hygiene*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1907), 207; Howard Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Karen Halttunen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women*, *1830-1870,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Rodney Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America*, *1780-1850*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); Rotundo, *American Manhood.* For a counter-point, see Anne Scott MacLeod, "The Caddie Woodlawn Syndrome: American Girlhood in the Nineteenth Century," *The Girls' History and Culture Reader: The Nineteenth Century*, Ed. Miriam Forman-Brnell and Leslie Paris (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 199-221; Anya Jabour, *Scarlett's Sisters: Young Women in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

hotspots like party headquarters or firehouses.[156] Towards the end of the century, as factories found a use for young hands and reformers improved the school system, the boy culture lost much of its independence.[157] But throughout the middle of the century American boys, in roiling cities and frontier villages, fixated on violence, fire, and crowds. Each allowed them to exercise their wilder instincts, and each reappeared in political spectacles.

Nineteenth-century boys were killing machines. Squirrels, frogs, rabbits, quail, and deer died by the thousands, pursued by groups of boys roaming the countryside. Many rural diarists hunted every day, more often than they needed to for food. The introduction of repeating rifles made them even more bloodthirsty, post-Civil War boys seemed to wield their Henry rifles and Spencer carbines with particular relish.[158] Urban boys satisfied their penchant for violence on each other. William Dean Howells explained that the real importance of the constant fights was not who won, but the unspoken refusal to let adults resolve a conflict. The boy who ran to his mother burst the bubble of their independence. When not fighting, boys were "always stoning something."[159] Unfortunately, such boys frequently harassed racial and ethnic minorities, targeting Irish-Catholics in 1840s Philadelphia, African-Americans during the New York Draft riots, and Chinese immigrants in Gilded Age California.[160]

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[156] J. Frank Kernan, *Reminiscences of Old Fire Laddies and Volunteer Fire Departments of New York and Brooklyn*, (New York: M. Crane, 1885).
[157] *Before he is Twenty: Five Perplexing Phases of Boyhood Considered,* (New York: F.H. Revell, 1894).
[158] Rolf Johnson, 67-92; David Schenck Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.
[159] Howells, *A Boy's Town*, 67, 72.
[160] Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 109; Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance in*

If petty violence was boys' daily bread, fires were longed-for treats. Anyone living in a nineteenth-century city, built of wood and packed with blistering stoves and belching furnaces, knew the chaos the fire bell signaled. But the alarm always seemed to draw more boys than firemen.[161] George Templeton Strong, remembered for his diary of the Civil War, spent his boyhood chasing the blazes that threatened his lower Manhattan home. Strong filled his snobbish, sarcastic, and awkwardly endearing diary with enthused descriptions of fires, reviewing each "as he would a stage performance."[162] Children loved the hypnotic power of fire and set their own blazes for fun. Down in Baltimore, Jacob Frey's friends would set fire to garbage in alleys, and then entertain themselves by hurling stones at the fire companies who arrived to extinguish their fun.[163]

Fires and violence offered fleeting fun, but crowds left long memories and introduced boys to public politics. As a "live boy in a live city," Jacob Frey "followed the crowd whenever there was any commotion." Years later Frey could still vividly recall the public hanging, cheered on by thousands of Baltimoreans, that he happened upon at age

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American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 30; W.T. Ellis, *Memories: My Seventy-Two Years in the Romantic County of Yuba, California*, (Eugene: University of Oregon Press, 1939), 6.

[161] Kernan, *Reminiscences of Old Fire Laddies;* Howells, *A Boy's Town*, 17.

[162] George Templeton Strong, *Diary: Young Man in New York, 1835-1849*, Ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, (New York: Macmillan Press, 1952), 8. That phrase comes from Allan Nevins' editorial notes.

[163] Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore,* 89. These companies were believed to act as a major political force, but in her exploration of volunteer fire companies Amy Greenberg convincingly argues that while such firemen were active partisans, their companies were often divided between parties, making them weak campaigners. While being a firefighter helped candidates build a social network and look masculine, companies did not offer politicians much organized support. (Amy Greenberg, *Cause for Alarm*: *The Volunteer Fire Department in the Nineteenth-Century City,* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998], 110-114. For more detail on fires in urban America, see Mark Tebeau, *Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800-1950,* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003]).

nine. The sight of that execution taught him more than "my teachers in the public school could."[164] Benjamin Brown Foster, an otherwise conscientious boy in Maine, also seemed incapable of resisting the urge to join whatever throng he happened upon.[165] Such boys populate crowd scenes in every Victorian novel, present in Dickens' Britain, but ubiquitous in younger, wilder America.

This Army of Younger Brothers

The rowdy boy culture fit perfectly into the age of popular politics. Partisan rallies offered the crowds, fires, and potential violence that thrilled boys. Girls, denied such excitement most of the time, indulged in these spectacles with the sanction usually given to political events. Of course, children were drawn to any crowd, whether partisan rallies or public executions, and hypnotized by both accidental trash-fires and jollification bonfires. But public politics distinguished itself by begging young people to participate in a way that hangings and burning buildings never did. Campaigners wanted children's attention and calculated their events "to catch the eye of a boy of nine years of age."[166]

Children made up a large portion of the spectators at political events. They gamboled along with marchers, got lost in the throng, or shouted themselves hoarse dangling from balconies and lampposts. Children seemed to inhabit a parallel dimension at rallies, running among the adults but focused on their own little dramas. William Dean

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[164] Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore*, 49.
[165] Benjamin Brown Foster, *Down east Diary*, Ed. Charles H. Foster, (Orono, ME: University of Maine at Orono Press, 1975); Howells, *A Boys Town*, 127 – 140; Lyman Abbott, *Reminiscences* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 33-36.
[166] Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore*, 53.

Howells spent "my whole youth" immersed in raucous political gatherings, but mostly cared about the battles that broke out between rival groups of children.[167]

In the hours before a big rally, while adult campaigners amassed barrels of liquor and crates of torches, brigades of children went to work as well. The more industrious prepared "fire-balls." First they gathered spare rags and, relying on their meager sewing skills, stitched them into cloth balls. Overnight, they soaked these balls in oil or turpentine. Come the parade the next evening, daring children would light these incendiaries and deftly hurl them out over the crowds, to make a "splendid streaming blaze." Ideally, these fireballs burnt up before gravity brought them down on onlookers' hats.[168]

Children found public politics so thrilling that they turned out for the opposing party's events. In gold rush San Francisco, Frank Leach and his young friends were "indifferent to the party with which they paraded so long as they secured a torch."[169] Another Californian claimed "kids played no favorites" and could never ignore a procession. He added, however, that a boy caught marching with the wrong party risked "a good licking from his dad."[170] More interested in pomp than policy, children sometimes struggled to turn down a good parade.

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[167] Howells, *Years of My Youth,* 160, 130; Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore*, 52; King, *Reminiscences*, 52; "The Village Election," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, May 14, 1867.
[168] Howells, *A Boy's Town*, 128; Jackson A. Graves, *My Seventy Years in California*, (Los Angeles: The Times Mirror Press, 1927), 33; Mrs. Charley Huyck, interviewed by Harold J. Moss, Lincoln, NE, January 24, 1939, Federal Writers Project, Library of Congress; "The Rival Bonfires," *The Youth's Companion*, October 16, 1884, 57, 387.
[169] Frank Leach, *Recollections of a Newspaperman; A Record of Life and Events in California*, (San Francisco: S. Levinson Co., 1917), 11.
[170] W.T. Ellis, *Memories*, 6.

Others were just mature enough to see that political fun had consequences. Bettie Ann Graham, a Virginian at boarding school in Philadelphia, realized this as the 1860 election unfolded. The fifteen-year-old was increasingly aware of a political distinction between her Southern family and her Spruce street schoolmates. The eye-catching Republican campaign of that year forced her to choose sides. One October night companies of uniformed Wide Awake marchers, accompanied by blaring brass bands and cheering children, streamed directly under her row-house window. Graham "would have enjoyed very much" the thrilling procession, "had it not been in honor of Lincoln." She shut the windows and tried to ignore the torchlight dancing on her ceiling.[171]

Public political events were more than inadvertently popular with children; they seemed to be specifically designed for them. This sense appears again and again in diaries and memoirs from the era. Sally McCarty, the seven year old who refused to dance because Tyler vetoed the Bank Bill, felt that there never was a "device so impressive to a childish mind" as the rolling log cabins debuted by Whig campaigners in 1840.[172] Jacob Frey agreed, exaggerating that the rallies of his youth were aimed at "a child of five years old."[173] William Dean Howells could not help being a little snide when he claimed that the politics of his town were designed for "the diversion of the boys," or at least "a primitive civilization among men."[174] As late as the 1890s, Populist

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[171] Bettie Ann Graham Diary, October 27, 1860, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA.
[172] Pleasants, *Old Virginia Days and Ways*, 6.
[173] Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore*, 53. Frey also said that rallies were "calculated to catch the eye of a boy of nine years of age." Realistically, children just on the cusp of adolescence, between twelve and fifteen, seem to have been the target audience.
[174] Howells, *A Boy's Town*, 130. The growing genre of juvenile literature often printed stories about young boys and girls at such events. ("The Rival Bonfires," *The Youth's Companion*, October 16, 1884, 57, 387; Mary Densel, "The Grand Procession, *Harper's*

processions in Nebraska specifically targeted young farm girls and boys.[175] Even at the dawn of the twentieth century, William Dean Howells still felt that on election night, "it is best to be young."[176]

This juvenile audience helps explain some of the stranger devices campaigners employed. Parades featured a menagerie of creatures and symbols that have baffled historians since. Floats wheeled out caged (and very angry) raccoons, foxes, and bears, not to mention tethered game cocks and occasionally eagles. They rolled giant leather balls from town to town, and dragged fully rigged ships on wheels, with names like "Constitution" or "Tariff." By the 1860s and '70s marchers favored ornate military uniforms and armed themselves with a variety of torches, some of which shot flaming bursts of explosive lycopodium powder. Clubs brought brooms – to sweep away their rivals – or labeled themselves "the chloroformers" – to knock out the opposition.[177]

Each of these devices carried a symbolic meaning for audiences during the age of popular politics, and historians have mined them in their study of political culture. But campaigners unveiled all of these raccoons, leather balls, and pyrotechnics for an

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Young People, November 9, 1880; Matthew White, "The Roverings and the Parade," *Harper's Young People*, November 16, 1880; Henry Liddell, *The Evolution of a Democrat: A Darwinian Tale*, (New York: Paquet & Co. 1888).

[175] Mrs. Charley Huyck, Federal Writers Project, Library of Congress.

[176] William Dean Howells, *Imaginary Interviews*, (New York: Harper and Brothers Pub., 1910), 260.

[177] White, *Autobiography,* 48; King, *Reminiscences*, 51-2; Robert Gray Gunderson, *The Log Cabin Campaign*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1957); Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore*, 53; Mrs. Charley Huyck, Federal Writers Project, Library of Congress; Harry Germaine, "A Campaign Club's Equipment," *Daily Inter Ocean*, May 31, 1896; "The Making of Campaign Banners," *Harper's Weekly*, September 10, 1892; "In a Campaign Banner Factory," *Rocky Mountain News,* August 23, 1896.

audience that was often strikingly young. Parties contended for the attention of twelve year olds, and this might explain some of their wilder contrivances.[178]

Public political events reinforced what children had learned at home and school. Once again, the impassioned, competitive, collective aspects of the democracy drowned out issues of governance or rational choice. But unlike the political socialization parents passed down at home and teachers let slip in the classroom, rallies begged young Americans to join in. As children matured their politics became more personal. After years of rehearsals, young people could finally feel like actors in the show.

The Ward 8 Dynasty

Sometimes older children graduated from spectators to organizers, working as errand boys for political machines. They passed messages, fetched pails of lager, and dragged tipsy voters to the polls. Usually boys considered these chores a privilege. In the words of George Washington Plunkitt, the bombastic Tammany hall boss who got his start at age twelve, "You can't begin too early in politics…Show me a boy that hustles for the organization on Election Day, and I'll show you a comin' statesman."[179]

These "comin' statesmen" found work and identity on the lowest rungs of partisan organizations. James Michael Curley, an impoverished teen who eventually won nearly every office in Boston and Massachusetts, chose politics "because industrial conditions

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[178] Howells, *A Boy's* Town, 132; Pleasants, *Old Virginia Days and Ways*, 1-12; Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore*, 52-3; White, *Autobiography*, 52; Leach, *Recollections of a Newspaperman*; W.T. Ellis, *Memories*, 6; Mrs. Charley Huyck, Federal Writers Project; Graves, *My Seventy Years in California*, 33.

[179] William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1963), 19.

were deplorable."[180] Working for Democratic Party meant better pay, cleaner lungs, and more adult guidance than his previous job in a sweltering piano factory. As urban labor conditions deteriorated and the system of apprenticeship crumbled, boys with few connections could still find healthy employment and devoted mentors within party machines.

James Curley's introduction to Boston politics offers a perfect example of how children became political actors, and how they passed down traditions to the next generation. Nineteenth-century Boston's party headquarters, tucked away behind butcher shops and funeral homes, often hosted bosses at the tables and boys leaning against the walls. Those smoky backrooms launched a dynasty of plucky, striving young ward leaders. Each got his start around age twelve. But no one is born a boss, and their successive initiations tell a story of how elders finally explained the inner workings of politics to select children.

The shambling immigrant neighborhoods of Boston's West End, particularly the notorious Eighth Ward, cried out for better leadership in the final years of the century. Open sewage canals marked the lines between neighborhoods. Some blocks were dense with brick buildings, others wound randomly, made up of oddly spaced wooden shacks. Dirt roads divided most, like arteries bleeding out into the marshy mud flats of the Charles river. The locals, a confused mix about one third Irish, one third Jewish, and less

[180] James Michael Curley, *I'd Do it Again*, (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 46.

than a quarter "native American," felt ignored by the Brahmin elite and looked to the Democratic machinery for salvation.[181]

They settled, for a time, on an unlikely choice. Martin Lomasney got his start as an orphan bootblack, the descendant of Irish famine immigrants. Locals remembered the taciturn young Lomasney for his penetrating blue-grey stare and the way he used his silence to command a room. During the 1870s the fifteen year old ran a street gang. His hustling caught the eye of a Democratic boss, who recruited him with odd jobs and extra cash. That boss found Lomasney an easy city job as a lamplighter and helped him open a political club. As the boy matured into a boss he coined the political dictum: "Never write if you can speak; never speak if you can nod; never nod if you can wink." Lomasney even had a drink named for his precinct (the highest honor any Boston politician could hope for). The "Ward 8" was essentially a whiskey, made bloody with grenadine.[182]

By the 1890s, the whole ward knew Lomasney as "the Mahatma," the very stereotype of a "jut-jawed, heavy-set political boss."[183] As he built his empire, won office, and survived an assassination attempt (he took a bullet in the leg), Lomasney began to recruit the next generation of young Democrats. One of his favorites was Nathan Sodekson, a fatherless Jewish immigrant.[184] Sodekson – a nervy ball of energy – lived in a tenement across the street from Martin Lomasney. He hung around Lomasney's

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[181] James Michael Curley, *I'd Do it Again*; Joseph F. Dineen, *Ward Eight*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1936); Alice Stone Blackwell, *Growing Up in Boston's Gilded Age*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
[182] "Pebbles," *The Independent*, March 30, 1911, 70, 672; Curley, *I'd do it Again*, 22; "Reported By Police," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, November 10, 1884, 8; "A Fine Old Bostonian," *New York Times*, August 15, 1933, 16.
[183] Curley, *I'd Do it Again*, 22.
[184] According to James Michael Curley, Sodekson's mother had fled with Nathan after pogroms in their hometown of Preinai, Lithuania, then part of Russia. James Michael Curley, *I'd Do it Again*, 23-25.

headquarters until "the Mahatma" began assigning him chores in the club and errands around town. Lomasney eventually entrusted Sodekson with the party checklist on election day, 1896. Together they made a distinctive team: the hulking, mute Mahatma, wearing his trademark yellow straw hat, his moustache twitching, peering sternly out through gold-rimmed glasses, standing beside the skinny, restless twelve-year-old, monitoring the polls and dispatching runners to round up malingerers.[185]

Eventually, Nate Sodekson moved on, unionizing Boston's newsboys, but he passed down "the Lomasney tricks" to another generation of aspiring wirepullers before he went.[186] One of Sodekson's students, James Michael Curley, carried on "the Mahatma's" legacy. While Lomasney relied on his commanding personality, and Sodekson used his deep knowledge of the local voters, young Curley traded on his ability to persuade. He hung around the ward's cheap groceries, buttonholing doubtful voters amid the corned beef and the pickle barrels. From there, Curley put his education to good use through a term as Massachusetts' governor, two terms as United States congressman, and four terms as Boston's mayor. Not to mention two stints in prison.[187]

Boston's Democratic machine recruited Lomasney, Sodekson, and Curley by using the same tactics as professional guilds and organized crime. Apprenticeships began sometime between twelve and fifteen, and started with the honor of performing menial tasks. Each generation was expected, in time, to pass along their secrets to the next. And

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[185] Bosses commonly assigned this unwanted task to boys. George Washington Plunkitt had this same job four decades earlier, tracking down voters "who had jags on" and helping them to the polls. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, 19; Curley, *I'd Do it Again,* 23-25.
[186] Ibid., 23; Robert W. Bruére, "A Newsboys' Labor Union," *The Outlook*, December 1906, 287; "To Newsboys," *The American Federationist***,** 9, (January 1902), 11.
[187] Curley, *I'd do it Again*, 23.

young partisans came to view their actions in much the same way as a master craftsman or a lifelong criminal, as a trade or task, with few moral or ideological considerations. Several generations found this the easiest way to bring in new blood.

The eighth ward crew all shared something else. Each was fatherless. Lomasney had lost both parents as a boy, Sodekson's dad disappeared somewhere back in the old country, and Curley's father died trying to lift a heavy load of bricks at a Boston construction site. Of course, many millions of Americans never knew their fathers, but partisan mentors often played a paternal role, fitting neatly into the usual pattern of children's political socialization. Those without fathers to drag them to rallies or argue politics at the dinner table still found their way into the party, and may have responded the presence of caring role models, especially given so few other options.

Little more than a game

William Dean Howells was born into a middling Ohio family in 1837. A generation later, Susan Bradford called a spacious Florida plantation home. Nathan Sodekson fled Russia at the tail-end of the age, and spent his childhood in a Boston slum. Despite their differences, each joined in a political culture that enlisted children to sing campaign songs, light bonfires, and follow their parents' politics. Each was given a party to support with little information and followed through with surprising involvement for an eight or twelve year old. Their participation far outpaced their comprehension. From a young age, William, Susan, and Nathan each played an active role in their nation's fevered, enigmatic democracy.

William A. Alcott scoffed at these "violent little partisans." The craggy New England reformer made his name crusading against courtship, meat-eating, amusements in general, and popular politics in particular. While he labeled young people "the rulers of the land," he was not entirely happy about this situation. In his 1850 advice book Alcott denounced "the blustering politician of twelve or fifteen" for whom "politics is little more than a game," and who is as unlikely to bring into partisanship "any thing in the shape of a conscience, as to a billiard-table or a checkerboard."[188]

Though his tone may have been too arch, Alcott was mostly correct. Children's politics rarely acknowledged the existence of individual conscience. Many boys and girls viewed democracy like billiards or checkers, an entertaining and external game, not linked to their interior selves. They practiced what historian Michael McGerr called this an "extroverted concept of partisanship."[189] Children attended rallies, jeered rivals, and generally followed adults' lead, but with little individual agency or identity.

As young Americans entered the second half of their teens, they started to take their politics more personally. They continued to hurrah for their party, to talk politics, to join clubs, and to hustle at the polls, but added a new interior meaning to this participation. After a decade of splashing in the shallows of politics, American teenagers waded deeper. They began to see a private meaning in public partisanship, important in their own lives as well as the nation's. At the same time, the crises of adolescence buffeted youths with waves of social, economic, and romantic uncertainty. Many responded by sinking further into popular politics.

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[188] Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men*, 253.
[189] Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, *The American North 1865-1928*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 39.

2

The Go-Ahead Principle

Though he was four years, two months, and ten days too young to vote, Ben was out early on election day, 1848. He looked unkempt, even for a sixteen-year-old boy on a foggy Maine morning. Ben was short and solid, with a serious brow and a heavy jaw fringed with hopeful muttonchops. He wore a tattered black coat, torn at both elbows. Despite his ragged appearance, Ben strode intently through Orono, Maine, his muddy boots padding on the sawdust that powdered the lumber-town's dim streets, marking his trail towards its waking polling place. He could not yet vote, but he hoped he might "advance a boy's opinion" with those who could.[190]

Ben's journey into politics did not begin on that chilly autumn morning. In fact he wondered, in his candid and neurotic diary, how he had become so caught up with a subject "not intimately concerning myself." Why should he care about elections and conventions? What Ben did not realize was that, like many nineteenth-century youths, he dove into politics precisely because it did not intimately concern him. As Ben struggled in his economic, romantic, and social life, he sought out partisan politics as a source of external identity and achievement. Like millions of his fellow teens, Ben used elections and rallies as a tool to cope with the looming uncertainties of adolescence in an adolescent nation.

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[190] Benjamin Brown Foster, *Down East Diary*, Ed. Charles H. Foster**,** (Orono, ME: University of Maine at Orono Press, 1975), 140.

Ben struggled with those pursuits that did intimately concern him. He felt teased by a gnawing desire for progress, a "shuddering discontent that crawls over me."[191] The sixteen year old berated himself, on his birthday, for being "ignorant, poor, fickle, wavering, without brilliancy, talents, wealth or influential friends." He failed to win apprenticeship after apprenticeship, was cheated out of his pay by a malicious boss at a country store, and kept jealous track of wealthier young people in his town.[192]

Ben's anxiety – "my eternal pest" – haunted his romantic life as well. He consistently failed to impress local girls. One popular young woman mocked him as "the dirtiest looking object she ever saw." Another girl seemed interested, but on a romantic sleigh ride together Ben lost his nerve and they "indulged no indecent familiarities."[193]

Frustrated in work and love, Ben first turned to self-improvement, putting his faith in the pseudo-science of phrenology. Based on a reading of the shape of his skull, he swore off butter and fatty meats. He slept with the windows open, in Maine, in January. He suppressed his natural goofiness in a bid to seem sober and serious. None of this helped him find a job or a wife.[194]

Phrenology could not sate Ben's stifled ambitions, but politics could. Between fifteen and eighteen he threw himself into anti-slavery organizations. Dinner with fugitive slave lecturer Thomas James influenced his views, and partisan newspapers framed his actions. He read constantly, devouring Poe, Dickens, and the Brontës, but also the *New York Tribune*, the *Liberator*, and the *National Era*. He shared those publications' hatred for slavery, but chaffed against their frustrating faith in moral suasion alone. He believed

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[191] Foster, *Down East Diary*, 146.
[192] Ibid., 102, 124, 76.
[193] Ibid., 217, 107, 97.
[194] Ibid., 7, 38.

that political parties were "America's salvation…the cement of the Union," and, at fifteen, penned an article calling for an antislavery political party.[195] The *Bangor Gazette* published his anonymous battle cry. For the first time in his otherwise stifled life, Ben felt some success.

So on the state election day in September, 1848, he woke early, washed his face and neck, pulled on his muddy brown boots and his torn black coat, and headed out to the polls. There he watched as Orono, Maine slowly awoke. Dazed and sleepy voters, many of them caked with dust from the town's humming lumber-mills, began to cast ballots. Some voted with deep "regard for principle," while others seemed "reckless, careless." Poll hustlers caught men "by the buttons and drag them as the spider doth a fly," to vote Whig, Democrat, or – as Ben hoped – Free Soil.[196]

Ben went to work too, not pressing ballots on the undecided, but simply talking anti-slavery politics with whoever would listen. He indulged his irrepressible "love of talking," his massive head bobbing in animated discussion with those who shared his distaste for the Slave Power. Other "coolly reminded me that I was a boy." At the end of the day, Ben walked home through the dimming autumn light, sure that he had convinced some men to change their votes. Back at his parent's house, Ben recounted the thrilling election in his diary. He had never "felt so much interest and excitement."[197]

This politicking would not satisfy "the wealth-phantom," nor would it teach him how to flirt or reshape his skull for better phrenological results. It did not directly solve any of the sweaty anxieties Ben poured into his journal. It did, however, offer the self-

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[195] Foster, *Down East Diary*, 149, 31.
[196] Ibid., 140-1.
[197] Ibid.

critical sixteen-year-old a hint of adulthood and influence. The election showed Ben a clearer path to manhood than he had seen before. Usually, he fretted about turning twenty-one, when he would have "no home to fall back upon." But at the polling place, Benjamin Brown Foster felt just the opposite, wishing "that I was for one year, and on this one topic, a man, a voter."[198]

From Basements to Steeples

When Benjamin Brown Foster sighed: "my life is already probably a quarter or a fifth gone and with what result?" he joined a chorus of moaning youths.[199] From the young Pennsylvanian who fretted that his big plans would probably "vanish for the lack of money," to the Tennessean who felt that she did "nothing but eat and wear and be in the way," a diverse swath of young Americans expressed the same mixture of self-improving ambition and self-pitying pessimism. Most believed that they alone were failing to progress towards adulthood.[200]

These worries were not limited to young Americans of a particularly morose type. Confident, arrogant, and smug youths expressed the same sense of obstructed progress. A Great Plains buffalo hunter, who survived a stabbing at Deadwood, boxed for Calamity Jane's amusement, and kept track of all the animals he shot in his diary frequently

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[198] Foster, *Down East Diary*, 69, 141.
[199] Ibid., 76.
[200] Lester Ward, *Young Ward's Diary,* Ed. Bernhard J. Stern, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935), 8, 25; Amanda McDowell Burns, July 5, 1861, *Fiddles in the Cumberland*, Ed. Amanda McDowell and Lela McDowell Blankenship, (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1943); Jacob Heffelfinger Diary, June 12, 1858, in Letters of J. Theodore Heard, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA; David Schenck Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. For a brilliant study of failure in America, see Scott A. Sandage, *Born Losers; A History of Failure in America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

groaned about his future.[201] An evangelical street-preacher, who could work massive Philadelphia crowds into riotous anti-Catholic agitation, filled his diary with lamentations that he was "qualified for nothing" and found it "humiliating indeed" that he still lived with his parents at age nineteen.[202] Something larger than personality held back all these uncertain young people.

What seemed like the individual failures of millions of youths was, in reality, the human impact of the massive structural forces unleashed in the nineteenth century. The unprecedented changes felt during the age of popular politics filled the lives of fifteen or twenty-year-olds with gnawing uncertainty. Though many benefited from the radical innovations of the turbulent era, and some suffered, all Americans struggled to discern where "childhood ends and youth begins and where youth ends and manhood begins."[203] Pushed by a faith in progress and pulled by the disorderly modern world, young men and women hoped for success but saw no clear way forward. Many of these frustrated young people tried to solve their internal, individual anxieties with external, collective politics.

American life changed more radically during the nineteenth century than it ever had before. Between the 1830s and 1900, America's population quintupled, splitting cities' seams and peopling the vast frontier. At least eighteen million immigrants arrived

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[201] Rolf Johnson, *Happy as a Big Sunflower: Adventures in the West, 1876-1880,* Ed. By Richard E. Jensen, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 160-196.
[202] Charles W. Plummer, September 27, 1840, Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia PA.
[203] William Fletcher King, *Reminiscences*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1915), 64. For more on the uncertain process of aging, see William Quesenbury Claytor, January 1, 1849, *Diary of William Claytor, 1849-1896,* (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2002); Parmenas Taylor Turnley, *Reminiscences of Parmenas Taylor Turnley : from the cradle to three-score and ten,* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1892), 24-5; James Silk Buckingham, *America, Historical, Statistic, and Descriptive*, *Two Volumes*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841), 1: 120.

from Europe, more people than had lived in all of America in 1840. And the economy exploded. In 1810, just three percent of the American labor force worked in manufacturing. By 1900 that number was more than twenty percent, and Americans made a larger share of the world's goods than Britain, Germany, and France combined.[204]

Such upheavals disturbed the usual order of life. Before these revolutions, most youths simply hoped to replicate their parents' livelihood.[205] Beginning in the early decades of the nineteenth century, a growing market economy and an obsession with progress eclipsed that hope**.** By the Jacksonian era, few could plan to live as their ancestors had.[206] Slowly, over the rest of the century, moral reformers, social activists, and industrial capitalists built up a new structure, so that by around 1900 large institutions managed young people's education, employment, and entertainment. But for two-thirds of a century in between, "every aspect of American life witnessed a desire to

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[204] Stanley Lebergott, *The Americans: An Economic Record* (New York: Norton, 1984), 66; Thomas Weiss, "U.S. Labor Force Estimates and Economic Growth," *American Economic Growth and Standards of Living before the Civil War*, Ed. Robert E. Gallman and John Joseph Wallis, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 22; Paul Boyer, et al, *The Enduring Vision*, (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 2003), 544.

[205] Charles G. Sellers, *The Market Revolution,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 12.

[206] This process began in the eighteenth century, and built momentum exponentially over the decades. These changes, some argue, peaked in the 1820s, but were still avoidable until mid-century. For further studies of the "market revolution," and Americans' growing focus on social and economic progress, see Charles G. Sellers, *The Market Revolution,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mary Ryan, *Cradle of the Middle Class,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004; Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*, (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1995).

throw off precedent."[207] This unruly society shook the way young people lived, loved, worked, and voted.

Massive social change altered young Americans' most intimate experiences. Romantic relationships grew more complex, as highly mobile men and women bounced around to new cities and territories. Americans courted more partners and married years later than their ancestors.[208] Finding work became another fraught decision; most young people had never before had to get a job outside of their families' domestic economy and social network. As America refocused on unskilled industry, the tradition of apprenticeship that introduced so many young men to the middling classes crumbled. The market added formerly unimagined options, but most jobs were unstable and short-lived. Work that had once been collective, like farming, was replaced by individual labor and personal pressure.[209] Though family and regional networks weakened, new institutions like schools and unions could not yet structure young Americans' lives.

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[207] David Hebert Donald wrote this quote in his famous "Excess of Democracy" explanation for the coming of the Civil War, arguing that the social unravelings of the Antebellum era brought about the conflict. Some historians, like Allan Nevins, have claimed that the Civil War reversed this trend, bringing about an "organizational revolution," but this shift was largely limited to a small core of industrialists. For most Americans, the years after the Civil War brought as much social change as the decades leading up to it. (David Herbert Donald, "An Excess of Democracy," *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era*, *Third Edition,* [New York: Vintage Books, 2001], 56*;* Allan Nevins, *The War For Union: Volume 3, The Organized War 1863-1864* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971]).

[208] Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Howard Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.

[209] Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard Universty Press, 2006), 151-180, Walter Licht, *Getting Work: Philadelphia, 1840-1950*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1-17, James Schmidt, *Industrial Violence and the Legal Origins of Child Labor*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Just as their futures grew hazy, young people faced increasing social pressure to achieve. Each generation seemed more self-improving than the last, driven by what many came to call "the go-ahead principle."[210] Though committed to the idea of progress and individual achievement, most young people experienced a phase of "semi-dependence" in their late teens. Many left home for six months of school or two years of work, but returned to rely on their family while planning their next move.[211] The nineteenth century is often considered a time of final journeys – from farm to city, from agriculture to industry, from Europe to America – but many experienced it as an era of false starts, and found themselves on a wagon returning to the family farm, or a steamer pointing back towards Europe. One young man in Ohio considered his teen years an alternating series of "buoyant hopes" and "baffling discouragements."[212]

Few nineteenth-century Americans would have called these young people "adolescents." That word's frequent usage began in the 1890s by psychologists describing a phase in which young people were particularly vulnerable, in need of protection while they matured. Between the 1840s and 1890s, men and women of the same age were more often called "youths," and they were treated far less gently. A youth, most believed, occupied a transitional phase on the spectrum between children and adults

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[210] "The Go-Ahead Principle" was a popular shorthand for young nineteenth-century Americans' striving ambition. As in: "Not content with going ahead personally, we have infused the go-ahead principle into the very foundations of the republic." *The American Review: A Whig Journal*, 4, (New York: E.N. Grossman Printer, 1849), 287. Also see the infamous minstrel routine "Zip Coon on the Go-Ahead Principle," (Boston: L Deming, 1832); Timothy Templeton, *The Adventures of My Cousin Smooth*, (New York: Miller, Orton, & Mulligan, 1855), 2;

[211] Kett, *Rites of* Passage, 11-13; E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era,* (New York: Basic Books, 1993)*,* 7, 56.

[212] William Fletcher King, *Reminiscences*, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1915), 64.

and could enter maturity, not through aging, but by proving oneself. For men, this meant economic success, or physical strength, or manly virtues; for women it could mean marriage, motherhood, or the competent management of a household.[213] The wrong course, taken at this crucial turning point, could lead a youth towards a life of crime, violence, alcoholism, prostitution, or a host of other sins.[214] While the later idea of adolescence offered a reprieve to grow physically and emotionally, nineteenth-century "youth" was conditional, demanding action.

Politics promised that action. By joining parties, reading newspapers, attending rallies, speaking at debates, marching in processions, handing out ballots, or simply hurling bricks at the opposition, frustrated and go-ahead youths achieved a longed-for sense of direction. Many refocused their personal inertia towards public action.

In an otherwise shaken society, popular democracy's regularity was one of its great appeals. Presidential campaigns could be counted upon every four years, congressional votes every two, and a host of local battles fought annually.[215] Uncertain

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[213] Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 11-14; Schmidt, *Industrial Violence and the Legal Origins of Child Labor*; Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?*; Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 63-135.

[214] John Mather Austin, *A Voice to Youth: Address to Young Men and Young Ladies*, (Utica: Grosh and Hutchinson, 1839), 3; William A. Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men on Various Subjects: Designed as a Companion to the Young Man's Guide*, (Buffalo, Geo H. Derby & Co, 1850), 78; James Isaac Vance, *The Young Man Foursquare*, (New York: F.H. Revell Co. 1894), 41; Junis Henri Browne, *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869), 73; L. K. Washburn, "A Lecture to Young Men," *Boston Investigator*, October 3, 1888; Karen Haltutnen, *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).

[215] Roy F. Nichols discussed the structural implications of this never-ending campaign cycle, but its personal impact on the lives of young Americans is just as important. Roy F. Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy*, (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948), 21.

young men and women could jump upon this campaign merry-go-round as it swung through their lives, often when all else seemed stalled. Many found that they could rely on this sense of progress when social forces blocked their path to adulthood.

Campaigners were happy to welcome unpaid young promoters. Though career ambitions might be thwarted, and romantic crushes unrequited, parties always needed more boots on the cobblestones. Only when office-seekers mobbed newly elected officials, boasting of campaign heroics, did bosses regret bringing in so many ambitious youths.[216] Many politicians saw themselves as providing a service to uncertain teens. George Washington Plunkitt boasted that Tammany Hall assisted struggling young people who were "longin' to make names and fortunes for themselves at the same game."[217]

Walt Whitman put it best. When a British traveler complained that American youths were too unruly, Whitman responded: "We are laying here in America the basements and foundation rooms of a new era. And we are doing it, on the whole, pretty well and substantially. By-and-by, when that job is through, *we will look after the steeples and pinnacles*."[218] As American society constructed a revolutionary new edifice, its young people puzzled over how to climb towards those promised but illusory steeples. Some of their most important ambitions – finding a spouse, a home, work, and an adult

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[216] Walter Lichts' *Getting Work* shows that older men were far more likely to have found their jobs through "political pull." Licht, *Getting Work*, 34.
[217] William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1963), 13. For other examples of adult politicians inviting young people into politics, see Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography, Volume One*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publisher, 1906), 203-5; C.S. Bundy, *Early Days in the Chippewa Valley*, (Menomonie, WI: Flint Douglas Printing Company, 1916), 6-11; Abraham Lincoln to P. Quinn Harrison, November 3, 1859, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Volume Three*, 492.
[218] Edwin Arnold, *Seas and Lands*, (London, Longmans, Green, 1894), 78.

identity – proved particularly shaky. Millions used politics as a scaffolding to reach these goals. Walt Whitman, who began his writing career as a particularly nasty partisan journalist, certainly did.[219]

Quite the thing here for ladies to do

Anna Ridgely hated politics. The devout nineteen-year-old Presbyterian, so religious that she refused to dance or play billiards, resented the drunken shouts, interminable oom-pah music, and celebratory cannon fire of boisterous rallies, which drowned out her humble prayer meetings.[220] But the Springfield, Illinois native changed her mind during the 1860 presidential campaign. The fact that her father played cards with Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas had some influence, but mostly, she was interested in the young men who populated those profane processions.

When Anna began to "go with gentlemen," her admirers escorted her to exciting campaign demonstrations. Some invited her to pro-Douglas rallies, while others talked her into attending massive celebrations of Lincoln's nomination. Anna came from a line of staunch Democrats, and her parents warily eyed her Republican suitors. In spite of her former distaste for the wicked world of politics, she embraced the overheated campaign. Temporarily intoxicated, either with the cheering crowds or her suitors' attention, Anna exclaimed "hurrah for Lincoln!" in her diary.[221]

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[219] David Reynolds, *Walt Whitman's America,* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 100-1.
[220] Anna Ridgely, May 20, 1860, "A Girl in The Sixties," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Ed. Octavis Roberts Corneau, 2, (October 1929), 6-9.
[221] Ibid., April 8, 1860; June 24, 1860. As Anna grew older, the Civil War destroyed her earlier life. Her two most serious suitors died in the Union Army, leading Anna into the ranks of the Peace Democratic movement. By 1864, she was no longer hurrahing Lincoln, but rather calling for an "uprising of the people" against the Republican party.

Romantic entanglements could drag even the most apolitical men and women into politics. In their late teens, millions joined Anna Ridgely in using worldly politics for personal relationships. At a time when Americans dramatically shifted their expectations for marriage, courtship's coy possibilities and crushing dismissals elicited restless uncertainties. As the concept of romantic love prospered, Victorian mores tightened, and the number of potential partners skyrocketed, nervous teens sought an external tool in their awkward search a mate.[222]

Large political gatherings offered a perfect venue to meet the opposite sex. Youths saw these events as a democratically sanctioned excuse for public flirtation, and some young women used courting to express their otherwise disenfranchised beliefs. The result was a messy jumble of national campaigns and personal romances.

The great shake-ups of the nineteenth century made courtship difficult for most young Americans. Single men and women increasingly lived in different places. Chasing booming industries, young men congregated in cities, the frontier, and bachelor communities like mining towns, lumber camps, railroad crews, and ocean-going vessels.[223] Nevada, California, Oregon, and Texas had far more young men than women. Women predominated in older communities along the East Coast and the Gulf,

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[222] Historians studying this period tend to agree on a basic model of courtship running from the Jacksonian era until the 1890s. Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*; Howard Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor*; Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy,* (New York: Viking, 2005); Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Frances B. Cogan, *All-American Girl: The Ideal of Real Womanhood in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989), 101-175.

[223] For further reading on these bachelor communities, see Howard Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor*.

particularly in states like Maryland, Connecticut, and Louisiana.[224] Anna Ridgely, visiting her elderly aunt in a sleepy rural section of Missouri, missed the crowds of young gentleman she had grown used to in booming Springfield.[225] Immigration furthered this mismatch. The majority of migrants pouring into the country were male – with the exception of the mostly female Irish immigration – so that men outnumbered women in America by several million.[226]

This increased mobility inadvertently brought about a more restrained style of courting. Unwed pregnancy was common in the eighteenth century, but usually with the assumption that the expectant couple would marry. As the social unravelings of the nineteenth century made flight an easy option for young men, Victorians constructed a more restrained romantic culture.[227] Women were urged to act with extreme modesty, lest they find themselves pregnant with the father disappearing along some turnpike or rail-line, and male sexuality was denounced as predatory and in need of constant suppression.

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[224] For every 100 fifteen-to-nineteen year old women in Nevada there were 218.7 men of the same age, while in Louisiana 100 young women had only 89.12 young men to choose from. Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals, 1790 to 1990,* (Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau: Washington, D.C. 2002), Accessed March 21, 2013.

[225] Anna Ridgely, July 29, 1860, "A Girl in The Sixties," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*.,

[226] The trend of a male majority in America, building to a significant mismatch by 1900, differed from western European nations, which boasted more women than men.
As for Irish immigration, Philadelphia in 1860 provides a stark example. There were only 582 Irish men between ages 20 and 29 for every 1000 Irish women. Licht, *Getting Work,* 15.

[227] Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity; An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Jacksonian America." *Turning Points: Historical and Sociological Essays on the Family,* Ed. John Demos, Sarane Spence Boocock, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

All of this pushed the average marriage age well into the twenties, reaching an unprecedented peak by 1890, not returned to until 1980 for women and 1990 for men.[228]

While courting was complicated for young men, emerging from their all-male boy culture, it had weightier impacts on women. In addition to the threat of pregnancy, young women made their reputations through their courtships. Anna Ridgely worried about her active social life, reminding herself that spending too much time with gentlemen was "not profitable" and made her seem scandalously available.[229] Women's reliance on their future husbands also meant that finding a spouse was likely to be the biggest choice a woman ever made, yet the path forward was unclear. Though the older culture of picking a partner from a limited village selection had deteriorated, the structured world of "dating" had yet to emerge.[230] With high mobility and an inchoate system for meeting partners, young people cast about in their romantic lives.[231]

So at public political events young men and women kept one eye on each other. In a dispersed and shaken society, a big October rally might introduce couples that would otherwise not have met. Crafty campaigners manipulated these democratic flirtations, promising "wife-less young voters" that "all the handsome and intelligent young ladies"

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[228] Marriage age in the twentieth century can be graphed as a reverse check-mark, slowly dropping from 1890 to lows during the Cold War, and rising rapidly for the last four decades. Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor*, 48.

[229] Ridgely, March 11, 1860, "A Girl in the Sixties," *Journal of the Illinois Historical Society,* 7.

[230] Cogan, *All-American Girl*; 101-175; Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1988).

[231] For particularly good examples of the challenges of courting in this shaken society, see Martha Farnsworth, *Plains Woman: The Diary of Martha Farnsworth, 1882-1922,* Ed. Marlene Springer and Haskell Springer, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 19, 24, 44-66; Letters of Mattie V. Thomas and Uriah W. Oblinger, 1864-1869, Uriah W. Oblinger Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Digitally collected at the Library of Congress, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhihtml/pshome.html.

supported their party.[232] Young Americans openly acknowledged their use of public events for private liaisons. When nineteen-year-old Lester Ward learned of a Republican rally that "everyone is planning to go to," he saw it as "a good opportunity" to contact the young woman with whom he had recently shared a late-night tryst.[233] Charlotte Howard Conant, a wealthy young Republican in Massachusetts attended a Democratic rally, not because she supported that party, but because two suitors had invited her and "it is quite the thing here for ladies to do."[234]

Some young women used courtship to express their political views. Denied more direct routes to activism, many relied upon flirtation as a source of influence. Newspapers joked that candidates with charming young daughters always seemed to win a large following among virgin voters.[235] Occasionally, women specifically turned down marriage proposals because of the young man's political affiliations.[236] In the words of a twenty-year-old Indiana abolitionist, complaining about the poor prospects in her town during the Civil War, "there is no young men here except Copperheads and they are beneath our notice."[237]

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[232] "Grant and Colfax," *Des Moines Daily State Register*, October 27, 1868; "Saturday's Local the News of a Day in the Capital City," *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, September 29, 1889.
[233] Lester Ward, *Young Ward's Diary,* Ed. Bernhard J. Stern, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935), 7.
[234] Charlotte Howard Conant, September 19, 1888, in *A Girl of the Eighties at College and at Home*, Ed. Martha Pike Conant, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1931), 261.
[235] "The Political Arena. Democrats Discussing the Convention of Monday," *Knoxville Journal*, November 29, 1893.
[236] Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Voices without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England,* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010), 98-102; "Multiple News Items," *Morning Oregonian*, November 2, 1894.
[237] Lili (Full name unknown) to Mattie Thomas, December 19, 1864, in Uriah W. Oblinger Collection, *Nebraska State Historical Society.*

Many young people bluntly admitted that they used popular politics to woo the opposite sex. The charming diary of Annie Youmans – full of emotive exclamations like "ahem!" and "umph!" – shows how a young woman employed political flirtation to reach out to romantic prospects. The twenty-year-old Republican learned to debate politics with young men, particularly those she found attractive. In September 1868, she had an animated, flirtatious debate with a suitor who argued that Horatio Seymour, the Democratic candidate, would win the coming presidential election. Annie teased that she hoped he enjoyed his delusions. In her diary she noted: "by the by this young man is very handsome." That same campaign, Annie placed a bet on Grant's victory – for a pair of gloves – with a more serious suitor, who she described as having "splendad dark eyes." Though she certainly cared about politics, Annie admitted that her political bet with this dark-eyed suitor was a "pretense."[238]

Annie was outdone by Clay Anderson, a nineteen-year-old bank teller in Ohio. In the mid-1850's, Anderson penned letters to a friend bragging about meeting "fair and fascinating" ladies at Know Nothing rallies. At one event, attended by over five hundred "young folks," Anderson rode his mustang colt past a pretty young woman, also on horseback, who requested that he escort her along the parade route. Anderson gallantly, eagerly, agreed. That charming Miss Sarah Darlington ("a darling as well as a Darlington") shared both Anderson's attraction and his hatred of the "denizens of Deutchland." But she lived seventy-five miles away; they probably would not have met if not drawn together by politics. Anderson confidently concluded his letter writing: "I will

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[238] Anne L. Youmans Van Ness, January, 1868; September, 1868; November, 1868, in *Diary of Annie L. Youmans Van ness, 1864-1881*, (Alexandria: Alexander Street Press, 2004.)

have more to say of this young lady in my next." Unfortunately for the couple, Clay Anderson died of typhoid soon after the rally.[239]

Such courting does not make youths' focus on politics any less sincere. Instead, the political flirtations of Americans like Clay Anderson and Annie Youmans nurtured the idea that politics was a gendered exchange. Young men used popular politics to perform their masculinity, waving torches, hollering slogans, and strutting ostentatiously. Women like Annie Youmans brought up campaigns, often in flirtatious mock-debates, to engage men they found interesting. Where else, but at a public political rally, could a young woman seek out a male stranger in such a forward manner?[240] Again and again, young women's letters show their habit of talking politics when writing to men, but neglecting the subject in their communications with other women.[241] Party politics served

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[239] Letters from Clay W. Anderson to William G. Beatty, October 27 1855; June 24, 1856; September 18, 1856, in *Life and Letters of Judge Thomas J. Anderson and Wife,* Ed. James House Anderson and Nancy Anderson, (Cincinnati: Press of F. J. Heer, 1904).

[240] Historians Mary and Ronald Zboray disagree, rightly pointing out that many women fell back on a "rhetoric of diffidence," feigning political ignorance in the presence of men. While there are a significant number of examples of young women who did this, many others made deliberate use of their political knowledge. Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Voices without Votes*, 12.

[241] Alice Bradley Haven criticized this belief that women should avoid talking politics amongst themselves, writing to her sister: "You laugh at my interests in politics…and you ask me to write to you whether Millard Filmore or Fillard Milmore is President…I understand what your affectation of ignorance implies. Do not be afraid of my knowing too much even to please you, who have such a horror of women dabbling in politics." (Alice Bradley Haven, *Cousin Alice: A Memoir of Alice B. Haven*, Ed. Cornelia Richards, [New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1868], 135-7). Other examples of women discussing politics with men, but avoiding it with women, can be found in: Susan Hale to Alexander Hale, November 1, 1848, in *Letters of Susan Hale*, Ed. Caroline P Atkinson, (Boston: Marshall Jones Company, 1918); Blanche Butler Ames to Sarah Hildreth Butler, January 7, 1861, in *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century: Family Letters of Blanche Butler and Adelbert Ames, Volume One,* Comp. Blanche Butler Ames, (Clinton, MA: Privately Published, 1957), 63; Cornelia Oatis Hancock, November 14, 1864, in *Letters of a Civil War Nurse: Cornelia Hancock 1863-1865*, Ed. Henrietta Stratton Jaquette, (Lincoln, NE:

as an ideal pastime, a popular event, and an external identity for courting youths to exchange in their clumsy flirtations.

The connection between politics and romance was complimentary, not inherent. Most Americans probably never linked these pursuits. Young people also flirted at Fourth of July celebrations, spelling bees and camp revivals. Partisan campaigns simply made it easier for uncertain youths to announce something about themselves, so necessary in the confused romantic world of nineteenth-century America. Young Americans, struggling to find a spouse in the face of titanic demographic upheavals and moral reforms, used partisanship as a tool for courtship, bringing public politics to the aid of personal romance.

Off on a wander year

The uncertainties of nineteenth-century life often began with a young person's first steps away from home. Millions of Americans – most of them men – relocated in their late teens, lighting out for the territories, or the city, or simply the next state over.[242] The mature self-assertion that came with leaving one's parents' house, the fleeting life of tramping across the country and living on farmers' charity – in the form of bread, milk,

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University of Nebraska Press); Isabella Maud Rittenhouse Mayne, January 1882, in *Maud*, Ed. Richard Lee Strout, (New York: Macmillan & Co, 1939), 48-52.

[242] Young men had significantly higher rates of relocation than young women, and also traveled in a less structured manner. When women relocated they tended to have a specific destination, often with a relative, and they were more likely to travel in groups, rely on paid transportation, and stay in lodgings along the way. Young men were far more likely to set off on a wander year with little money or direction, and simply meander on foot across multiple states. An illuminating comparison can be seen in two accounts of trips, one by a young man and the other by a young woman, taken across the Midwest in 1840. See John Parsons, *A Tour Through Indiana in 1840*, (New York: R.M. McBride & Co. 1920) and Elize R. Steele, *Summer Journey in the West*, (New York: John S Taylor and Co., 1841).

and prayer – and the socialization in boardinghouses and work camps all seemed to guide young travelers to party politics. For those new in town, embracing political enthusiasm offered young wanderers like Oscar Lawrence Jackson "introduction to the leading men…which is a great advantage to a stranger."[243]

Such sojourns became a rite of passage. In 1850, William Alcott observed: "it is as rare now, to find a young man of thirty, who has not been beyond the limits of his native state, as it was thirty years ago, when I began to be a traveler, to find one who *had* been." [244] In one Wisconsin county, 89% of teenaged males present in 1860 had left by 1870, and 90% of those present in 1870 were gone by 1880.[245] Travelers often set out with only the vaguest goals: a relative in a distant region, or a plan to rely on the religious good faith of fellow Methodists or Baptists along the way.[246] Impoverished young men were most likely to wander, but students from Yale and the University of Virginia also headed out for a spell after school.[247] Packing a carpetbag and hitting the road served as the capstone adventure for thrill-seeking graduates of nineteenth-century American boy culture.

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[243] Oscar Lawrence Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary; Journals kept Before and During the Civil War*, Ed. David P. Jackson, (Sharon, PA: Privately Published, 1922), 28.
[244] Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men,* 141.
[245] Merle Curti, *The Making of an American Community: A Case Study in Democracy in a Frontier County*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 68. For similar, urban statistics, see Stephan Ternstrom and Peter R. Knights, "Men in Motion: Some Data and Speculations about Urban Population Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 1 (Autumn 1970), 7-35.
[246] Marcus Pomeroy, *Reminiscences and Recollections of "Brick" Pomeroy*, (New York: The Advance Though Company, 1890), 19.
[247] William Wheeler to Theodosia Davenport Wheeler, February 14, 1860, in *Letters of William Wheeler of the Class of 1855, Yale College*, (Privately Published, 1875), 46; Parsons, *A Tour Through Indiana in 1840*.

Party hacks made use of this unmoored population. Campaigners introduced one of the sleaziest tactics of the age of popular politics, a practice known as "colonizing," in which a group of partisans temporarily settled in a ward's cheap boardinghouses and voted to sway an election. "Young men out of employment" became the most likely colonizers, enticed with the promise of free lodgings and six drinks a day.[248] In Massachusetts' mill-towns in the 1850s, ascendant Republicans worried that Democrats might manipulate the "very large number of young unmarried voters" to "carry any Ward they may choose."[249] Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story worried about this practice, noting "the habits of our people, compared with many other nations, are migratory," and proposed structures to help mobile young men orient themselves politically.[250] Here, social uncertainty had very concrete partisan implications.

The act of leaving home, and the diverse characters met along the road, helped politicize young wanderers. Many experienced a powerful ideological emancipation upon moving away from their parents. Some began to rethink the simplistic partisanship they had been raised with, while others saw their experiences in the wider world as proof of their elders' political wisdom. Bumming around America by foot, hoof, and rail also

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[248] Richard Bensel offers a thorough study of colonization in *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 159-164, as does Mark W. Summers' *The Plundering Generation: Corruption and the Crisis of the Union*, *1849-1861,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 54-58.
[249] "Districting Middlesex for Representatives," *Lowell Citizen and News*, Saturday, August 1, 1857.
[250] Joseph Story, "Domicil," in *Encyclopaedia Americana*, *Volume* III, Ed. Francis Lieber, (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard, 1844), 58.

introduced young men to adults who talked politics incessantly, and to ideas and injustices that captured their imaginations.[251]

James Witham was one of the many young men who wandered away from home and into politics. Witham's early years in post-Civil War Ohio were marked by his families' poverty and his own irrepressible contrarianism. As he later described it, young Witham could never back down from an argument and went out of his way to be "the very worst boy in school."[252] Pressed by the same species of nineteen-century angst that worried Benjamin Brown Foster, James Witham struggled through a difficult youth. Often, when sent into the snowy woods to chop cordwood to support his family, James sat on log and wept instead. Finally, in 1872, the sixteen year old left the Withams' ramshackle cabin and headed aimlessly west.

His political life began on a hot August day, when he found himself crammed into the caboose of a freight train with a few other passengers. As the train chugged out of Ohio, an obnoxious traveling salesman began to loudly mock the farmers' shacks dotting the countryside. Drawing from his intense reading of the progressive *New York Tribune,* and needled by his inability to turn down a promising argument, Witham launched into a spirited debate. The ensuing quarrel – refereed by the train's crew – "commenced my defense of the men who toil on the farms." James Witham set out on a half-century

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[251] Lyman Abbott, *Reminiscences* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 98; Andreas Ueland, *Recollections of an Immigrant,* (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1929), 38; Nils Haugen, *Pioneer and Political Reminiscences*, (Evansville, WI: The Antes Press, 1930); Isaac Stephenson, *Recollections of a Long Life, 1829-1915*, (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1915); C.S. Bundy, *Early Days in the Chippewa Valey*, (Menomonie, WI: Flint Douglas Ptg Co, 1916); Franklin A. Buck, *A Yankee Trader in the Gold Rush*, Comp. Katherine A. White, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Col, 1930).

[252] James Witham, *Fifty years on the Firing line: My part in the farmers' movement***,** (Chicago: Privately Published, 1924), 2.

crusade advocating farmers' rights, and promoting radical Midwestern politicians like James B. Weaver and William Jennings Bryan in newspapers and lectures.[253]

Though his memoir attacks the salesman as one of many silver-tongued hucksters who preyed on struggling farmers, the older man did James Witham a great favor. The salesman's willingness to argue politics with an earnest young man offered Witham a sense of authority he had never before felt. The middle-aged traveler and the agitated sixteen-year-old shared a political culture, and though neither gave an inch on ideology, the debate left a lifelong mark on James Witham.

The bustling world of nineteenth-century travel, of crowded passenger trains, bumpy stagecoaches, and interminable canal-boat voyages, helped politicize young Americans. Adults often proved willing to talk politics with young strangers in such environments. It became a trope in memoirs from the era: the intense political conversation between a prominent politician and a young man stuck together on a ship or train. Various writers proudly recalled their talks with Sam Houston, Daniel Webster, Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and Ben Wade.[254]

"Wander-years" could also bring regional conflicts into stark relief. In the antebellum era, a young northerner's voyage through the South, or vice versa, often posed crucial questions about slavery, race, and Union, while cross-country trips during

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[253] Witham, *Fifty years on the Firing line*, 1-12.
[254] Charles A. Murdock, *A Backward Glance at Eighty*, (San Francisco, P. Elder and Company, 1921), 10; John M. Roberts, *Buckeye Schoolmaster: A Chronicle of Midwestern Rural Life, 1853-1865*, Ed. J. Merton England, (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 224; William Dean Howells, *Years of my Youth*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1916), 108; Isabella Maud Rittenhouse Mayne, January 1862, *Maud*, 48-52; Charles W. Plummer, September 1, 1840, Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia PA.

the Gilded Age often introduced eastern salesmen and western farmers.[255] Even when wanderers arrived at a destination – particularly temporary camps focused on manual labor and populated with diverse itinerants – politics was always a frequent topic of conversation.[256]

Just as in the patchwork school system, age-diversity and unabashed partisanship turned public spaces into political seminars. Adults did not shy away from debating with sixteen-year-olds; many felt a sympathetic desire to help young people learn to talk politics. A respectful debate with "a well-read man of some forty years" seemed to "tickle the vanity" of young travelers.[257] Coaxed along by the motley public world, the comfort with open political disagreement, and the intimacy found in shared travel, boarding houses, and nights spent lodging with strangers, uncertain journeys began partisan careers.

The Poor Boy

Where to live and whom to marry were tangible questions with discrete answers. The bulk of young Americans' ambitions were not so concrete. Instead, many lumped together broad concerns about financial success, proving their maturity, and asserting

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[255] Frederick Law Olmstead, *Journeys and Explorations in the Cotton Kingdom*, (London: S. Low, Son & Co., 1862); Abbott, *Reminiscences*, 98; Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 9. Also see Eric Foner, *Free Labor, Free Soil, Free Men*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970) for a strong portrayal of northern travelers' perspectives on the South.

[256] The memoirs of Scandinavian immigrants in the Upper Midwest are particularly rich in stories of work-camp political socialization, as are reminiscences from the California frontier. See Ueland, *Recollections of an Immigrant,* 38; Haugen, *Pioneer and Political Reminiscences*; Stephenson, *Recollections of a Long Life*; Bundy, *Early Days in the Chippewa Valley*; Buck, *A Yankee Trader in the Gold Rush*.

[257] Witham, *Fifty Years on the Firing Line,* 9; Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary*, 27.

their masculinity or femininity. This cluster of anxieties especially bedeviled eighteen to twenty-one-year-olds trapped in the limbo of semi-dependence. It is no coincidence that this hazy phase separating youth and adulthood – considered "the most dangerous period of human life" by preachers, educators, and parents – was also the moment when most Americans formed their own political identities.[258]

Young peoples' concerns about wealth, maturity, and gender played on each other. Adulthood and masculinity, for instance, were mutually reinforcing for young men. Americans considered manhood "a matter of age *and* gender," and used "manly" to distinguish men from boys as often they used the term to separate the sexes.[259] At the same time, a culture of self-made capitalism increasingly dominated American aspirations, leading many to see financial success as proof of adulthood and masculinity. For young ladies, usually cut off from capitalist strivings, a feeling of uselessness undermined their sense of womanhood. Women frequently denounced themselves as foolish, frivolous, wasteful, and childish.[260] For young men and women, a victory in the realm of wealth, maturity, or gender strengthened all-around self-image, but a setback increased their uncertainties across the board.

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[258] "A Lecture to Young Men, L. K. Washburn," *Boston Investigator*, October 3, 1888. For a thorough examination of the dangers faced during the late teenaged years, and some progressive solutions, see the essays in *Before he is Twenty: Five Perplexing Phases of Boyhood Considered,* (New York: F.H. Revell, 1894).

[259] Rotundo, *American Manhood*, 20; Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 173; Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[260] Amanda McDowell Burns, May, 1861, *Fiddles in the Cumberland*; Alice Bradley Haven, February 1852, *Cousin Alice,* 135-137; Ellen Tucker Emerson to Addie Manning, September 8, 1856, *The Letters of Ellen Tucker Emerson, Vol 1*, Ed. Edith W. Gregg, (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1982), 118-120; Eliza Frances Andrews, May 1865, *The War-Time Journal of a Georgia Girl,* Ed. Spencer B. King, (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1908).

Politics hooked many young Americans' attentions because their web of anxieties was so loose. This explains Benjamin Brown Foster's wonder at his zeal for a topic "not intimately concerning myself." Without earning a dollar, young political activists could win the regard of adults, making them feel wealthy and mature. Without changing physically, campaign club members could achieve a sense of fraternity, strengthening their faith in their masculinity. Because their goals were so broad, external politics could often stand in for more personal achievements.

Michael Campbell knew these uncertainties more immediately than James Witham, Anna Ridgely, or even Benjamin Brown Foster. In the 1880 election this immigrant factory worker learned how quickly democratic activism could ease concerns about money, maturity, and masculinity. Popular politics helped Campbell, formerly "one of the poorest of street urchins" in New Haven, on his journey from factory packing house, through Gilded Age boxing gymnasium, into the inner sanctum of one of the most powerful politicians in his state.[261]

Michael's parents brought him to New Haven from Ireland as a toddler. His mother bore eight children, starting at age sixteen and ending at thirty-six, when Michael's father died of tuberculosis. As a young boy, Michael ran wild in the lots behind New Haven's bustling industrial waterfront, but he went to work at age eleven.[262] In his late teens he lived with his family, worked in a factory packinghouse, and kept a

[261] Michael F. Campbell, December 30, 1881, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT.
[262] Ibid., May 7, 1881.

poignant diary overflowing with adolescent frustration. In this dreamy, self-pitying chronicle, Michael sometimes referred to himself simply as "the poor boy."[263]

Some of that self-pity was warranted. The disadvantaged youth struggled during the "Long Depression" of the 1870s, marked by sixty-five continuous months of economic contraction, the longest in U.S. history.[264] Michael felt this worldwide downturn as a series of personal rejections. His application to apprentice in the wood pattern trade was denied. His boss at the factory shook his head to repeated requests for a raise. Michael tried night school, studying everything from bookkeeping to "scientifics" to child-rearing, but could not raise the money for more courses. In one of his darker lamentations, he described his life as: "strife day after day for it is a hard task for an Irishman without capital."[265]

His financial worries jelled with concerns about manhood. Michael Campbell was physically slight – 5'7" and one hundred and eighteen pounds – and kept obsessive track of his height and weight in his diary.[266] In an era increasingly captivated with muscular masculinity Michael fretted that he was "not a man in looks."[267] At work, he enviously watched his brawnier co-workers, and complained in his diary that he was "laughed at by the stronger and better off."[268] In his late teens and early twenties, Michael Campbell's

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[263] Michael F. Campbell, May 7, 1881, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT.
[264] "Business Cycle Expansions and Contractions," *National Bureau of Economic Research*, Last modified January 4, 2009, http://www.nber.org/cycles/cyclesmain.html.
[265] Michael F. Campbell, May 7, 1881, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT.
[266] Ibid., May 7, 1878.
[267] Ibid., May 7, 1881.
[268] Ibid. James Schmidt's work on child labor shows that size often correlated to pay for young workers, so Michael's fears of being weak and being poor were linked, not only in

anxieties about his physical strength, his authority, and his job prospects mingled together. He comes across as one very insecure young man.

Perhaps the most striking thing about uncertain youths like Michael Campbell, (or Benjamin Brown Foster or Oscar Lawrence Jackson), was just how ambitious they were. Most spitefully denounced "loafers" and launched multiple campaigns to better themselves. One of Michael Campbell's projects focused on gaining strength. At nineteen he began running in New Haven's parks. He joined a gymnasium soon after. Weightlifting was still considered new and eccentric in 1879, and Michael notes that his friends laughed at his "gymnastics." But he continued, exercising after his shift at the factory. Soon he started to practice fisticuffs, learning the art of bare-knuckle boxing in his search for size, strength, and, ultimately, authority.[269]

Michael's boxing was much like Benjamin Brown Foster's phrenology. It gave him a temporary identity, but no one else really benefited from it. Political activism, on the other hand, aided Michael while making him useful to adults he wished to impress.

Less confrontational pastimes first pointed Michael Campbell towards politics. He joined the Young Men's Christian Doctrine and Library Association, an organization designed to reach out to young Catholics. This society helped introduce him to associational life, reminded him of his Irish-Catholic roots, and drew attention to the reemerging conflicts over Catholicism in American politics in the 1870s. It is not surprising that a religious institution helped politicize Michael; no other sector of society focused more effort on recruiting young people. The roots of a distinctive "youth culture"

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his own mind, but in his salary. Schmidt, *Industrial Violence and the Legal Origins of Child Labor*, 1-40.

[269] Michael F. Campbell, November 20, 1879; March 5, 1881; March 17, 1881. May 7, 1881. Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT.

emerged in Sunday schools and camp revivals before they appeared anywhere else. Though most important to Evangelical Protestants, urban Catholics like Michael benefitted from the same basic model. Such associations empowered young people as orators and organizers, playing an unmistakable role in pointing youths towards politics.[270]

He also became an avid reader. His older brother James, who took on a paternal role when their father succumbed to consumption, passed him Democratic newspapers. Michael made it his goal (writing in the third person again) to "study and read all he can." He stocked the Christian Doctrine Association's reading room with piles of party newspapers. In doing so, Michael Campbell joined practically every other politically active young person in the nation. Independent reading of the partisan press almost always heralded an interest in politics. Most young Americans even followed a similar pattern in their reading. Nationally prominent, ideologically aggressive papers like the *New York Tribune* or *New York Herald* framed partisan battles, the lurid, violent, immensely popular *National Police Gazette* heightened emotions, and the local press personalized national issues.[271]

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[270] Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Rodney Hessinger, *Seduced, Abandoned, and Reborn: Visions of Youth in Middle-Class America*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

[271] Horace Greeley and Whitelaw Reid's *New York Tribune* politicized more young Americans than any other paper. Its mass availability, its focus on societal progress, and Greeley's deliberate appeals to the young made it an unparalleled tool for recruiting Whigs and Republicans. The Democratic Party never fielded a publication of similar power. For examples of young readers politicized by the *Tribune* see Lester Ward, *Young Ward's Diary,* Ed. Bernhard J. Stern, (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1935), 74; Benjamin Brown Foster, *Down East Diary*, Ed. Charles H. Foster**,** (Orono, ME: University of Maine at Orono Press, 1975), 110; James Witham, *Fifty years on the Firing line: My part in the farmers' movement***,** (Chicago: Privately Published, 1924), 6; Rasmus

This combination of reading and religion played a key role in Michael Campbell's political initiation. As he linked the competitive, shrill, entertaining partisan press with the camaraderie offered by membership in religious associations, he began to see politics as the antidote to his social worries. Perhaps a more rewarding one than nights spent at the gymnasium.

Michael was sixteen during the 1876 presidential campaign, which he observed as an amused spectator. He attended flag raisings, but, like most children, viewed such events as something external and distant. By the 1880 campaign, however, Michael Campbell needed politics. In the intervening four years he faced rejection after rejection, attended his father's funeral, worried about his masculinity, won friends in semi-partisan clubs, and read up on the political battles of the day. By the time James Garfield's Republicans faced off against Winfield Scott Hancock's Democrats, "the poor boy" Michael Campbell was ready to take a side.

He became, predictably, a Democrat. He was an urban, laboring Catholic – a natural Jacksonian – and his Uncle Pat already worked in the New Haven Democratic machinery. Michael made some halfhearted efforts to explain his support for the party. Mostly, he harped on the Republicans' defense of Chinese immigration.[272] Though there were, according to the 1880 Census, fewer than 200 Chinese people in all of Connecticut, and Michael Campbell was himself an immigrant, the anti-Chinese propaganda spoke to him most strongly. Driven into politics by economic uncertainties, many young Americans saw immigrants as rivals for entry-level jobs, and also complained that adult

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Bjorn Anderson, *Life Story of Rasmus Bjorn Anderson*, (Madison, WI: Privately Published, 1915), 40.

[272] Michael F. Campbell, October 31, 1880; November 1, 1880, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT.

migrants could vote while native-born youths had to wait.[273] Nativist mutterings run as a leitmotif through many young Americans' writings during the age of popular politics, even, apparently, for the Irish-born Michael Campbell.[274] But ultimately he picked his party based on family connections, years before making these claims.

Michael bounded into party politics as the 1880 campaign took off. After attending a Democratic rally and evidently liking what they saw, Michael and his brother eagerly enlisted in the James E. English Phalanx, a local political club named for Connecticut's wealthy former governor and senator. The night after they joined, the Campbell brothers stepped out in their first procession, parading through the heart of "one the largest crowds I've ever witnessed."[275] This almost immediate transition from on-looking nobody to proud political demonstrator helps explain what young Americans got from public democracy.

He rose higher still. The following Friday evening, Michael and James set out on the short walk from their Franklin street house to Wooster Square, crossing an unmarked boundary between their immigrant neighborhood and one of the wealthiest sections of New Haven. The brothers climbed the steps of former Governor James English's cream-

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[273] Albion Winegar Tourgée, *Letter to a King*, (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1888), 43; James Isaac Vance, *The Young Man Foursquare*, (New York: F.H. Revell Co. 1894), 69-70.

[274] Roberts, *Buckeye Schoolmaster*, 53; Charles W. Plummer, May 30, 1844, Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia PA; Clay W. Anderson to William G. Beatty, October 27 1855, *Life and Letters of Judge Thomas J. Anderson and Wife*; George Templeton Strong, *Diary: Young Man in New York, 1835-1849*, Ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, (New York: Macmillan Press, 1952), 94; Young Men's Fillmore & Donelson Association, "An Address from the Young Men's Fillmore & Donelson Association of Boston to the Young Men of Massachusetts," 1856, Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress; "Young America," *Semi-Weekly Raleigh Register*, August 16, 1856.

[275] Michael F. Campbell, August 24, 1880, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT.

colored Italianate mansion. The established politician, one of the most powerful in the state's history, welcomed the nervous young factory workers into his home. Michael Campbell had a meeting with the governor.

Inside, beyond the three-story spiral staircase, settled in one of the fifteen-foot tall, marble-lined reception rooms, Michael, James, and the Governor discussed possible designs the English Phalanx uniform. The cut of a cape, the appropriate shade of gray, the style a cap, whether to wear plaid pants or striped slacks: political clubs weighed each minute detail. Governor English promised Michael one hundred dollars – several months' pay at the factory – to buy outfits for sixty men. Michael Campbell, so nervous about his appearance, his authority, and his prospects, a young man who could not win an apprenticeship or get a raise or gain five pounds, felt elated by his sudden political importance. Floor-to-ceiling mirrors lined the reception rooms of English's mansion, did Michael see himself in one, the scrawny "poor boy" shaking the hand of the wealthiest, most powerful man he would ever meet?[276]

Glancing at the same reflection, Governor English would not have seen an equal. The English Phalanx's mission clearly stated that it was expected to "turn out on

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[276] Michael F. Campbell, August 27, 1880 and September 4, 1880, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT. Information on the James E. English House, a New Haven architectural icon designed by the famous Henry Austin, was drawn from Henry Austin Papers, Beinicke Rare Book Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT; and from discussion with the house's current occupants, Maresca Funeral Home.
Michael McGerr makes excellent use of this meeting between Michael Campbell and James English in *The Decline of Popular Politics*, to show the relatively accessible style of popular politics during its height. His impressive work does not, however, situate this meeting in the context of Michael Campbell's larger insecurities and ambitions. Not only did Campbell win a surprising degree of access to Governor English, as McGerr shows, but he did so because of the young uncertainties that bedeviled the rest of his life.
Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, *The American North 1865-1928*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 12-22.

occasions when demanded by the Democratic committee."[277] From Governor English's perspective, this was a top-down tool to win an important campaign. But to Michael Campbell, the political club offered a higher and faster ascent than any of his other bids for self-improvement. Within a week of joining the Phalanx he had paraded in public and met privately with its namesake. Over the next three months, he attended six club meetings, held two private conferences with Governor English, and marched in ten processions. Compare this with Michael's more intimate affairs, such as his seventeen month-long bid to win a small raise at the factory, and young Americans' use of politics suddenly makes a lot of sense.

Neither new uniforms nor meetings with governors could resolve the social and economic forces that blocked Michael's path to manhood. Eventually he found success, winning an important promotion and bragging, in his diary, about being assigned "quite a large charge for a young 'Irish' fellow."[278] Later, the 1910 Census finds fifty-year-old Michael with many of the prizes he yearned for as a younger man: a job as a mechanical engineer (he always loved to "talk scientifics"), a wife, and five children. Political activism at age twenty did not deliver any of these goals, but it did offer him a hint of importance, no matter how external or temporary, at the point when his worries seemed overwhelming.

Michael Campbell followed the same pattern as courting and wandering young people, bringing public politics to the aid of private identities. Like the courting teens, Anna Ridgely and Annie Youmans, he used partisanship to facilitate a social exchange,

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[277] Michael F. Campbell, August 23, 1880, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT

[278] Michael F. Campbell, June 29, 1881, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT.

repurposing exterior events as intimate tools. Like the wandering James Witham, his political involvement won him the attention of important adults. Grasping for maturity in the shaken nineteenth century, young men and women used the extroverted world of politics to achieve small internal victories.

This use of politics inverts the equation established in childhood. For children, democratic participation grew outwards from the private and familial to the public and national. Parents, teachers and peers pushed children into party allegiance without explaining what it meant. By their late teens, young people began to use democracy in exactly the opposite way, dragging partisan events into their intimate concerns. Striving, uncertain, go-ahead eighteen-year-olds found some personal relevance in the immigration of Chinese workers to America, or the place of slavery in the union, or the relationship between businessmen and farmers. By age twenty-one, most Americans had received a thorough but contradictory education about the role of politics, making it impossible to distinguish where party life ended and private life began.

I am 21 Years of Age to day

The uncertainties of nineteenth-century American youth had a kind of miasmic weight that seemed inescapable at the time, but eludes historians today. One moment in young Americans' lives, however, crystallizes the shift from frustrated ambition to excited politics. Young people best explained the relationship on their birthdays.

For Americans between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one, birthdays most often provoked negative reflections on failures and false starts. Historian Howard Chudacoff has shown that the "Happy Birthday Song" did not emerge until the twentieth century, as

part of the move towards age-separation that celebrated birthdays as a tool for social categorization.[279] Though young people in the nineteenth century sometimes received gifts, most felt that their birthdays were anything but happy. Usually, they marked the day with comments such as: "I am now eighteen and my feeling is regret – sincere regret," "Nineteen years of my unprofitable life are gone," and "My birthday – How much I feel to-day my own utter insignificance."[280] Such castigations did not resemble more modern concerns about growing old, but rather show worries about failure to be further along the path to adulthood.

In the face of all these melancholy anniversaries, one date stands out. Though young Americans bemoaned their failings on their seventeenth or twentieth birthdays, they reveled in their twenty-firsts. Young men in particular used proud, triumphant, republican, and nationalistic language to mark that anniversary. Charles Plummer, an Evangelical street preacher with a dramatic flair, proclaimed "All Hail, I am 21 Years of Age to day, Thanks be to God! The Laws of the Land declare me to be a man and a Citizen!"[281] Even Michael Campbell, so prone to moping and carping, announced: "Today is an important day in my life no doubt for on to-day I am to commence my career as a man and not as a boy…for on this beautiful day in may I have completed my

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[279] Chudacoff, *How Old Are You,* 117.
[280] Chloe Bridgman Conant Bierce, *Journal and Biological Notice of Chloe B. Conant Bierce*, (Cincinnati: Elm Street Printing Col, 1869). 98; Susan Allibone, July 1835, *A Life Hid With Christ in God,* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1856), 46-49; Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, April 1852, *Secret Eye: The Journal of Elle Gerturde Clanton Thomas, 1848-1889*, Ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 103; Charlotte L. Forten Grimké, August 1854, *The Journals of Charlotte Forten Grimké*, Ed. Brenda Stevenson, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 96.
[281] Charles W. Plummer, March 29, 1842, Pennsylvania Historical Society, Philadelphia PA.

twenty one years in this world."[282] While young men looked backwards on other birthdays, considering mistakes they had made or paths they might have taken, on their twenty-first they looked forwards to adulthood and citizenship.[283]

The Union Army veteran, Radical Republican, and civil rights activist Albion Winegar Tourgée best articulated the political weight of turning twenty-one. In his book *Letters to a King*, he implored young men not to lose interest in politics – as enthusiasm began to wane in the late 1880s – but to locate their manhood in democratic participation. Writing to a fictional young adult, Tourgée announced: "This is your 21st birthday. Yesterday you were an infant; to-day you are a man." Turning twenty-one meant more than manhood, Tourgée went on, "Yesterday you were a subject; to-day you are a sovereign." The political system coronated young men; the nation, Tourgée wrote, "enjoins you to *be a king!"*[284]

With one enduring act, twenty-one-year-old men could put their frustrating pasts, their uncertain ambitions, and so many failed birthdays behind them. All they had to do was vote.

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[282] Michael F. Campbell, May 7, 1881, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT; John M. Roberts, *Buckeye Schoolmaster*, 93.
[283] Young women were denied the same rite of passage at twenty-one, and remained perpetual minors in the eyes of the state. They did, however, enthusiastically encourage the twenty-one-year old men in their lives.
[284] Tourgée, *Letter to a King*, 13, 36, 34.

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My Virgin Vote

J.J. knew the river would be cold. His horse probably knew it too. By November, western Nebraska's North Platte hovered somewhere between a liquid and a solid, with broad wings of slush and drifting floes amid the sandbars. But the young cowboy had a mission that took precedence over warm breeches or dry boots. It was election day, 1884, and J.J. McCarthy had a ballot box to deliver. So he steered his old buckskin horse into the North Platte, its flailing hooves splintering the thin ice that lined the banks. Together they battled across the wide, shallow, freezing current, pushing towards the far shore, three-quarters of a mile away. J.J. was right, it was cold, but he would not let his virgin vote go uncounted.[285]

A few hours earlier John J. McCarthy cast his first vote, along with thirteen other employees of the Ogallala Land and Cattle Company. The cowboys were all first-time voters, but a thorough upbringing in American political culture had taught them how to make out ballots and prepare a poll book. The problem was that they lived on the isolated Keystone ranch, on the far side of the North Platte from the town of Ogallala. To the north stretched a choppy sea of mysterious sand dunes; J.J. and his partners were the first and only voters in their desolate precinct. But someone had to get their votes to the county clerk in Ogallala. So McCarthy, a talkative Irish immigrant and an ardent young Democrat, volunteered. J.J. threw the ballot box over his shoulder and set out for town.[286]

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[285] John J. McCarthy, "When I first voted the Democratic Ticket," collected by Bessie Jollensten, October 19, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project.

[286] McCarthy, "When I first voted the Democratic Ticket," American Life Histories.

A few hours later, a wet, cold, exhilarated McCarthy trotted into Ogallala. That "lively burg" of seven hundred was as rough and partisan as J.J.'s ride had been. A key railhead on the Union Pacific, Ogallala drew pioneers and troublemakers from the East, many of them Union Army veterans and strident Republicans. It was also the northern terminus of the Texas trail, and Democratic, former Confederate cowboys warily rubbed shoulders with hostile locals.[287] So when J.J. appeared on election day, bearing votes for Grover Cleveland, the Democratic candidate, the local Republican paper made a disdainful note of it. The *Ogallala Reflector* praised the "wet and bedraggled messenger" for the risks he took in bringing in the vote, but sniped that politics like J.J.'s "will bring ruin to all American industries."[288]

McCarthy refused to let the snide editor dim his glory. The twenty-four-year-old cowboy considered his ride through the North Platte a kind of baptism in the waters of politics. Despite an adventurous life, begun in County Cork and ended on the High Plains, his enthusiasm never "run higher than it did on that memorable day when I cast my first ballot."[289]

Though his ride was unique, McCarthy's experience connects him to millions of more pedestrian first-time voters. He went out of his way (and through an icy river) to vote, and believed that the ungainly ballot box strapped to his back contained a new, masculine, adult identity. Connecting his virgin vote to an earlier rite of passage, J.J.

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[287] Robert R. Mahnken, "Ogallala – Nebraska's Cowboy Capital," *Nebraska History,* 28, (April – June 1947); *Compendium of History, Reminiscence, and Biography of Western Nebraska,*(Chicago: Alden Publishing Company, 1909).
[288] McCarthy, American Life Histories; *Ogallala Reflector*, November 4, 1884.
[289] Ibid.; John J. McCarthy, "A speech made by J.J. McCarthy at Kearney, Nebr.," collected by Bessie Jollensten, October 19, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project.

McCarthy wrote: "that first election was like my first pair of trousers, I shall always remember."[290]

Americans agreed that a first vote promised passage. Most considered it a meaningful transition from boyhood to manliness. Younger men looked forward to their first time as a moment of ascent; older men looked back at theirs as a basis of stability. A young man's first ballot granted passage between two levels; it was the ceiling of youth and the floorboards of manhood.

The day a young man cast that vote unfolded in the awkward crawlspace between those floors. Whether splashing through the North Platte, staggering to the polls with half-drunk friends, or facing down partisan challengers at the voting window, male minors became active citizens somewhere in the course of that day. How they headed out to vote, Americans believed, had deep consequences in their own lives, in the life of the parties, and in the future of democracy.

Getting Sleeked Up

It began with a mustache. Or the shadow of a goatee. Or muttonchops, side-lilacs, a dashing Van Dyke, or a stern Hulihee. As November began, and young men prepared to lose their political virginity, many asserted their manhood through nervous accessories. Evidence of the coming rite blossomed throughout American society with seasonable predictability in boastful new mustaches sprouting under "twenty-onesters'" noses.[291] Most virgin voters did not haphazardly stumble upon their first election; instead they

[290] McCarthy, "When I first voted the Democratic Ticket," American Life Histories.
[291] "The Independent Twenty-Onesters," *Daily Evening Bulletin***,** August 17, 1869; Albion Winegar Tourgée, *Letter to a King*, (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1888), 37.

visualized their political initiation, and prepared themselves to look the part they hoped to play.

There is no better guide through the strange rituals of the virgin voter than a funny little book of cartoons produced during the 1860 campaign. Charles Leland, a folklorist who considered himself "a scholar and a wizard," wrote *Pipps Among the Wide Awakes* to recruit young men to the Republican Party's political clubs.[292] His story of naïve young Mr. Pipps' efforts to cast his first vote explored the thrills and doubts of the archetypal virgin voter. Leland brought a sparkling wit and an anthropologist's eye to the rituals of new voters, as well as an arsenal of 1860s slang, from "Rip Sam!" to "Go it lemons!" His sharp insights into Pipps' preparations help dissect the rites and customs of casting that first vote.

In *Pipps among the Wide Awakes,* Charles Leland introduces his main character admiring himself in a mirror. Pipps announces that, because "the horns are coming out under my nose," he could finally start voting.[293] Pre-election stubble made bold, self-conscious claims to masculinity and citizenship. The age of popular politics coincided, almost exactly, with the high tide of American beardedness.[294] Although this was part of a larger international trend, many young Americans linked beards and ballots. Historian Richard Bensel points out that new voters hoped their beards would make them look old enough to participate, but there was more at work in virgin voters' new beards.

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[292] Charles G. Leland*, Memoirs,* (London: William Heinemann, 1894), 13.
[293] Charles G. Leland, *Pipps Among the Wide Awakes,* (New York: Wevill & Chapin, 1860), 1.
[294] For more on the history of American facial hair, see Gerald Carson, "Hair Today, Gone Tomorrow," *American Heritage,* 17, (February 1966).

Young men grew out their muttonchops in response to the common dismissal of first-time voters as "beardless boys."[295] Partisan editors frequently used this epithet to write off novice rivals. Connecting the dots between facial hair and political stability, Chicago's *Daily Inter Ocean* condemned an upstart Democratic faction as "Men without hearthstones, or responsibility, beardless youths who wallow in the mire of dive politics."[296] The *Inter Ocean*, and many other publications, stressed a strict division between irresponsible, baby-faced youths and manly leaders with full beards and familial hearthstones. Virgin voters hoped a little "facial foliage" might help them transition into the latter group.[297]

Such aspirations went beyond pre-election stubble. First-time voters notoriously "sleeked up" before casting that ballot, which seemed to occur "at the precise age when young men pay particular attention to tooth brushes."[298] After the 1876 election, the *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel* chuckled at a stereotype of the average "maiden voter." A typical young man, the *Daily Sentinel* joked, awoke hours before dawn, fussed with his appearance, blustered at the breakfast table, argued politics with his father, dismissed his sister's views, and spent the day preening around the polls, his pockets stuffed with extra

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[295] "State Legislature Remarks," *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette*, February 24, 1843; "Riot," *Liberator*, December 20, 1850; "Political Painters," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 12, 1876; "The Ball Opens," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat,* June 20, 1876; "Latent Forces and How to Develop Them," *The Independent*, February 14, 1895.
[296] "To Anti-Gang Democrats," *Daily Inter Ocean*, March 26, 1893.
[297] "About Facial Foliage," *Daily Inter Ocean*, July 16, 1893.
[298] This quote, and the claim that young men's political interests peaked during their "hair-oil period of existence" comes from a story titled "The Magic Mirror," published in the *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier*. Even though the story described the experiences of a twenty-one year old prince in Persia, he nonetheless casts his virgin vote. Apparently, the experience of voting was considered so ubiquitous that even young men ruled by the Qajar dynasty practiced the rite. "The Magic Mirror," *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier*, May 13, 1868.

ballots.[299] Young voters put into their physical appearance exactly what they hoped to get out of voting, affecting the manhood they wished to achieve.

While young men fluffed their beards, donned new hats, and headed off to vote, their sisters and wives observed with a combination of support, pride, and quiet resentment.[300] Frances Willard, the future Temperance and Women Rights leader, certainly felt the latter emotion as a girl, watching her brother prepare to vote in 1856. Willard recalled "how proud he seemed as he dressed up in his best Sunday clothes and drove off in the big wagon with father and the hired men to vote."[301] Unlike Willard, who wished that she too could cast a ballot for the Free Soil party, most American women accepted the ritual as a sacred preserve of men. Georgia belle Ella Gertrude Thomas certainly encouraged her fiancée to vote, and noted with palpable disappointment that he was too sick to drag himself to the polls on election day.[302] Even Sarah Ann Ross Pringle, a Ku Klux Klan supporter in Reconstruction-era Texas, sent her brothers off to vote, each menacingly "furnished with something to shoot with."[303]

Young women watched as the men in their lives prepared to vote, but party activists refused to sit back and wait. Instead, they introduced a sub-species of political clubs, popular from the 1840s through the 1890s, to appeal to "those who

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[299] "The young man who deposited his maiden vote on Nov. 7 was easily recognized," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, December 11, 1876.
[300] Leland, *Pipps among the Wide Awakes,* 10.
[301] Frances E. Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years: The Autobiography of and American Woman*, (Chicago: Women's Temperance Publication Association, H.J. Smith & Co., 1889), 69-70.
[302] Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, November, 1852, in *Secret Eye: The Journal of Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas*, Ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1990).
[303] Sarah Ann Ross Pringle, interviewed by Effie Cowan, McLennan County, Texas, (Undated), American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers Project.

give their first Presidential vote."[304] Big city machines particularly stressed these "First Vote Clubs," hoping to attract lonely new arrivals who "do not wish to go alone to the polls."[305] Party agents recruited for such clubs in the boarding-houses and pool halls where new arrivals congregated. In Milwaukee in the 1880s, the Republican party used such clubs aggressively, even offering free bicycles to young men who recruited at least seventy-eight new members. Milwaukee Republicans advertized one such club to gather new voters to their ornate headquarters, then employed their official Young Men's Republican club – clad in dashing white capes and bearing bright lanterns – to shepherd the bewildered novices to the polls.[306]

Whether with friends or in a club, virgin voters converged on the town squares, warehouses, or saloons where voting would take place early on the much-awaited day. On their way they passed walls "papered three deep with humbug, banners, and inscriptions," pre-election meetings reverberating from every grog house, and muddy fleets of farmers' buggies, drawn from the far edges of a precinct. A few secreted pocket revolvers or knives under their early November jackets, more clutched flasks or growlers, but most focused on their thin, unassuming paper ballots.[307]

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[304] "Young Voters at Cleveland's Home," *San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin,* September 6, 1884.
[305] "Classified," *New York Times* November 4, 1864.
[306] "Their First Vote," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 29, 1888; "Campaign Uniforms," *Milwaukee Daily Journal*, September 15, 1888; "Campaign Clubs" *The Milwaukee Journal*, May 26, 1892.
[307] George Templeton Strong, *Diary: Young Man in New York, 1835-1849*, Ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, (New York: Macmillan Press, 1952),151; Diary of William Saunders Brown, October 30 through November 10, 1844, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville, VA; John Hunton, September 5, 1880, Diary, Special Collections, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA; Emil R. Kaiser, interviewed by Francis Donovan Thomaston, December 15, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project.

How a young man stepped out to vote said much about his style and his values. In "Mahatma" Lomasney's Eighth Ward in Boston, the budding politico James Michael Curley strolled quietly to the polls from party headquarters behind an old tobacco shop. The lean, sly, conservatively dressed young Curley affected the nonchalant style of the boss he hoped to become on his first trip to the polls, puffing on a cigar, his eyes shielded beneath a grey derby.[308] In lower Manhattan, the elite, sarcastic George Templeton Strong headed out with more apprehension, wary of the "wretched, filthy, bestial-looking Italians and Irish…the very scum and dregs of human nature" that supposedly populated his polling place.[309]

Most first-time voters were more exuberant. Nervous twenty-one-year-olds arrived in lively packs, said to blush all the way to the polls. Virgin voters were likely to vote in groups, often joined by brothers, fathers, and friends, and analysis of poll books shows that many excited new voters dragged along older acquaintances who had never before participated. Young immigrants, these same poll books suggest, rallied together before heading out to vote among the natives.[310]

As new voters neared the polling place, the sounds of a typical American election drowned out any hope of quiet reflection. Often, citizens heard drums first, their heavy beat resounding off distant buildings and exciting a martial, competitive spirit.[311] As

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[308] James Michael Curley, *I'd Do it Again*, (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 44-47.
[309] Strong, *Diary: Young Man in New York,* 94.
[310] Newtown Township Poll Books, Camden County, New Jersey, November 4, 1856, March 11, 1857, March 10, 1858, November 6, 1860, in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; "Lincoln Wide Awakes," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* May 26, 1860; "Wide-Awakes," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* May 29, 1860; "Their First Vote," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel,* July 29, 1888.
[311] Drums were used with particularly loathsome effect by white southerners during Reconstruction and Redemption, as an advance warning to would-be black voters. Older

voters got closer, they made out the clash and squeak of competing brass bands. Each party would field its own ensemble, causing musicians to favor volume over harmony. Some voters loved these street orchestras, while others complained that their blaring music as "very trying to musical ears."[312]

Now within blocks of the polling place, young voters picked up the sound of many men, some of them deeply drunk, bellowing campaign songs. Parties put a great deal of money into printing political songbooks, and tended to prefer the low blow and the easy-to-holler.[313] The superficial messages of such songs changed little over the decades. In 1840, Whigs took aim at Martin Van Buren – the second shortest president in U.S. history – shouting: "Little Van's a used up man." Forty-eight years later, Republicans targeted the obese Grover Cleveland – nicknamed "Uncle Jumbo" – in much

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Democrats even moved to suppress their use by excited young Redeemers. U.S. Senate. Recent Election in Mississippi, 44th Congress, 2nd Session, 1877.

[312] Carl Schurz, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz: Vol 2, 1852-1863*, (New York: The McClure Co, 1907), 194; August Segerberg, September 28, 1884, *Letters from the Promised Land: Swedes in America 1840 -1915*, Ed. H. Arnold Barton, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1975); Emil R. Kaiser, interviewed by Francis Donovan Thomaston, December 15, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project; Sally McCarty Pleasants, *Old Virginia Days and Ways, Reminiscences of Mrs. Sally McCarty Pleasants*, (Menasha: George Banta Publishing Company, 1916), 6; Anna Ridgely, April 8, 1860; "A Girl in The Sixties," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, Ed. Octavis Roberts Corneau, 2, (October 1929)*;* Letters from Clay W. Anderson to William G. Beatty, October 27 1855; in *Life and Letters of Judge Thomas J. Anderson and Wife,* Ed. James House Anderson and Nancy Anderson, (Cincinnati: Press of F. J. Heer, 1904).

[313] For information on the rise of campaign slogans in the 1840 race, see Gunderson, *The Log Cabin Campaign,* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1957), 123. For other nasty slogans, see F. A. Wagler, "Govr. Polk's march and quick step," (Baltimore: Geo. Willig Jr., 1844); A. Tennessean, "Hickory waltz and gallopade," (New York: John F. Nunns, 1844); John F. Goneke, "James K. Polk's grand march and quick step," (Philadelphia: G. Willig, 1844), All collected from "Music for a Nation: American Sheet Music, 1820-1860," Library of Congress, http://www.loc.gov/ and Brooklyn Young Republican Club, "Young Republican Campaign Song Book," Compiled by Henry Camp, (Brooklyn: Harrison & Morton Press, 1888), Library Company of Philadelphia, PA

the same way, warbling: "Grover Cleveland's collar is an extraordinary size, so many men mistake it for a corset in disguise."[314]

The great clanking whir of the polling place, the loudest machine in nineteenth-century America, distinguished full citizens from everyone else. African-Americans, for one, avoided the scene. Where black men could vote, they often visited the polls early in the morning, to dodge the crowds of white men that coalesced over the course of the day. In New Jersey, black men often made up the first few names in polls books in the morning, and during Reconstruction black voters in South Carolina, Mississippi, and Texas assembled off-site and arrived at the polls together.[315] Women and children heard elections too, mostly confined at home, listening apprehensively as the concussive drums rattled their windowpanes. Everyone within earshot knew a momentous rite was taking place, ringing loudest in the ears of those considered full citizens.

Young voters felt released, finally, from the seclusion experienced by all but adult men. Getting sleeked up and heading to the polls enunciated their membership in the American political nation. Virgin voters had prepared for this moment – with childhoods of confusing, thrilling party instruction, with awkward teenage years filled with the promise that voting brought certainty, and most recently with hopeful mustaches, stiff new collars, and long nights at wild rallies. Now, at twenty-one or twenty-three,

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[314] Brooklyn Young Republican Club, *Young Republican Campaign Song Book*, Compiled Henry Camp, (Brooklyn: Harrison & Morton Press, 1888), 34.
[315] See Newtown Township Poll Books, Camden County, New Jersey, November 4, 1856, March 11, 1857, March 10, 1858, November 6, 1860, in the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; also U.S. House, Digest of Election Cases, 47th Congress, 2nd Session, 1879, Miscellaneous Document No. 35; U.S. Senate. Recent Election in Mississippi, 44th Congress, 2nd Session, 1877; Sarah Ann Ross Pringle, interviewed by Effie Cowan, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers Project.

young men finally turned a corner, ballot in hand, ready to join the throng of chanting, jostling partisans.

Like a good wife's virtue

First-time voters were propelled by more than their own aspirations. As they approached the polling place, a heavy consideration weighed on their minds. In the weeks before an election, young men absorbed many messages – some of them quite shrill – about the meaning of their first vote. Above the miscellaneous clatter of catchy slogans, nasty rhymes, and scurrilous implications, a single phrase lingered in their ears, calling them to cast their "virgin vote."

During the excited 1856 campaign, for instance, the dissolute old poet N. P. Willis published a widely read letter dramatically proclaiming that, after fifty years of ignoring politics, "I shall give my 'virgin vote' for Fremont."[316] Known more for his dandyish style than his politics – he stood well over six feet tall and was fond of high beaver hats, flamboyant capes, embroidered vests, and literary gossip – Willis' declaration did not receive the respect he had hoped. Lydia Maria Child, the women's rights activist with a lightning wit, snapped "it was pleasant to learn that he had anything 'virgin' left to swear by."[317]

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[316] Nathaniel Parker Willis, "Letter from N. P. Willis About the Presidency," *New York Evening Post,* October 4, 1856.

[317] Child went on: "What a Rip! To lie sleeping fifty years, dreaming of kid gloves, embroidered vests, and perfumed handkerchiefs, taking it for granted that his country was all the while going forward in a righteous and glorious career. Isn't it too bad that such parasol-holders should have the right to vote, while earnest souls like you and me must await the result in agonizing inaction? Things look squally; don't they, dear?" Lydia Maria Child to Sarah Blake Sturgis Shaw, October 27, 1856, in *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, Ed. Wendell Phillips, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1882), 85.

Child's joke worked because Americans did not use "virgin" lightly. In a society that rarely spoke about sex (newlyweds' diary entries were masterworks of evasion), the term signaled the consequence of the rite of passage. Discussing attitudes towards young men's actual virginity, historian Carroll Smith-Rosenberg writes: "A single mistake, an unchecked lustful impulse, and an early grave lay before him."[318] No wonder campaigners and voters chose this metaphor. Rather than a bad case of syphilis, parties suggested that a miscast vote might trap a young voter with the wrong party. The concept of a "virgin vote" spoke to the combination of commencement and commitment, excitement and danger, youth and maturity, that casting a vote and sexual initiation had in common.

Most believed that the first vote cast, like that first sexual experience, had long-term implications. On the one hand, an aspiring voter was supposed to anticipate his first vote "as the event of his life;" on the other, older men were said to "refer to it in after years with pride and pleasure."[319] Recognizing this, campaigners and voters used language heavy with innuendo. During the 1876 presidential election, the aggressively partisan *Pomeroy's Democrat* warned young voters to be as careful with their virgin vote

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[318] Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Sex as Symbol in Victorian Purity; An Ethnohistorical Analysis of Jacksonian America." *Turning Points: Historical and Sociological Essays on the Family,* Ed. John Demos, Sarane Spence Boocock, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). The censorious rhetoric could be very different from the actual realities of prematiral sex for many young Americans. See Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Rereading Sex*: *Battles Over Sexual Knowledge and Suppression in Nineteenth-Century America*, (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2003); Patricia Cline Cohen, Timothy J. Gilfoyle, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *The Flash Press*: *Sporting Male Weeklies in 1840s New York*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

[319] Walter Marion Raymond, *Rebels of the New South*, (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co, 1905), 151; "The First Vote," *Vermont Patriot*, August 11, 1860; "Young Men!" *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, July 03, 1860; "The First Vote - Young Men, Start Right," *Daily Ohio Statesman*, September 13, 1860.

"as a good wife is of her virtue."[320] Virtue – sexual or political – could be established or forfeited by that first time.

Losing one's political virginity was dangerous, but it was also too important to avoid. Those who failed to cast their virgin vote, or to stick with their initial choice, were mocked as perpetual boys, effeminate "Miss Nancies," indecisive "old ladies," sexless "neuters," or – as Lydia Maria Child labeled N.P. Willis – "parasol-holders."[321] While non-voters were undernourished milquetoasts, voting made men "solid."[322] As E. Anthony Rotundo explained in *American Manhood*, the central difference between boyhood and manhood was the self-restrained stability that adult men were supposed to embody. The best way for a twenty-one-year-old to distinguish himself from wild boys and uncertain teens was to declare, with his virgin vote, the virtuous constancy that marriage also indicated. If cast wrong, a virgin vote meant "political defilement," but if handled with manly steadfastness, a young man's first time conferred manhood.[323]

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[320] "What is Democracy? To the Young Voters of the United States," *Pomeroy's Democrat,* June 3, 1876.

[321] John Worrell Northrop, May 1861, *Chronicles from the Diary of a War Prisoner in Andersonville,* (Wichita: J.W. Northrop, 1904), Lydia Maria Child to Sarah Burgis Shaw Shaw, October 27, 1856, in *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, Ed. Wendell Phillips, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1882), 8; Albion Winegar Tourgée, *Letters to a King*, (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1888), 49. A contemporary reader might think that phrases like "virgin vote" and especially "maiden vote" feminize young men, but there is little evidence of such implication. In fact, Americans often used language with female connotations to discuss men's virginity; pornographic books, for instance, even refer to men as losing their "maidenhead." American culture was simply far more concerned with women's virginity, and lacked male-gendered terms to discuss it for young men. Anonymous, *Maidenhead Stories, Told By a Set of Joyous Students*, (New York: Erotica Biblion Society, 1897); Howard Chudacoff, *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 62.

[322] In cartoons, the mere act of casting a vote seemed to physically inflate a young man, and one political satire – *Solid For Mulhooly* – played with the idea of weighty partisans. Rufus Edmonds Shapley, *Solid for Mulhooly*, (New York: G.W. Carleton & Co., 1881).

[323] "The Young Man's First Vote," *Rocky Mountain News*, November 1, 1890.

The term "virgin vote" did not come into common use until the age of popular politics proved its staying power. Americans only began to say it frequently in the late 1840's; N.P. Willis still felt it necessary to use quotation marks in 1856. The fact that it took a few years for "virgin vote" to catch on hints at the metaphor's meaning to young voters.

In 1840, young people's political interest looked more like a momentary burst of enthusiasm than the beginning of a six-decade-long cultural edifice. More first-time voters participated in 1840 than in any other election in U.S. history – nearly forty percent of all voters – but no one knew how they would behave four years later.[324] So in 1844, Democratic campaigners worked to assure young men who had chosen the Whigs that they could still rectify their mistake. Particularly in Ohio, Democrats played upon the camp revival model and organized "Renunciation Meetings." There, former Whigs testified that they had been "carried away by the whirlwind of blind enthusiasm" in 1840, but had been born again in the church of James K. Polk.[325] This tactic failed, and the Whigs won Ohio, a large, doubtful state. The same approach flopped in Tennessee and North Carolina as well. Activists began to realize that a first vote was not a temporary fling but instead announced a sustained identity. Virgin voters were more monogamous than partisans had thought.

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[324] Michael F. Holt, "The Election of 1840, Voter Mobilization, and the Emergence of the Second Party System," *A Master's Due: Essays in Honor of David Herbert Donald*, (Baton Rogue: Louisiana State Press, 1985), 16.

[325] "Hurrah for the Young Democracy," *Weekly Ohio Statesman*, May 29, 1844. For more on "renunciations meetings" in Ohio, see "Our Glorious Hickory Club," *Ohio Statesman,* November 29, 1843; "A Movement among the Young Men," *Scioto Gazette*, September 26, 1844; "Wm. A Neil, Esq," *Daily Ohio Statesman*, October 2, 1850; "Young men who will cast their first vote," *Memphis Enquirer*, December 28, 1843; "Taking the Right Side," W*eekly Raleigh Register, and North Carolina Gazette*, March 8, 1844.

Campaigners met popular talk of "virgin votes" with their own phraseology, more decorous but more forthright. Lecturers, hustlers, and editors all began to warn young voters to "start right." The term, almost unused in publications between 1800 and 1840, flourished alongside "virgin vote" in American speech in the 1840s and '50s. Newspapers screamed some variation of "start right" particularly loudly in the days before a presidential election. On October 30, 1856, Massachusetts' *Pittsfield Sun* demanded of young men: "How are you going to cast your first vote? How begin your political life? There is no event of your life of more importance than this. Begin right. That is everything to you."[326] Four days later and five hundred miles west, campaigners in Cleveland bludgeoned young men at least as bluntly, ordering: "Cast your first presidential vote right! Old America expects Young America to do its duty."[327]

Though the talk of voting "right" seems blatant, partisans put most of their emphasis on the "start" aspect of the phrase. Leaders picked up on virgin voters' view of their first ballot as more than a fling, and stressed the idea that one's political start determined decades of future behavior. Campaigners warned that a young man, casting his first ballot, "is to be ashamed of it or proud of it" for the rest of his life. [328] Young men advanced this rhetoric themselves. James Witham – the traveling farmers' rights radical who argued politics aboard Midwestern trains in the previous chapter – worried

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[326] "The Young Men," *The Pittsfield Sun***,** October 30, 1856.
[327] "Young Men!" *The Daily Cleveland Herald*, November 3, 1856.
[328] "Is Chicago Republican?" *Inter Ocean*, October 25, 1879; *"*To the Young Men of Orleans Co,*" Vermont Patriot*, July 13, 1840; "First Vote," *North American and United States Gazette*, September 17, 1868; "Are the Young Men of West Virginia in Favor of Constitutional Government?" *Wheeling Register*, April 3, 1880; "Voting," *Salt Lake Tribune,* October 30, 1880; "Every Young Man," *Puck,* April 27, 1881

about his first vote, and wondered if, "as a young man with my life all before me, could I afford to take the wrong side?"[329]

So America's new voters and campaigners put aside the language of "renunciation" – as if the parties were false, momentarily enchanting gods – and took up rhetoric of virginity and commencement. This change in the 1840s demonstrates crucial aspects of the era's political culture. Young voters introduced the rhetoric of "virgin vote," but campaigners kept it going with their talk of "starting right." Virgin voters were not simply conned by clever campaigners, but neither were they deaf to partisan harangues. Instead, each side put reciprocal pressure upon the other, shoving each other out the door on election day. And the popularity of "virgin vote" and "start right" demonstrates a settling into the sustained logic of the age of popular politics, in which political virginity and partisan manhood, individual agency and lasting structural power, all met at the polling window.

Tumble up there [330]

The polling place was its own nebula, densest at the center. On the edges, voters ducked into nearby buildings for a nip of whiskey or a glug of cider. Closer in, men hung around in loose constellations, some chatting, some arguing, some paying no attention whatsoever. Rural voters brought their lunch so they could spend all day "hangin' round the polls."[331] Closer still, a broad belt of elbows seemed to sway between a nervous

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[329] James Witham, *Fifty years on the Firing line: My part in the farmers' movement*, (Chicago: Privately Published, 1924), 21.
[330] Leland, *Pipps among the Wide Awakes*, 13.
[331] Richard Franklin Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 20, 58; Emil R. Kaiser, Interviewed by

young voters and the poll judge. That official accepted ballots through the window of a saloon, warehouse, or school selected as the district polling place. It was the sun around which much of American culture revolved.

Hustlers from both parties angled to "challenge" the votes of men approaching the window as ineligible for reasons of age, race, or residency. The goal was to challenge anyone even vaguely suspicious, based on looks, accents, facial hair, or clothing. The system of challenging turned the ground before the window into a gauntlet, where partisans attempted to bar opponents from the ballot box. It offered a dramatic showdown for a first-time voter, the culmination of decades of mounting political agency.

In a society with frequent migration, few government records, and a tangled web of relations, virgin voters struggled to prove they were of age. Many Americans knew their age only vaguely, and even those sure of their specific date of birth had trouble proving it. As a result, voters often answered their challengers with convoluted calculations. One young voter affirmed his age with the help of a witness who remembered seeing his mother, pregnant, at an execution twenty-one years earlier. Another was forced to chronicle the sex life of his mother, reputed to be a prostitute, to convince judges that he was old enough to vote.[332] A third virgin voter calculated his age "from examination of a tombstone."[333] Casting one's virgin vote was often the only time

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Francis Donovan, Thomaston, CT Thursday, December 15, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project; Don and Susie Powers, Interviewed by John William Prosser, Columbia, SC, February 6, 1939, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project.

[332] Bensel's *The American Ballot Box* includes the best investigation of the process of challenging voters. See 93 – 106.

[333] Digest of Election Cases, Cases of Contested Election in the House of Representatives, from 1865 to 1871 Inclusive, 38th Congress, 2nd Session, MRS Doc. No 152 (1870), 620.

in an American man's life that he was required to know exactly how old he was, further affirming the ritual as a moment of adulthood and self-assessment.[334]

First time voters, who believed their ballot would help transform them into men, denounced challenges as "a most exasperating thing."[335] Those with strong roots in a community particularly resented being challenged in front of men they had known since birth. Some objections verged on the ridiculous. One voter in Philadelphia in 1872 identified himself as an employee of a local box factory, to which a feisty challenger pointed to his fancy clothes and suspiciously observed that he dressed "rather tasty for a boxmaker."[336] In *Pipps Among the Wide Awakes*, Charles Leland joked that in casting his first ballot, young Mr. Pipps was "sworn in a little, and sworn at considerably."[337]

Popular accounts of confrontations with challengers often played on the fear that immigrants were perverting American democracy. A suspicious number of writers report being challenged by an "immense Irishman," a "*Ferocious Irishman*," or "fifty Irishmen," whom cartoonists depicted as overgrown gorillas in bulky coats.[338] This fear

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[334] This unique demand – that a young man be able to know and somehow verify his age – sets voting apart from almost all other rituals in nineteenth-century America. Howard Chudacoff has cleverly pointed out the culture's general lack of interest in age separation during this period, but political participation runs against this trend. Howard Chudacoff, *How Old Are You?* Corinne T. Field made this same point in her article "Are Women…All Minors? Women's Rights and the Politics of Aging in the Antebellum United States," *Journal of Women's History*, 12, (Winter 2001), 113-137.

[335] Andrew Dickinson White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickinson White, Volume 1,* (New York: The Century Co., 1904), 74.

[336] *Contested Election, McClure Against Gray, Proceedings of the Committee appointed upon the Petitions of Citizens of the 4th Senatorial District, Contesting the Election of Henry W. Gray*, (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co, 1872), 11.

[337] Leland, *Pipps among the Wide Awakes,* 15.

[338] Robert M. Howard, *Reminiscences,* (Columbus, GA: Gilbert Printing Company, 1912), 7; Leland, *Pipps among the Wide Awakes,* 14; Lyman Abbott, *Reminiscences*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1915), 111. The added fact that many of these

of "gigantic" Irish poll hustlers makes little sense, particularly considering that most Irish immigrants had lived chronically malnourished lives and were probably smaller than the average native-born voter. Stories about having to battle Irish rowdies probably say more about young men's efforts to make their first votes sound heroic than they do about "Irish Democracy."

Not all challenges were baseless. An ever-present minority refused to wait to turn twenty-one to vote. Such underage voting highlights young men's desire to join the adults, as well as Americans' undying love of plucky campaign trickery, but it mostly demonstrates the powerful influence of the specific voting environment. Richard Bensel has convincingly argued that most illegal voting transpired in big cities and on the frontier: in unstable, scrambled environments where young men could get away with it. Casting an underage ballot was most difficult in long-settled rural communities, full of citizens who had known each other for decades. A stranger for a poll judge encouraged mature looking nineteen-year-olds to try to pass; a family friend collecting ballots discouraged such behavior.[339]

The two largest bursts of underage voting help explain why some were allowed to cast ballots prematurely. During the Civil War, many young Union soldiers voted underage in the 1862 and 1864 elections. Leander Stillwell, an eighteen-year-old sergeant from Illinois, recounted his first vote in an army camp in 1862. Stillwell knew he was well underage and had no plans to participate, but an older soldier took him by the arm and marched him to the camp's makeshift polling place: a few hardtack boxes set out

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claims came from places, like rural Alabama and Georgia, where there were hardly any Irish people casts further doubt on such stories.

[339] Bensel*, The American Ballot Box,* 83-96; Diary of an Unknown Resident of Madison County, Virginia, 1852, University of Virginia, Special Collections, Charlottesville, VA.

under a tree. When the suspicious election officers questioned Stillwell as "a mighty young looking voter," his older friend blustered: "It's all right; he's a dam good soldier." Stillwell was allowed to vote for the Republican Party, heavily favored in the ranks. The fact that Stillwell's capable fighting won him permission to vote highlights Americans' linkage of voting and manly acts like soldiering.[340]

The other eruption of illegal voting took place along America's peripatetic frontier. In sodden, dripping tents perched on Sierra Nevada hillsides, in dusty Great Plains outposts with more cattle than voters, and in mossy north woods logging camps with more mosquitoes than voters, young men were often permitted to vote before turning twenty-one.[341] These elections followed a similar pattern as wartime votes. Older men in frontier communities encouraged illegal voting because they needed any

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[340] Leander Stillwell, *The Story of a Common Soldier of Army Life in the Civil War, 1861-1865*, (Frank Hudson Publishing Co, 1920), 96. Diaries and memoirs by many underage soldiers recount voting illegally, and none articulate a sense of shame in doing so. Many Union Prisoners of War even held mock contests on northern election days from Andersonville or other southern prisoners, and they observed no age restrictions. In some cases, Confederate prison guards even facilitated these contests, though they were often chagrined when Lincoln won. Warfare, particularly fought by citizen-soldiers, has always helped enfranchise young men and question age-based voting restrictions. William Bircher, November 1864, in *A Drummer-Boy's Diary*, (St. Paul: St. Paul Book and Stationery Co., 1889), 199; Sim Moak, *The Last of the Mill Creeks*, (Chico: S.N., 1923); John Worrell Northrop, November 1864 in *Chronicles from the Diary of a War Prisoner in Andersonville and Other Military Prisons of the South in 1864*, (Wichita: J.W. Northrop, 1904), 228; Michael Dougherty, November 1864, in *Prison Diary of Michael Dougherty,* (Bristol, PA: C.A. Dougherty, Printer, 1908), 128; Thomas W. Spring Diary, November 8, 1864, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA; Wendell W. Cultice, *Youth's Battle for the Ballot,* (New York: Praeger, 1992).

[341] Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado; or, Adventures in the Path of Empire*, *Volume Two,* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850), 189; Erastus Flavel Beadle, *Ham, Eggs, and Corn Cake: A Nebraska Territory Diary*, Ed. Ronald Naugle, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 76; C.S. Bundy, *Early Days in the Chippewa Valley,* (Menomonie, WI: Flint Douglas Printing Company, 1916), 6.

participants they could find, and because they felt that underage settlers had proven their manhood.

Such voting was crucial in the unsettled, western reaches of the nation, where so many young men gravitated. In 1850, white males between the ages of fifteen and twenty-nine made up more than half of the population of California.[342] Politicians pointed to "the emigration of young voters from the older States to the inviting fields of the Pacific slope," and believed a permissive voting environment might induce young men to put down permanent roots.[343] They also hoped to bolster their numbers at election time, to help along territorial bids for statehood. Local campaigners, especially in California, reached out to teenagers and to non-residents. In the first election held in one Central Valley town, activists lined the San Joaquin river banks, calling passing boatmen to cast their first vote, reasoning that they "were citizens of the world" and "might as well vote here as anywhere."[344]

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[342] White males ages 15-29 made up 53.29% of California residents in 1850. Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990,* Working Paper Series No. 56 (Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau: Washington, D.C. 2002), Accessed March 21, 2013.

[343] James G. Blaine, *Life and Public Services of Hon. James G Blaine*, Ed. James P. Boyd, (Philadelphia: Publishers Union, 1893), 240. State politicians often introduced liberal voting laws in a bid to attract migrants. In the years after America's conquest of California, many local Mexicans were also encouraged to vote, "to give this primitive people their first lesson in the mysteries of American citizenship." Horace Bell, *Reminiscences of a Ranger: Early Times in Southern California,* (Los Angeles: Yarnell, Caystile & Mathes, Printers, 1881), 73; Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado; or, Adventures in the Path of Empire*, *Volume Two,* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850), 189.

[344] Enos Christman, *One Man's Gold: The Letters and Journal of a Forty-Niner*, Ed. Florence Morrow Christman, (New York: Whittlesey House, 1930), 117. Also see Moak, *The Last of the Mill Creeks*; David R. Leeper, *The Argonauts of 'Forty-Nine: Some Recollections of the Plains and of the Diggings*, (South Bend: J.B. Stoll and Company, 1894), Appendix IV; Bell, *Reminiscences of a Ranger*.

Pioneers allowed underage voting on the same logic that gave Sergeant Stillwell a ballot at eighteen. A youth who had proven his manhood had earned political maturity. Tough young settlers – like "dam good soldiers" – deserved to vote. In Placerville, California, eighteen-year-old David R. Leeper excitedly cast his first ballot in 1850, encouraged by a friendly poll judge who felt that "every one that had been able to make his way to the country" should get to vote.[345] In frontier Nebraska, a successful teenaged speculator named Dick Darling was given special permission to vote underage, because "he is considered one of the first pioneers."[346] This special treatment further highlights the link many Americans saw between manliness and voting.

Frontier voting shows the power of America's political culture to replicate itself, across generations and across landmasses. Gold miners in California, feeling physically and emotionally cut off from their birthplaces in Tennessee or Pennsylvania, looked forward to voting as "a refreshing reminiscence of home."[347] The Keystone ranch cowboys voting with J.J. McCarthy domesticated their wild district by holding an election on its soil. Those cowboys were all virgin voters, but managed to cast ballots without any previous experience or official mechanisms, showing that democracy lived in their culture, not in a state apparatus.[348] Often, election organizers even selected a (legal) virgin voter for the honor "of casting the first vote that was ever cast" in a new district.[349] This enthusiasm explains the sustained power of American politics, capable of reasserting itself for virgin voters in virgin precincts.

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[345] Leeper, *The Argonauts of 'Forty-Nine*, Appendix IV.
[346] Beadle, *Ham, Eggs, and Corn Cake*, 76.
[347] Taylor, *El Dorado,* 189.
[348] McCarthy, "When I first voted the Democratic Ticket," American Life Histories.
[349] Beadle, *Ham, Eggs, and Corn Cake*, 102.

Of age or under, on the frontier or back east, virgin voters put great meaning into this potentially banal scene of one man passing a slip of paper to another. Charles Leland's account of Mr. Pipps' first vote demonstrates this excitement. Once Pipps casts his ballot, Leland writes: "IT IS DONE. He hath voted! He hath. It's there in the box, as done as can be." One can practically see Leland waving his top hat and cane, shouting "GO IT LEMONS!"[350]

The practice of challenging young voters enlivened this anticlimax, turning a civic rite into a tense confrontation. Though many complained about being challenged, the gauntlet of shouting poll hustlers created a dramatic crescendo out of the quiet act of voting. The rowdier the polling place, the bigger the challenger, the wilder the environment, the more tangible a vote's meaning.

Young and vigorous manhood

Knowing that their ballot lay "there in the box," a sense of significance washed over anxious virgin voters. As one Indianan put it, after voting "I was happy, and ranted and cheered, and made myself a burden."[351] As they strutted from the polling window, swigged ale, applauded friends and hassled rivals, young men outlined a narrative for the day's meaning.

Over and over, virgin voters affirmed some variation of the same conviction, expressed by twenty-two year old Union cavalry captain Charles G. Hampton, "This has been a red letter day, for with many others, I have cast my first vote for

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[350] Leland, *Pipps among the Wide Awakes*, 16.
[351] Lew Wallace, *An Autobiography, Volume One*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1906), 205.

President."[352] Many expressed their excitement on an existential level, labeling their first vote "the proudest day of my life."[353] In doing so, they echoed those campaigners who nudged young men to "start right." On this topic, if on little else, voters and party leaders seemed to agree. The equation was balanced for once: what politicians put into voting, young men claimed to get out of it.

First-timers considered the experience transformative. Many began election day feeling like boys and ended it boasting about their "vigorous manhood."[354] Charles Leland was attuned to this change, and wrote that Mr. Pipps, post-vote, became "a Man of the World and a Politician, and patronizes the juveniles." In a recurring joke, running throughout the book, Mr. Pipps makes ambitious declarations about himself, and bolsters them with the hopeful catchphrase "…or any other man!" – as if tentatively affirming his membership in the crowd of adults.[355]

The account of one first-time voter, Theodore Sutton Parvin, captures this sudden maturation. Theodore had been one of those wild boys playing in America's woods, until one day, at age seven, he jumped from a high dam and landed wrong. That fall "crippled me for life."[356] He could still walk, but with great effort, and focused on books and education from then on. Fourteen years later, election day found twenty-one-year-old Parvin – now an earnest young lawyer with enormous brown eyes, a chin curtain beard, and a pronounced limp – aboard a Mississippi

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[352] Charles G. Hampton, "Twelve Months in Rebel Prisons," *War Papers Read Before the Michigan Commandery of the Loyal Legion of the United States, Volume Two*, (Detriot: James H. Stone & Co., 1898), 242.
[353] Bircher, November 1864, *A Drummer-Boy's Diary,* 199.
[354] "The Young Man's First Vote," *Rocky Mountain News*, November 1, 1890.
[355] Leland, *Pipps Among the Wide Awakes,* 1, 11, 14
[356] Theodore Sutton Parvin, *The Life and Labors of Theodore Sutton Parvin,* Ed. Joseph E. Morcombe, (Clifton, IO: Allen Printing Company, 1906), 17.

steamboat docked at a small Iowa town. The boat's captain asked his passengers if they would like to go ashore and vote. Parvin shouted "Amen," and clambered up the riverbank, at great personal effort, to cast his first ballot. Later he reflected: "it was a joyous privilege going forth from the steamer that afternoon a boy, and returning later to her decks a full-fledged man."[357]

It might be tempting to think that first-time voters like Parvin were simply the type of Romantic nineteenth-century youths who described every sneeze in florid, baroque prose. Perhaps virgin voters' claims of sudden manhood were mostly literary, and few young men actually considered casting a ballot "the proudest day of my life." For some, the act of voting probably meant relatively little, but the majority who felt transformed should be taken at their word. Compare Theodore Parvin's excitement at voting with his striking nonchalance during other meaningful moments in his life. Twice the young man was made an attorney – once in Ohio and once in Iowa. In both cases he dryly noted that he "received a certificate of such fact," with no declarations of manhood, no pretentious self-congratulations, no sense of initiation. Yet the act of climbing ashore and casting a ballot in a muddy riverside town – a place that was not yet named and which he had never before set foot – made him a "full-fledged man."

This sudden transformation meant a young man also left behind the women in his life. Voting turned boys into men, but it also elevated them above their wives, mothers, and sisters. When young Francis Willard watched her brother dress in his finest clothes and ride off with their father to vote, she bemoaned the implication that she did not "love

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[357] Parvin, *The Life and Labors of Theodore Sutton Parvin*, 64.

the country just as well as he."[358] Lydia Maria Child, mocking the self-important dandy N.P. Willis, condemned a system in which he could vote on a whim, while she had to "await the result in agonizing inaction," despite her three decades of activism.[359] Historian Corinne Field has argued that this gendered ritual – transformative for men and nonexistent for women – arrested young women's development. Casting a virgin vote implied that men walked a progressive path towards increasing rights and powers, while women waited at home.[360] This double standard frustrated women's rights activists, but, for the majority of Americans who supported such gender distinctions, it made the ritual even more significant.

Presented with this passage into manhood, some young men cast off the party of their forefathers. Though most supported the organizations they had been raised to revere, a decisive bloc of young Americans announced their adulthood, independence, and agency by picking a new party. Some "smart alecks" – accused an Arizona miners' newspaper – voted specifically "to show the 'old man' that they have a will of their own."[361] Though this was, theoretically, the proper way for an independent, multiparty democracy to maintain itself, such rejection was rarely

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[358] Willard wrote: "My sister and I stood at the window and looked out after them. Somehow, I felt a lump in my throat, and then I could n't see their wagon any more, things got so blurred. I turned to Mary, and she, dear little innocent, seemed wonderfully sober, too. I said, 'Would n't you like to vote as well as Oliver? Don't you and I love the country just as well as he, and does n't the country need our ballots?' Then she looked scared, but answered, in a minute, " 'Course we do, and 'course we ought, - but don't you got ahead and say so, for then we would be called strong-minded.'" The same thoughts must have run through countless women's heads during the age of popular politics. Frances Willard, *Glimpses of Fifty Years*, 69-70.

[359] Lydia Maria Child to Sarah B. Shaw, October 27, 1856, *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, 85.

[360] Field, "Are Women…All Minors?" *Journal of Women's History*, 12, (Winter 2001), 113-137.

[361] "Editorial Notes," *Arizona Weekly Journal-Miner*, October 12, 1892.

greeted with enthusiasm. Young voters grappled with the decision to join a new organization, and some only did so provided "mother and step-father didn't find out."[362]

"Bolts" by virgin voters often followed a similar pattern. New voters rejected the party of their birth, hoping to declare an independent path. By picking a new party, such defectors distanced themselves from a long line of relatives, and from their own childhoods. This was usually deliberate. One gold prospector, voting deep in the Sierra Nevadas, abandoned his family's party solely because he was "determined to go blind." He had already turned his back on his home and his kin, and wanted to start fresh in California with new politicians, even though "I don't know a damned one of them."[363]

Lew Wallace, the future Civil War general and author of *Ben Hur,* rejected his "intensely Whig" family with his first vote in 1848. Wallace hated Zach Taylor and gave furious speeches against him. After one particularly harsh rant at the county courthouse, an elderly family friend approached Wallace and inquired, with genuine concern, "Your father is living, isn't he?" The old Whig could not conceive of a world in which a virgin voter would turn his back on the party of a surviving father.[364]

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[362] Bensel, *The American Ballot-Box*, 3.
[363] Taylor, *El Dorado,* 2: 189. Over the course of the age of popular politics this rejection of the familial party became more common, until the movement for independent voting really took off in the 1880s. (August Woodbury, *Plain Words for Young Men*, [Concord, MA: McFarland & Jenks, 1858], 157; "Radical Amendment," *Weekly Patriot And Union*, October 31, 1867; "The Young Voters" *Cleveland Gazette*," September 27, 1884; "Young men should be Independent," *Kansas City Evening Star*, August 1, 1884; "Garfield to Young Voters," *Daily Inter-Ocean*, November 5, 1888).
[364] Wallace, *An Autobiography,* 1: 203.

As they rejected their past, partisan apostates also looked forward, seeing their first vote as a long-term commitment. The wealthy Virginian John Herbert Claiborne had been raised, like Wallace, as a Whig, but believed that he could not continue that tradition in the early 1850s. He felt that a new voter should "shape his course, true to himself," and he could not commit to the crumbling party. Had he been an established voter, Claiborne would have held out in support of his family's party, but the rite of passage forced a moment of clear-eyed decision. Interpreting his first vote as a lifelong initiation he became the first in a long line of Claibornes to vote for a Democrat.[365]

Most new voters did not "disdain parental influences" in such a way, but more partisans switched allegiances with their first vote than at any other moment.[366] Loss of political virginity provided a rare passageway between worlds; in the transition some young people changed parties, along with so much else about themselves. Some used the opportunity to ostentatiously assert their independent adulthood, while others saw it as a way to chart a path forward into manhood. For over half a century, the world's largest democracy turned on the whims of such "smart alecks."

Haunted by their First Time

A virgin vote did not end with a young man leaving the polling place. Instead it gained meaning in the days, months, and years that followed, as voters ornamented

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[365] John Herbert Claiborne, *Seventy-Five Years in Old Virginia,* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1904), 132.

[366] Leland, *Pipps among the Wide Awake*s, 10; William E. Gienapp, "Politics Seem to Enter into Everything: Political Culture in the North, 1840-1860," *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840-1860*, Ed. Stephen E. Maizlish, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1982, 54-6.

an emotional altar dedicated to their first election. Often, the nature of this legacy depended on how their first ballot had faired. If a young man's first vote helped elect a ticket he boasted of it for decades, and if his initial participation resulted in defeat, it motivated an embattled, re-committed worldview. Campaign activists and virgin voters all assumed that a first vote left a long trail that young voters would "refer to in after years."[367]

William Saunders Brown learned about this legacy the hard way. The twenty-three-year-old clerk at sleepy tidewater Virginia courthouse met his first election with vocal enthusiasm. Brown considered Henry Clay the absolute embodiment of an American statesman, and wanted to do something to help along the Whig candidate's chances in 1844. Over breakfast a few days before the vote, Brown and a friend hit upon the notion of raising a "Clay Pole" for their hero. For three late-October days they wandered the tawny Virginia woods, felling trees, stripping their bark and branches, and splicing them together to form a seventy-foot pole. With the help of more friends, they raised the pole at a key crossroads, and ran a thirty-five-foot-long blue Whig flag to its top. Proud of the beautiful construction, William then passed all of November Fourth at the crowded election – the whole place "resounding with singing" – aggressively challenging hated "Locos."[368]

It was only after his thrilling first election that Brown saw that "times look rather squally" for his beloved Mr. Clay. The local Whigs only rallied half of the voters they had hoped. Worse yet, in the night some villains tore down his beautiful

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[367] "The First Vote," *Vermont Patriot*, August 11, 1860.
[368] William Saunders Brown, November 4, 1844, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville, VA.

Clay Pole. Brown fumed, in his diary, "no one but the most vile character would have committed such an outrageous deed."[369] He accused some young Democrats, who had erected their own "Polk Pole," of the sabotage, but they played dumb. From there on, Brown noticed more ominous clouds gathering. In the next few days, the older Whigs at the courthouse looked downcast, but Brown was young and exuberant, and held out hope that his hero would win out "over such a man as Jas. K. Polk."[370]

Brown had some waiting to do; 1844 was the last presidential election held in different states on different days. Finally, five days after Virginia voted, Brown happened upon an acquaintance while riding, who informed him of the Democrats' victory in New York state, giving Polk the presidency. Brown took the loss hard. He raced home to write in his diary, worrying about how poor Mr. Clay would receive the news. Brown griped: "shame upon the country that it chose its preferences in this way." That night Brown barely slept, waking to turn over the defeat in his mind. The loss "haunted my sleeping hours." William Saunders Brown, not usually an emotive diarist, scrawled, "if crying would have done any good I could have shed a multitude of tears."[371]

Brown was not the only disconsolate young man who considered crying when his virgin vote failed. Four decades later, in the midst of a Senate hearing on labor relations, two men in their sixties paused to reflect upon the enduring pain they had carried since their first votes for the defeated Henry Clay. New Hampshire businessman Malachi F.

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[369] William Saunders Brown, November 5, 1844, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville, VA.
[370] Ibid., November 9-10, 1844.
[371] William Saunders Brown, November 10, 1844, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville, VA.

Dodge made a passing reference to Clay in his testimony, at which point he and Alabama Senator James L. Pugh digressed to reminiscence about their first votes. Detouring from the hearing, they talked about their commitment to Clay, their fear that "the country was ruined" when he lost, and how they "could not help shedding tears" at the news.[372] Their conversation before the Senate Committee reveals a long-petrified specimen of the same hurt that kept William Saunders Brown tossing and turning four decades earlier. Virgin voters, in New Hampshire, Alabama, or Virginia, felt much the same about their first loss.

As the most influential politician never to win the presidency (despite four attempts) Henry Clay invited special feelings, but most voters clung to the legacy of their first ballot. Many young men felt that their first vote built a bond between them and their candidate, and they frequently remarked upon that connection. Virgin voters who had endorsed particularly iconic statesman always took some credit. Even in 1915 – when popular politics was a fast-fading shore – memoirists still bragged, "I voted for Abraham Lincoln."[373] Alternately, those who gave their first ballot to a defeated candidate smugly believed that, had their man won, the whole course of American history might have been altered. Old men who had supported John Fremont in 1856 or Stephen Douglas in 1860 claimed that they could have averted the Civil War, and supporters of William Jennings

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[372] Report of the Committee of the Senate upon the Relations between Labor and Capital, and Testimony taken by the Committee, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1885), 131.

[373] Jared Benedict Graham, *Handset Reminiscences: Recollections of an Old-Time Printer and Journalist*, (Salt Lake City: Century Printing Company, 1915), 105.

Bryan felt that, had voters followed their lead in the 1890s, the nation would no longer bear a cross of gold.[374]

Even the minority of Americans who left their initial party could not live down the embarrassment of a miscast first vote. In his essay "How I Became a Socialist," radical organizer John C. Chase recounted his regrettable first time. Chase had labored in New England woolen mills and shoe factories since age eight and came into his first election believing that the Democratic party spoke for the workingman. Though he cast his first vote for a Democrat, Chase moved on to socialism and felt "stoop-shouldered in carrying about that load of shame," in the years since. He tried to forget that first ballot, but sometimes its memory "rises up to haunt me and I say to myself, what a fool I was!"[375]

Both the radical socialist Chase and the Virginia Whig William Saunders Brown chose the word "haunt" to describe their feelings on an aspect of their first vote, whether regretted or defeated. Though they would have agreed on little else, both men expressed the pervasive sense that there was something undying about a virgin vote. It had a meaning that lasted more than four years – as the Democratic organizers of "renunciation meetings" learned in 1844. An elderly Mississippi steamboat captain, writing to the Republican newspaper *The Outlook* in 1916, agreed. The eighty-three-year-old boatman shamefully admitted that he cast his virgin vote for James Buchanan, but added: "If the

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[374] "Harrison Men of '40," *Republican Magazine*, 1, 1892; John Albee, *Confessions of Boyhood*, 259; Charles Francis Adams Jr., *The Forum*, Vol. 13, (New York: Forum Publishing Co, 1892); Roberts*, Buckeye Schoolmaster*, 224; "Where is the Once Proud Southern Rights Party?" *Augusta Daily Chronicle & Sentinel*, April 15, 1857; "The Meeting in Tammany Hall," *New York Herald*, October 22, 1856.
[375] John C. Chase, "How I Became a Socialist," *The Comrade*, 2, (November 1902), 109.

good Lord will forgive me for that, I will take the risk on all the balance of my sins myself."[376] Good or bad, that first vote cast a long shadow.

Voter to Elector

J.J. McCarthy never let those around him forget how cold the North Platte had been. The Irish cowboy built a reputation around Ogallala as a talker, rambling on in his slurred County Cork accent. Usually, he spoke about horses, which he made a living riding and raising, or the Romantic brilliance of Victor Hugo, whose works he would recount in after-dinner lectures to his less literate partners.[377] But often he would talk about his first vote. He bragged about it at the bar in Ogallala's Hotel Mellette, made loquacious by "the cup that cheers."[378] He lectured on the subject at Democratic rallies.[379] Settlers who moved to Ogallala well after the 1884 election knew the story, but believed it had happened the year they arrived, as did his wife Mary, whom he married a half decade after strapping the ballot box to his back.[380]

Not even death could shut J.J. up. When he passed away, in 1931, the *Keith County News* printed an admiring obituary, which described his famous ride. The details it included – J.J.'s "buckskin horse," the river of "snow, slush and ice" – made it clear

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[376] W.B. Miller, "A Letter from a Neighbor," *The Outlook*, March 8, 1916, 536.
[377] "A Sturdy Pioneer Passes to Reward," *Keith County News*, October 1, 1931.
[378] McCarthy, "When I first voted the Democratic Ticket," American Life Histories.
[379] John J. McCarthy, "A speech made by J.J. McCarthy at Kearney, Nebr.," collected by Bessie Jollensten, October 19, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project.
[380] B. G. Mathews, interviewed by Bessie Jollensten, November 5, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project; Mary McCarthy, interviewed by Bessie Jollensten, October 19, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project; "A Sturdy Pioneer Passes to Reward," *Keith County News*, October 1, 1931.

that the obituary's author had heard McCarthy's story firsthand. The practice of mentioning a man's virgin vote in his obituary or eulogy was actually quite common, whether the story was as thrilling J.J.'s or more mundane. For the generations of men raised during the age of popular politics and dying off in the early twentieth century, obituaries frequently noted a man's first vote as the detail that concluded his youth and commenced adulthood.[381]

Then, in 1938, a fifty-year-old woman named Bessie Jollensten paid J.J.'s aged widow a polite visit. Jollensten worked for the New Deal's Federal Writer's Project, assigned to round up life histories from her dusty, struggling region. Seated in the sunny, modern addition of her rambling farmhouse, Mary McCarthy passed Jollensten an old document written by her husband. J.J. had penned "When I First Voted a Democratic Ticket" years earlier, to commemorate a central moment in his long and exciting life. Seven years after his death, fifty-four years after his ride through the North Platte, and a century after the beginning of the age of popular politics, J.J. went on telling the story of his first time. Bessie Jollensten included his account in the Federal Writer's Project's American Life Histories. J.J.'s virgin vote had outlived him.[382]

From this perspective, J.J. McCarthy was the archetypal virgin voter. He saw his first vote as a personal initiation and dutifully kept his promise to "always remember." His wife Mary – barred from voting for most of her life – curated the memory of his first ballot. But there is another angle. As he aged, J.J. matured from a young man galloping

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[381] "A Sturdy Pioneer Passes to Reward," *Keith County News*, October 1, 1931. For a thorough if morbid study of the evolving place of obituaries in society, see Janice Hume, *Obituaries in American Culture*, (Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2000).
[382] Mary McCarthy, interviewed by Bessie Jollensten, October 19, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project.

off to vote into a Democratic party insider. By 1912 he even represented Nebraska in the Electoral College, helping to make Woodrow Wilson the first Democratic president since McCarthy's old hero, Grover Cleveland.[383] At some point, he became the older man, pointing a new generation of youths towards the polling place.

No matter how long Americans lingered on the memory of their virgin vote, time pushed them into new categories. "Twenty-onesters" did not act alone; the largest, most powerful institutions in the country engineered their deeply meaningful first votes.[384] The tan ballots virgin voters clutched while heading to the polls did not magically appear. Instead, armadas of ostentatiously jaded mid-twenties activists shoved them into the hands of new voters. Older men crafted the slogans and songs designed to get virgin voters to "start right," not to mention selecting the candidates and setting their platforms. A young American man's first vote signaled a transformation from boyhood to manhood, but his participation also heralded a transition from individual agent to cog in a massive machine.

Neither aspirational new goatees, nor flirtations at late-night rallies, nor "fire balls" hurled by eleven-year-olds can tell the entire story of age of popular politics, without balancing them against bullying poll hustlers, taciturn bosses, and well-intentioned, condescending reformers. We have seen how young Americans pushed to vote, but how were they pulled?

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[383] "A Sturdy Pioneer Passes to Reward," *Keith County News*, October 1, 1931.
[384] **"**The Independent Twenty-Onesters**,"** *Daily Evening Bulletin***,** August 17, 1869.

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How Easily Persuaded I Am

If you believe James Logan's defenders, the twenty-one year old did not begin election day by quietly loading a large revolver. He did not, they swore, hide that weapon beneath a bulky black coat. In fact, Logan's father-in-law later testified, the Baltimore gang-member wore no such coat, but donned a flashy plum colored jacket that morning. And the scrawny, sharp-faced, goateed Logan certainly did not slip a weighty cast iron knuckleduster into his pocket as he headed to Ward Fifteen's polling place.[385]

Others were less evasive about how they spent the morning of November 3, 1859. In a home far tonier than Logan's cramped quarters, twenty-nine-year-old George Kyle loaded a double-barreled pocket pistol and sheathed a long dirk. His brother Adam painstakingly prepped a revolver with powder, ball, and cap, and then hefted a weighted cane with a metal head. Each grabbed a large bundle of ballots. With heavy pistols jammed against their hips, and "Reform" tickets folded underarm, the scions of one of Baltimore's wealthiest families set out for the same polling place as Logan.[386]

George and Adam Kyle knew they were heading into a "hard neighborhood." The nativist Tiger club controlled much of Baltimore's harbor district. In addition to bullying immigrant and free black shipbuilders, the Tigers spent their time intimidating Baltimore businesses for easy jobs, though they did notoriously shoddy work. They also hustled for the American party, the official wing of the Know Nothing anti-immigrant movement,

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[385] "Proceedings of the Courts," *Baltimore Sun*, January 21, 1861.
[386] "The Murder of Mr. A.B. Kyle Jr.," *Baltimore Sun*, November 8, 1859; Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 149.

maintaining its hold of Baltimore politics. In return, the city council located Ward Fifteen's polls in the Tigers' favorite tavern.[387]

But George and Adam Kyle were young and daring, and believed that no more turf should be surrendered to such ruffians. The Kyle brothers represented Baltimore's Democratic establishment, with ties to pro-slavery, pro-southern, pro-immigration state and national organizations. They hoped to retake Baltimore masquerading as a reform movement. In addition to their own weapons, George Kyle had distributed eighteen revolvers to workers who would police other wards that day.[388] So as they neared the Light street polling place, teeming with voters and more than a few Tigers, the Kyles thought they were prepared.

The brothers went to work with the brazenness expected of nineteenth-century poll hustlers. George Kyle stationed himself just two feet from the voting window, practically leaning on it as he pressed ballots on voters. His brother Adam stood back, handing out more tickets amid the growing throng.[389] Few men showed any interest, either out of distaste for the Reform movement, or fear of what might happen if they took a ticket. Somewhere in the crowd, among the peaceable citizens and grumbling Tigers, James Logan allegedly watched angrily.

The partisan tension was too much for Logan's boss. Joseph Edwards Jr., the middle-aged bartender who ran the Tigers, had seen enough of these gentlemen-hustlers

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[387] Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War*, 149-151; Jacob Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore*, (Baltimore: Maryland Book Concern, 1893), 83-100; Tracy Matthew Melton, *Hanging Henry Gambrill: The Violent Career of Baltimore's Plug Uglies, 1854-1860*, (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).
[388] Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War,* 150.
[389] "The Murder of Mr. A.B. Kyle Jr.," *Baltimore Sun*, November 8, 1859.

and their Reform tickets. Looking to his club members, whom he had ordered to do far worse in the past, Edwards stepped up and hollered:

"Snatch the tickets from them sons of bitches!"[390]

The crowd boiled over. Someone tore the ballots from Adam Kyle's arms. In the same instant, James Logan – if you believe those who testified against him – lunged forward and cracked Kyle in the side of the head with his iron knuckles, knocking him to the pavement.[391]

Had the young gentleman stayed down, it might have ended there. But Adam Kyle, still on the ground, began to the thrash about with his weighted cane, driving the throng back. As the seething mob paused, Kyle drew his revolver and came up shooting. His thumb and finger frantically worked trigger and hammer, launching a swarm of un-aimed bullets. One of his rounds wounded an attacker, a local rowdy who went by a nickname so improper that it was struck from newspapers after the shooting. Another bullet killed Basil Elmore, a boy who was either raising a flag, or hurling bricks, depending on the account. With his attackers stunned, Kyle bounded into Dochtermann's candy shop and barred the door.[392]

The Tigers set after him. Five men smashed down the door and stormed up the stairs on Kyle's heels. They caught him on the third floor of the building, and began to drag him back to the street. On the stairs, in full view of Regina Dochtermann, the German immigrant who ran the candy shop, someone who strongly resembled James

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[390] Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War*, 151.
[391] "Outrages at the Polls," *Baltimore Sun*, November 3, 1859.
[392] Ibid.; "Proceedings of the Courts," *Baltimore Sun*, January 21, 1861.

Logan – same pinched and angry face, same dark goatee – drew a long revolver from under a heavy black coat, and executed Adam Kyle.[393]

Outside, the street rattled with the staccato of percussion pistols. Other Tigers set upon George Kyle just as they had attacked his brother. George also fought, escalating from fists to blades to bullets. He stabbed a man with his dirk, and fired both barrels of his pistol into the crowd. At least six men cocked their guns, but before they could shoot a fast-fingered brick-thrower pegged George square in the chest. He crumpled to the ground as most of the Tigers' fusillade sailed over his head. Bullets grazed George's shoulder, hip, and temple, but would have done far more damage if not for that well-aimed brickbat. He stood up and scrambled quickly down the street, his empty pistol leveled at the surging crowd in an impotent threat. Always a gentleman, George Kyle paused to retrieve his hat, then limped home, leaving hundreds of bloody Reform ballots strewn across Light street.[394]

The 1859 Baltimore election was one of the more violent votes during the age of popular politics. The battle on Light street received the most attention, because it left a prominent young man dead, but across the city rowdies clashed that day. The Baltimore *Sun's* tally of "Outrages at the Polls" reported nine shootings, five stabbings, and twenty-four severe beatings. That count ignores frequent attacks with shoemakers' awls, which did harm but were not always classified as stabbings, beatings not considered severe, and

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[393] "Outrages at the Polls," *Baltimore Sun*, November 3, 1859; "Proceedings of the Courts," *Baltimore Sun*, January 21, 1861; House of Delegates of the State of Maryland, Baltimore City Contested Election, Papers in the Contested Election Case from Baltimore City, Feb 13, 1860. (Annapolis: B. H. Richardson, Printers, 1860).

[394] "The Murder of Mr. A.B. Kyle Jr.," *Baltimore Sun*, November 8, 1859. "Proceedings of the Courts," *Baltimore Sun*, January 21, 1861.

numerous "knock downs" of men waiting to vote "the wrong ticket."[395] Nativist gangs even kidnapped German migrants and forced them to repeatedly vote anti-immigration ballots.[396] The American party, collapsing almost everywhere else in the nation, took a lopsided seventy-five percent of the city's votes.[397]

Though on the bloody side, this election was only an extreme outgrowth of the usual pattern of popular politics. Men in their twenties, far from children but still considered young, made up many of the canvassers, hustlers, and foot soldiers in each campaign. Away from the polls, they often took the lead as "lung workers," debating the issues over a mug of lager or game of billiards.[398] Young women, discouraged from overt politicking, joined in, trying to sway the men in their lives. Acquainted with popular politics but still young and striving, Americans in their twenties served as the chief persuaders on the ground.

Often these young people focused their energies on convincing lukewarm partisans, who preferred one party but might not bother to vote, to participate on election day. These so-called "marginal voters" were particularly important during the antebellum years, when they made up a historic peak of about one quarter of the electorate.[399] It was young adults' job to drag them to the polls.

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[395] "Outrages at the Polls," *Baltimore Sun*, November 3, 1859.
[396] Richard Franklin Bensel, *The American Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 179; "Outrages at the Polls," *Baltimore Sun*, November 3, 1859.
[397] Towers*, The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War*, 151; Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore,* 85-100.
[398] Henry Liddell, *The Evolution of a Democrat: A Darwinian Tale*, (New York: Paquet & Co. 1888).
[399] Paul Kleppner, *Who Voted? The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout, 1870-1980*, (New York: Praeger, 1982), 24.

Parties relied on young adults to bridge the generations. Politicians preferred to delegate tasks to twenty-five-year-olds, who had seen a campaign or two but asked for less money and held fewer grudges than older activists. More established men usually avoided the tedious requirements of on-the-ground campaigning, from explaining platforms to arguing with cranks to tracking down drunks.[400] So campaigners often considered young adults – "full of generous zeal and inspiring hope" – their best investment.[401]

From the other angle, young adults could reach out to virgin voters and youth in unique ways. They mixed with the next crop of juvenile partisans and knew, better than older activists, who might be most useful. While younger Americans mostly focused on their own personal growth, young adult persuaders learned the extroverted arts of recruitment and delegation. They began to practice politics from a mature perspective, serving as a crucial liaison between the generations.

These young persuaders challenge the image, painted so lushly by some historians, of a political jungle divided between voracious campaigners and their unwitting prey. Most of the young adults who convinced friends, spouses, or strangers to vote went unpaid and unrewarded, acting as an unofficial auxiliary of older party

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[400] Edmund Keyser Diary, December 22, 1867, in *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia PA; "Gratifying Indication of Progress," *Washington Post*, September 12, 1882; James Michael Curley, *I'd Do it Again*, (New York: Arno Press, 1976), 17-33; William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1963), 8-14.

[401] Samuel Tilden, "To perfect the organization of the democracy of this state," Circular to New York State Democrats, March 31, 1868, Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress.

activists.[402] They usually threw themselves into campaigns on a whim, vaulting over the relatively low bar for entry into electioneering. Their participation shows how messy party organizations could be, more like an overgrown trellis, with weeds snaking up and down, than a trim and simple ladder.

This self-deputized posse reversed the path set out over the course of youth. Underage Americans encountered partisanship first at home, then in school, then in the streets. Their public activism usually peaked with their virgin vote. Over the rest of their dwindling youth, Americans settled into an increasingly private politics. As their commitments entrenched and their enthusiasms became routine, men and women in their twenties slowly began to distance their political selves from the public. Though still intensely invested in politics, they expressed their fascinations in less bombastic ways.

Often their persuasions began, as the Kyles had intended, with hustling strangers and door-to-door canvassing. From there, young adults focused on the quieter work of guiding younger friends and relatives into politics. Finally, persuasion nestled into its most intimate form, as young wives lobbied, behind the scenes, to influence the votes of their new husbands.

So the shootout on Light street provides an extreme example of the last role young people played in politics before becoming full adults. The fighting began on the orders of the middle-aged head of the Tigers club. It ultimately affected an underage hanger-on: the errand boy who died raising a flag, or throwing bricks. But it was a young adult who fired the bullet that killed Basil Elmore, and another twenty-something rowdy

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[402] Though patronage played a central role in party structures, there were always far more campaigners than there were jobs available, so most workers went unrewarded. Walter Licht, *Getting Work, 1840-1950*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 34.

who – probably – killed Basil's shooter. Sandwiched between the adults who gave the orders, and the youths who felt the results, teams of young adults did the persuading and the fighting.

Who were the hustlers who loaded revolvers and packed ballots that morning? What motivated them to take such an active role? Who were the unheard players in their noisy showdowns? The Kyles' had a sister in her twenties, did she attempt to sway her brothers, or encourage them, as they capped their pistols? How about James Logan's younger brothers and sisters? What message did they take from his work for the Know Nothings? How did partisans in their twenties appeal to each other, to their siblings, and to their spouses?

The Love of Smart Dealings

Charles Dickens took away two big points from his disappointing tour of America in 1842. First, he concluded that the entire nation, particularly the senate floor, was saturated with tobacco spittle. Second, Dickens came to feel that the dominating ethos of the country was a "love of 'smart dealings' which gilds over many a swindle and gross breach of trust."[403] Though America's democratic experiment made it unique in the eyes of the world, the nation was at least as notorious as the home of a striving, bumptious, sneaky capitalism. This "love of smart dealing" soaked into the political culture, and many young adults participated in campaigns to try to sell their party to strangers. The changing model of politics, more counting-house than schoolhouse, moved democratic persuasions into new, aggressive territory.

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[403] Charles Dickens, *American Notes*, (London: Everyman Press, 1997), 246.

Canvassing and hustling created an odd political marketplace, in which young people were both the most active salesmen and the most sought-after customers. Many young adults tried their hands at partisan peddling in a campaign or two. Most concluded that electioneering required an odd blend of volubility and discretion. Successful young canvassers, talking politics in the days before an election, worked to ingratiate themselves with doubtful voters, and hustlers swaggered like carnival barkers on election day, foisting ballots on strangers.[404]

But even as they increased their volume, these partisan showmen retreated into more private venues. Though they performed in the public theatre of politics, young adults focused more and more on the machinations of their parties, which secretly determined so much about nineteenth-century elections. Young Americans, climbing the party ranks, spent their time buttonholing voters, manufacturing ballots, and intimidating citizens, in hidden locations where smart dealings verged on dirty tricks.

In public, campaigners rarely alluded to behind-the-scenes scheming. Instead, even the most introverted electioneer usually relied on false familiarity, hoping to turn fleeting friendships into pledges of support. Younger voters particularly hated this approach. "The poor boy" Michael Campbell, who considered himself an active partisan after his work for the English Phalanx, complained that at a city fair, he found himself

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[404] Edmund Keyser Diary, December 22, 1867, in *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia PA; Michael F. Campbell, November 8, 1881, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT; Franklin Buck, September 22, 1852, *A Yankee trader in the gold rush; the letters of Franklin A. Buck*, Comp.ed Katherine A. White (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1930), "Electioneering," *New Haven Register*, October 15, 1884; Rolf Johnson, November 6, 1876, *Happy as a Big Sunflower: Adventures in the West, 1876-1880,* Ed. By Richard E. Jensen, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 33.

surrounded by crowds of canvassers "all calling my name as familiarly as if they were old friends of mine but for my part I could not recognize one."[405]

Americans worried that young voters were particularly susceptible to these phony tactics. The Louisiana comic Marianne Marbury Slaughter published a brilliant piece on this during the 1878 election. She joked that young men needed to shield themselves from this "shelling of 'principles' and 'platforms' and this thundering bombardment of eloquence." Older men, Slaughter wrote, had learned to join canvassers at the bar, accepting their free drinks and cigars without ever promising support, but virgin voters were too easily won over. Slaughter hoped for a refuge "where young voters with tender consciences can skip to on the approach of this suicide-inducing fraternity."[406]

Many young men pledged this fraternity. Canvassers especially haunted groceries and country stores, selling their party among the cracker barrels and reams of gingham. These small establishments – often with a makeshift bar in the back – provided the perfect environment for canvassers to treat potential young voters to a dram of brandy or a jigger of gin. Party activists would use a first toast as an introduction, then keep the drinks coming while expounding on immigration or banks or slavery.[407] Americans

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[405] Michael F. Campbell, November 8, 1881, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT.

[406] Marianne Marbury Slaughter, writing as "Pleasant Riderhood," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, August 25, 1878.

[407] Canvassers always worried, however, that too much free bourbon would undo their hard work. Nineteenth-century American drinkers wasted little time on moderation, and partisans hated the idea of spending hours refilling the cup of a man who might never remember a word. A voter who was "just a little bit tight" – activists learned – was more useful than one who was three sheets to the wind. (James Michael Curley, *I'd do it Again*, 18; Joseph J. Mersman, October 18, 1848, *The Whiskey Mechant's Diary, Joseph J Mersman*, Ed. Linda A. Fisher, [Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2007], 137; Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, 77; Digest of Election Cases, Cases of Contested Election in

became familiar with the image of nattily dressed young party operatives loitering outside such stores, idling talking politics as they waited to ambush shoppers.

From their perch "squatting," one writer put it, "like a venomous toad upon the corner of a block," these "liquor groceries" enabled unusual politicking.[408] Sometimes the woman who ran the counter used her position to lobby for her party in a manner that would have been unacceptable outside of the store. One such woman was the tough young Mrs. Con Donoho, who ran a grocery in New York's Five Points slum. Mrs. Donoho's husband was a "zealous, firm, hard-fisted Democrat," rising to prominence in the mid-1840s. Con commanded the local street sweepers, who found easy city work in exchange for occasionally turning out to smash the hat or break the nose of a party rival. While Con fought his political battles with squadrons of local thugs, Mrs. Donoho used the family store to influence an army of partisan wives.[409]

The Donoho's store looked like most. Up a few narrow stairs, passed an open barrel of shimmering herring and another of matte black charcoal, stood an elaborate bar of home-brews. Locals joked the couple manufactured "ardent spirits as well as ardent voters."[410] Mrs. Donoho watched over the business, smiling at the immigrant women who

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the House of Representatives, from 1865 to 1871 Inclusive, 38th Congress, 2nd Session, MRS Doc. No 152 [1870], 697).

[408] George Foster*, New York in Slices: By an Experienced Carver*, (New York: W.H. Graham, 1849), 81. In his satire of the political system, *Solid for Mulholly,* writer Rufus Shapley asked: "Why continue to talk of the free-school on the hillside as the hope of the Republic, when every day, under your very eyes, you see the indubitable proof that the despised grog-shop is the true birthplace of statesmanship, and the maligned gin-mill the very cradle in which shall be rocked into manhood the coming American politician?" (Rufus Shapley, *Solid for Mulhooly,* [Philadelphia: Gebbie & Co., 1889] 21).

[409] J. Frank Kernan, *Reminiscences of the Old Fire Laddies,* (New York: M. Crane, 1885), 47-50.

[410] Ibid., 47-50; Foster*, New York in Slices*, 22-29; Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points*, (New York: Free Press, 2001).

came in to buy a fish for dinner or to refill their milk pitcher from the gin barrel. She would coyly quiz her customers on their husbands' preferred candidates in local races, usually for alderman. If a wife answered that her man backed the wrong politician, Mrs. Donoho would sell only the smallest fish, or green, eye-specked potatoes from the depths of the barrel. She would add, with a wink, that if the wife could change her husband's mind, he might find work in Con's crew, ten shillings a day. This was the kind of quiet electioneering, meted out in spuds or gin, that built local political empires.[411]

The Donoho's homemade gin, made bright red with a dash of lemony ratafia, could not win over all voters.[412] Though alcohol played a central role in American politics, canvassing was never simply a votes-for-booze exchange. There were too many young temperance supporters for that. Middle class, religious young people were particularly likely to denounce "the beverage of hell," and many joined the Sons of Temperance, among the most popular youth movements in America.[413] Party activists had to be careful whom they treated. Though there were more temperance supporters among the Whigs and Republicans, some young Democrats were passionately anti-liquor, so canvassers had to avoid pressing the bottle on the wrong voter. [414]

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[411] Kernan, *Reminiscences of the Old Fire Laddies*, 47-50. On the other hand, some women ran stores and saloons frequented by the opposing party, much to their irritation. (Emily Hawley Gillespie, November 1861, *A Secret to be Buried: The Diary and Life of Emily Hawley Gillespie*, [Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1989], 295).
[412] George Foster*, New York in Slices*, 81.
[413] John M. Roberts, *Buckeye Schoolmaster: A chronicle of a Midwestern Rural Life, 1853-1865*, Ed. J. Merton England, (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996), 184; Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeepers' Millennium*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).
[414] David Schenck Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC; Roberts, *Buckeye Schoolmaster*; "A Triumph of Young America," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, May 14, 1867.

The idle drug store chatter, the free five-cent cigars, and all that phony good-fellowship ended the day before an election. At this point, the soft-sell of canvassing transformed into the frantic commerce of hustling. Young men, more than anyone else, were expected to do the footwork, and most parties looked to striving young adults "to get out the vote."[415] Considering the forty-eight hours of work that stood between him and closing of the polls on November 4, 1856, one twenty-year old Brooklyn Republican anticipated the "tickets to be printed and distributed, votes to be looked after, repeaters to be guarded against, frauds to be discovered and defeated."[416]

The key to hustling, if not to the whole of nineteenth-century democracy, lay in the ballots. The parties printed and distributed their own ornate tickets, and an election could be decided before the polls even opened by particularly sneaky "smart dealings." Friendly newspaper presses printed most ballots the day before an election, and these clanking presses, hidden away in obscure newspaper offices and unheated warehouses, acted as home-bases for parties fighting a behind-the-scenes war to control an election.

Parties worked to keep the design of their ballots secret. Otherwise their opponents would print bogus ballots, designed to look like one party's tickets but listing candidates from the other. Illiterate voters might be tricked into casting a ballot for the wrong side. Or one party, the Republicans for instance, might print thousands of mock

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[415] "Many Candidates," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 31, 1893.
[416] Lyman Abbott, *Reminiscences* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 110. For other examples of active young hustlers, see Edmund Keyser Diary, December 22, 1867, September 15, 1868 – November 3, 1868, in *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia; Mersman, October 18, 1848, *The Whiskey Mechant's Diary,* 137; Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, 8-14; Johnson, November 6, 1876, *Happy as a Big Sunflower*, 33; Witham*, Fifty Years on the Firing Line*, 18-22.

Democratic ballots with the politicians' names all spelled wrong, so that they would be disqualified by election judges once the polls had closed.[417]

One California newspaperman described the secret battle, fought during an early 1870s election in Vallejo, to copy rivals' ticket designs and distribute counterfeits before the other party learned about the scheme. Both sides had quietly sent teams to San Francisco by rowboat – to avoid detection – buying up all the colored paper available. Once the voting began, runners sprinted from the polls to the newspaper offices, breathlessly reporting on the opposition's ballot color. Then journeymen printers and political operatives rushed out new ballots in that same shade. "Again and again the change of color was made," and every twenty minutes hustlers appeared with new ballots to trick voters.[418]

Mid-twenties hustlers presided over these printing wars, watching as newspaper presses manufactured the instruments of democracy. Once the ballots were prepared teams of young adults, supervised by older men, went to work in party headquarters. Like sweatshop laborers, they bent over wide desks, cutting and stacking the sheaves of ballots. Each organization had its own style. Tammany Hall preferred canvas sacks stuffed with ballots, various Republican organizations wanted them bundled like greenbacks. District leaders watched this manual labor closely. Without ballots, there

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[417] Frank Leach, *Recollections of a Newspaperman; A Record of Life and Events in California*, (San Francisco: S. Levinson Co., 1917), 17-21; Abbott, *Reminiscences*, 110. The best information on ballot tricks can be found in Mark Wahlgren Summers, *Party Games: Getting, Keeping, and Using Power in Gilded Age Politics*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 94-130; Patricia Crain, "Potent Papers: Secret lives of the Nineteenth-Century Ballot," *Common-Place*, 9, (October 2008).

[418] Leach, *Recollections of a Newspaperman,* 17-21. Another popular trick, related by Frank Leach, was the "tapeworm ballot," printed just half an inch wide, so that voters who wished to split their vote would have no room to write in the names of other candidates.

were no votes: sabotage of these flimsy paper bundles would mean "no election could take place."[419]

The newspaperman who watched the Vallejo printing-war came away with a trenchant insight. Older partisans controlled the political process from nomination through printing the ballots, but once those votes were handed off to hustlers, elections were decided by young activists on-the-ground.[420] "The indefatigable industry of young enthusiasm," agreed a Republican organizer, "is worth a thousand speeches from great leaders on the night before the election." The "real, substantial warfare must be at the polls."[421] Put another way, once a twenty-five-year-old stuffed his jacket pockets with blue or gold or green tickets early on election day, "the fight was on."[422]

In Brooklyn, twenty-year-old Lyman Abbott decided to help John C. Frémont's presidential bid on election day, 1856. The future preacher was then a "quasi-bohemian" in his early twenties, a high-foreheaded young man with a slick mustache and piercing black eyes. An anti-slavery Republican, Abbott worried that "America will either remain in God's service, an exponent of individual freedom, or it will go over to Satan." So he organized his brothers, with whom he shared a rented room in Brooklyn Heights, and picked a polling place nearby. The three Abbott boys stationed themselves around the

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[419] William Mills Ivin, *Machine Politics and Money in Elections in New York City*, (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1887), 52. William Mills Ivin stressed how controlling printing presses allowed New York City bosses to dominate the political process. More recently, Michael McGerr and Richard Bensel addressed this issue, arguing that, on the one hand, the system of printing ballots allowed for easy entry of new tickets and third parties, but on the other, this system enabled parties to dominate the political process. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 214; Bensel, *The Ballot Box in the Mid-Nineteenth Century,* 15.
[420] Leach, *Recollections of a Newspaperman,* 17.
[421] Daniel J. Ryan, "Clubs In Politics," *North American Review*, 146, (February 1888), 177.
[422] Leach, *Recollections of a Newspaperman*, 18.

polls, one out before the window, and the others at the ends of the street, pushing Republican ballots on whoever walked by.[423]

The brothers were doing a passing job, working the polls in their "cold-blooded, reserved" way when a rough-looking fellow in an old yellow coat appeared. Abbott worried that the thug was a Democrat there to run interference, but he grabbed a bundle of ballots and let loose with the kind of vigor that blurred the line between politics, salesmanship and show business. His yellow coat flapping, the stranger stomped up and down the Brooklyn street, vociferating, at the top of his lungs: "Here's your regular Republican tickets! – Free speech, Free soil, Free press, Free men, and Frémont! – Free speech, Free soil, Free press, Free men, Frémont! – Free speech, Free soil, Free press, Free men, Frémont!" Hollering the rhyme, the greatest slogan from the age of popular politics, in a rolling tongue-twister, the rough fellow pressed large handfuls of ballots on Brooklyn voters that day.[424]

The Abbott brothers were not wrong to worry about an approaching tough. Most parties made use of thugs to police the polls. In 1844, the *New York Herald* reported that both Whigs and Democrats were arming "the fighting men – the bullies – the 'sporting men' – the 'gentleman of fancy as they are called in their own slang.'" Respectable citizens, the *Herald* accused, were employing "the dregs of a population, drawn from all parts of the world," collected in brothels, saloons, and the rougher theatres, to hustle and intimidate. The article also asserted that, in the run-up to the heated election, hardware stores were selling off whole boxes of new Colt revolvers to partisans.[425]

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[423] Abbott, *Reminiscences*, 110.
[424] Ibid., 110.
[425] "Increase of Political Excitement," *The New York Herald,* October 1, 1844. Another

A certain type of "sporting man," feared by the respectable classes, seemed particularly involved in street-level politics. These "young bloods" – sleeked up in garish jackets, leather vests, and wobbly top hats – put aside their dog-fights, rat-baiting, and theatre-going to hustle and canvass before most elections.[426] One New York boarding house resident reported on the "fast young man" who shared the breakfast table each morning. The youth talked of nothing but an upcoming race, made out his housemates' election bets in the proper English book style, spent his evenings talking politics in pool-halls, and "falls up-stairs every night, full of information."[427] Down in Baltimore, James Logan – revolver on his hip, knuckleduster in the pocket of his bulky black coat – fell into this same category.

More than just urban thugs hustled. Young men pressed ballots on voters at polling windows from North Carolina to South Dakota. In rural regions, parties could not afford as many professional politicians so Americans in their twenties formed "electioneering parties," grabbed a few growlers of beer, and wandered from house to house, dragging voters to the polls from miles away.[428] These hustlers carried more

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article on the rise of "political fighting clubs" in 1844 hoped that "the election will scatter these gangs of rowdies" who would return, after November, to "the old business of plunder, boxing, and crime." "Political Rowdyism," *New York Herald*, October 17, 1844.

[426] "First Demonstration of the Clay Party in This City," *New York Herald*, September 28, 1841; Edmund Keyser Diary, *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia; "The Alleged Election Frauds," *Milwaukee Daily Journal*, April 22, 1886; "The Model Young Man," *Hinds County Gazette*, March 25, 1857; "Our Best Young Men Talk It over," *Daily Register-Call*, November 25, 1881; "Young Men's Convention," *New-York Spectator*, October 6, 1836.

[427] Paul Prowler, "Glimpses of Gotham," *National Police Gazette*, October 4, 1879.

[428] Johnson, *Happy as a Big Sunflower*, 33; Erastus Flavel Beadle, *Ham, Eggs, and Corn Cake: A Nebraska Territory Diary*, Ed. Ronald Naugle, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 101; Bayard Taylor, *El Dorado; or, Adventures in the Path of Empire, Volume Two,* (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1850), 189; C.S. Bundy, *Early Days in the Chippewa Valley,* (Menomonie, WI: Flint Douglas Printing Company, 1916), 6; Horace

weight than their urban equivalents. In a large city, a voter could usually procure a ticket for whatever party he preferred, but this took more work in highly partisan stretches of the countryside**.** It was nearly impossible to find a Republican ballot in South Carolina in 1860, or a Populist ticket in 1890s Vermont.

The fact that there were simply fewer rural hustlers also meant more power for each individual ballot-distributer. In big cities a party could diversify – having amateurs like Lyman Abbott hustle ballots while focusing more experienced (or intimidating) operatives on challenging and threatening voters. In New York in 1860 the parties became so specialized that Republicans organized a task force to monitor Democratic hustlers, and the Democrats responded with a committee to monitor their monitors.[429] But in rural areas, young hustlers doubled as enforcers, and there were few strangers in these small towns. In an 1862 election in rural Missouri, for instance, an elderly man complained that a young family friend, who was handing out Republican ballots, had threatened him. The youth blocked his elder, and ominously hissed: "Uncle Jake we do not want any democrats to vote."[430]

Simply buying off voters represented the ultimate expression of the love of smart dealings. An ever-present minority sold their vote, a practice that was illegal but still common. In his 1888 jeremiad calling on young Americans not to abandon politics,

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Bell, *Reminiscences of a Ranger: Early Times in Southern California,* (Los Angeles: Yarnell, Caystile & Mathes, Printers, 1881), 73; Enos Christman, *One Man's Gold: The Letters and Journal of a Forty-Niner*, Ed. Florence Morrow Christman, (New York: Whittlesey House, 1930), 117; Sim Moak, *The Last of the Mill Creeks*, (Chico: S.N., 1923); David R. Leeper, *The Argonauts of 'Forty-Nine: Some Recollections of the Plains and of the Diggings*, (South Bend: J.B. Stoll and Company, 1894), Appendix IV.

[429] "Volunteers after the Wide Awakes," *New York Herald,* November 6, 1860

[430] Cases of Contested Elections in Congress, 1834 to 1865, 38th Congress, 2nd Session, Miss. Doc. No. 57, (1862), 620; Bensel*, The American Ballot Box,* XII-XIII, 83-96.

Albion Tourgée attacked otherwise law-abiding citizens who sold their votes. Comparing this practice to the brutal "bull-dozing" of African-American voters in the South, which he had personally battled against, Tourgée wrote that the vote "briber and the 'bull-dozer' are precisely equal in delinquency."[431] But many Americans smiled at the sneakiness of vote-buying. One Norwegian immigrant reported on a Minnesota state senator, who, instead of buying voters, paid the opposing hustlers to tear up their ballots and go home. This move "was considered clever and not concealed."[432]

Though as many as one in ten votes may have been bought in some elections, it seems that young adults were less likely to sell their tickets. Younger voters were almost universally believed to be more honest, law-abiding, and naïve. Though there is very little evidence of anyone bragging about selling their ballots (for obvious reasons), there are particularly few examples of young people doing so. Young adults enjoyed many of the sneaky battles of nineteenth-century partisan warfare, but they were still learning the arts of political corruption, and seemed less easily bought.[433]

Whether canvassers or hustlers, gin-drinkers or teetotalers, big city 'sporting men' or country store electioneers, a large block of young adults participated in the doubly American mixture of salesmanship and democracy. But while hustling ballots seems more active and involved than merely voting, in reality it represented a step away from the full emersion in public politics, anticipated by youths and enjoyed by virgin voters.

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[431] Albion Winegar Tourgée, *Letters to a King*, (Cincinnati: Cranston and Stowe, 1888), 166.
[432] Andreas Ueland, *Recollections of an Immigrant*, (New York: Minton, Balch & Co., 1929), 51.
[433] "Letter," *The Chronicle, Student Magazine of University of Michigan*, 7, (September 1880 – June 1881); For a thorough view of the worst examples of vote-buying, see Summers, *Party Games*, 91 – 107.

Like a business, the front end of political persuasions seemed open and extroverted, but the back end fed into a more covert world. As they aged, and as they climbed party ladders, young people's politics moved away from noisy bandstands and roaring town-squares, to lamp-lit grocery store bars and cobwebbed printing rooms. There was a low bar for entry into the world of hustling and canvassing, but it marked the beginning of a climb away from the public politics of youth.

Looking out for the little fellow

Hustling ballots was among the most dramatic forms of political persuasion, but most young adults advocated for their parties in a quieter fashion. Many turned newly inward, retracing the steps which had led them into the public world of rallies and elections, back towards the families which pointed them towards politics as children. While fifteen or twenty-one-year olds seemed particularly focused on the world outside their home, Americans in their twenties began to consider how they might influence the rising crop of partisans.

One particularly honest editorial explained how they could do so. Following a close, ugly defeat in 1884 presidential election, the Republican *American Reformer* explained exactly how new voters were created. Looking to its youthful audience, the paper editorialized: "It's the 'big fellow' that holds the admiration and allegiance of the 'little fellow,'" and does more to frame his political world than "teachers or parents or books."[434] If the party hoped for virgin voters next time (and one thousand forty-seven

[434] "Young Reformers Club," *The American Reformer*, November 8, 1884, 364.

more Republicans in New York would have swung that election), it had better get the "big fellow" and the "little fellow" talking.[435]

The *American Reformer*'s editors implied a neglected truth about popular politics. Dividing the electorate into generations was the wrong way to reach out to that "little fellow." Instead, the better increment to subdivide citizens, the fundamental unit of partisan demographics, was the quarter-generation. A twenty-two-year-old stood the best chance of getting a seventeen-year-old reading the papers, and a twenty-six-year-old made an ideal escort for a virgin voter. Rising young people often listened most attentively to the lobbying of men and women roughly five years their senior.

Everyone seemed to have an older sibling or friend who made politics feel crucial and lively and accessible. Susan Bradford, still deciphering the meaning of partisanship in Florida her late teens, shared her family's mansion with a strident brother-in-law who provoked partisan debates at the dinner table.[436] When William Saunders Brown wandered into the Virginia woods to fell the trees for his Clay pole, a friend nine years his senior carried the axe.[437] And James Witham, that contrarian Farmer's Rights supporter who argued politics on Midwestern trains, hung out with a group of older friends in rural Iowa. They frequently debated the issues, though Witham's buddies were

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[435] *An American Almanac and Treasury of Facts, Statistical, Financial, and Political, for the Year 1886*, Ed. Ainsworth R. Spofford, (New York: The American News Company, 1886), 241.
[436] Susan Bradford Eppes *Through Some Eventful Years,* (Macon, GA: J.W. Burke Co., 1926), 378.
[437] Diary of William Saunders Brown, October 30, 1844, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville, VA.

"pretty rough company" and could make him "decidedly uncomfortable" when they disagreed.[438] Which, knowing Witham, was frequently.

These persuaders were usually about five years older than the friends they influenced. They had seen one more presidential election, and were a step further into work, marriage, and parenthood. They often had a particularly strong effect on Americans in their late teens, who no longer received much instruction from their parents. Though these older peers never had the same formative influence as parents, they stood as encouraging markers along the path to politics, waving on youths and virgin voters.

Casual mixing of age groups enabled this kind of persuasion, and campaigners worked to create the right blend in political clubs. Marching companies rarely set age-limits. Instead, their rosters show a healthy mix of youths and young adults.[439] Though they won attention with flashy public rallies, clubs also drew together different age

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[438] James Witham, *Fifty years on the Firing line: My part in the farmers' movement***,** (Chicago: Privately Published, 1924), 13. For more examples of young people introduced to politics by an older sibling or friend, see Charles Plummer, September 27, 1840, *Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia; Michael F. Campbell, August 23, 1880, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT; Benjamin Brown Foster, *Downeast Diary*, Ed. Charles H. Foster, (Orono, ME: University of Maine at Orono Press, 1975, 75; Oscar Lawrence Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary; Journals kept Before and During the Civil War*, Ed. David P. Jackson, (Sharon, PA: Privately Published, 1922), 17-36.

[439] For a comparative survey of political club rosters, published in newspapers and club papers from 1832 to 1912, see "Proceedings of a National Republican convention of young men," Providence, November 2, 1832, Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress; "Young Men's Ratification Meeting*," Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 25, 1857; "Democratic Douglas Arthur Association, Minute book," 1858, Clubs and Association records, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; "Lincoln Wide Awakes," *Daily Cleveland Herald,* May 26, 1860; "Wide-Awakes," *Daily Cleveland Herald*, May 29, 1860; "Their First Vote," *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 29, 1888; "Young Men of Hope," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 23, 1890; "Young Republican Club of the Twenty-Second Ward, Minute Book," Philadelphia, 1892-1912, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

groups for smoke-filled, whiskey-soaked, late-night meetings in their rented headquarters.[440] Perhaps most important, the bonds between clubs members were as mixed as their ages. Some knew each other well, but others were only casual acquaintances.[441] These loose bonds helped persuade young Americans to imitate their immediate elders.

Children's fiction reflected the habit of older peers guiding the politics of young Americans. Writing for *Harper's Young People* in the early 1880s, Mary Densel published a story about a young girl who accompanies her brother to a political rally disguised as a boy. She is cheered by clubs of boisterous young men for getting involved while so young, who holler that there is "nothing like getting boys on the right side."[442] In Charles Leland's *Pipps Among the Wide Awakes,* Mr. Pipps is also guided to participate by older acquaintances. One gives him a speech the importance of "the Elective Franchise being transmitted unimpaired to the rising generation," while Pipps' "Bruising Friend" – drawn as a massive, bearded fellow – lectures his younger buddy on fighting his way to the voting window.[443]

How did the persuasion of friends differ from political education by parents? For the most part, children received their parents' guidance as a neatly wrapped gift, a coherent and cohesive tribal identity, and the majority accepted it wholesale. On the other

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[440] Jeremiah A. Wilcox Diary, April 3, 1860, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford.
[441] Michael Campbell, "the poor boy" of the James English Phalanx, reported bumping into club members whom he had lost touch with years later, rediscovering his political interest in the process. Campbell, November 8, 1881, Sterling Library, Yale Special Collections, New Haven, CT.
[442] Mary Densel, "The Grand Procession," *Harpers Young People*, November 9, 1880.
[443] Charles G. Leland, *Pipps Among the Wide Awakes,* (New York: Wevill & Chapin, 1860), 6, 14; "The Rival Bonfires," *The Youth's Companion*, October 16, 1884, 57, 387; Matthew White, "The Roverings and the Parade," *Harper's Young People*, November 16, 1880.

hand, most young Americans were somewhat leery of their friends before the slow emergence of peer society in the end of the century.[444] They tended to view acquaintances with an attitude of competition or distrust, or as cautionary examples about taking the wrong path in life. So while they listened to their political beliefs, young Americans were much more critical of their peers' views. Some, like young Blanche Butler, demanded more political information from her parents, to balance out the unreliable news "the girls get round."[445]

As a result, partisan talk among young adults was often more substantial than the conversations between parents and children. If there was one point when young Americans weighed party ideology rationally, it was here. Benjamin Brown Foster, for instance, held heated arguments with his older brother Charles. The two would lie in bed, in their frigid room early in the Maine morning, debating which party was more anti-slavery in the coming 1848 race.[446] Similarly, Oscar Lawrence Jackson would stage public debates with a clever young Democrat named William Rehren. Jackson and

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[444] Howard Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 70-71.

[445] Blanche Butler Ames to Sarah Hildreth Butler, January 7, 1861, *Chronicles from the Nineteenth Century*, *Volume 1*, Compiled by Blanche Butler Ames, (Clinton, MA: Privately Published 1957), 63. For strong examples of this sense of peer rivalry, see William Wheeler, December 23, 1860, *Letters of William Wheeler of the Class of 1855, Y.C.*, (Privately Published, 1875); Foster, *Down East Diary,* 10-12; William Saunders Brown, November 5, 1844, University of Virginia Special Collections, Charlottesville, VA; Moses Puterbaugh to Uriah Oblinger, June 26, 1868; Mattie V. Thomas to Uriah W. Oblinger, Uriah W. Oblinger Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Digitally collected at the Library of Congress, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhihtml/pshome.html.

[446] Foster, *Down East Diary,* 75.

Rehren were good friends, and enjoyed testing their newfound partisan ideologies on each other.[447]

Though meaningful, this kind of peer persuasion met striking limitations. Almost all of the evidence of such interactions comes from the younger person, recording what an older friend or relative imparted. Older persuaders certainly passed down political information, but they did not seem to value such conversations enough to record them. Most young adults still looked up the hierarchy, more fixated on their interactions with established adults than with aspiring youths. Their efforts could not replace the decades of political socialization most young Americans received from their parents. Though more substantive and free-form, peer socialization was also weaker and less intentional, showing the diminishing returns of political persuasion as a voter aged.

Do not say you are not comeing home to vote

When Mattie Thomas put aside her bible and her baking, to write to her long-distance beau Uriah, her letters ranged from teaching Sunday school, to her intense desire to see him, to her burning hatred for the Democratic party. Politics played a central role in this Indiana couple's tumultuous relationship, as it struggled over distance, war, and class. So when twenty-four year old Mattie wrote Uriah, with the 1868 election looming but their engagement stretching on indefinitely, she mingled the two campaigns that seemed to define her life.

By the time they were in their mid-twenties, most Americans were married or pledged in serious courtships. But young couples still used politics to help explore the

[447] Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary,* 28.

boundaries of these relationships. New husbands felt their vote now counted for two, and wives never had a better chance at influencing a voter. Americans commonly expressed this in jokes, like one comedian's jest that his fiercely partisan mother permitted his father to "go thro the manual labor uv castin the ballot," or the gag about the hectored, drunken husband who promised he would vote for Stephen Douglas, if his Democratic wife would just let him sleep. [448] No longer courting adolescents, showing off their ostentatious political passions, men and women in their twenties treated politics as a chip in the negotiations that measure committed relationships.

Young women walked a blurry line. They were expected to guide the morals of the men in their lives, but also to know when to keep out of "worldly affairs." How could they tell where domestic morality ended and political ethics began? Unlike street-corner hustlers, young women's efforts to influence their husbands or beaux were muffled, usually offered in hushed bedroom talks or quiet correspondences, easily drowned out by the thunderous hullabaloo of nineteenth-century politics. But an intimate conversation between newlyweds could carry more weight than the pontifications of a stranger in a country store. Young women's domestic politicking played a crucial role in persuading many men to turn out on election day.[449]

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[448] David Ross Locke, *Nasby: Divers Views, Opinions and Prophecies of Petroleum v. Nasby*, (Cincinnati: R.W. Carroll & Co., 1867), 25; "A Political Lecture by a Pious Wife," *New York Herald,* September 22, 1860; Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas, November 1852, *Secret Eye*, Ed. Virginia Ingraham Burr, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

[449] Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3-9; Charlotte Howard Conant, October 19, 1880; September 19, 1888, in *A Girl of the Eighties at College and at Home*, Ed. Martha Pike Conant, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1931); Isabelle Maud Rittenhouse Maybe, Janurary 1882, *Maud*, Ed. Richard Lee

When Mattie Thomas met Uriah Oblinger neither thought much about politics. They knew each other from Sunday school, near Young America, Indiana, in the late 1850s. Uriah was then a handsome, square-headed, irascible youth, with a troubled reputation and bright blue eyes. Mattie was petite and pretty, with a worried dark gaze, high cheekbones, and big stubborn ears. She wore her glossy black hair up in a complicated Victorian do. Where Uriah had a hot-temper that quickly cooled, Mattie simmered with a persistent intensity. The two shared an attraction, but the Civil War intervened.

Uriah enlisted in an Indiana Cavalry regiment, and did extraordinarily well in the war. He reveled in the "hard fighting and good running" of cavalry raids, and often wished, post-war, that he was still in uniform.[450] But Uriah was not solely focused on the conflict. In May 1864, Mattie Thomas received a surprising letter from her former classmate. Earnestly promising that he was "entirely free from all lady correspondents" Uriah asked for a letter from Mattie, if her parents approved. He closed by swearing that he would write no other lady until she responded.[451]

Mattie wrote back and they began a romance, first by mail and then in person when he returned. The two seemed perfect for each other; he even became a Methodist to match her spirited faith in a better world to come. They spent the year after his discharge

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Strout, (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1939), 48-52; Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America*, (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 190-5.

[450] Uriah W. Oblinger to Mattie V. Thomas, August 18, 1864, Uriah W. Oblinger Collection, Nebraska State Historical Society, Digitally collected at the Library of Congress, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/award98/nbhihtml/pshome.html.

[451] Ibid., May 11, 1864.

in an intimate bubble. She would tease him and tug affectionately on his dangling whiskers; he would box her big ears and pull her onto his lap.[452]

But their love could not surmount the divisions between them. Mattie's family was middle class, while Uriah had no money or concrete promise. While her parents played a guiding role her life, Uriah's mother had died when he was a boy and his father had been deeply depressed ever since. On top of this, their letters allude to vague, disreputable behavior Uriah perpetrated as a youth, before he found Mattie and god and the cavalry.

Uriah could not yet marry Mattie. Though they were pledged to each other, Mattie's father forbade it. Uriah pushed for a date in the future and Mattie evaded. This was typical of mid-nineteenth century couples, in which the man advocated for marriage while the woman and her family delayed (she had far more to lose, after all).[453] Instead, Uriah needed to earn money and status before they could wed, so he set off "to roam the broad prairies of the beautiful west" until Mattie and her father agreed to a marriage.[454]

Uriah spent three long years wandering Minnesota, working odd jobs. He cut corn, dug ditches, peddled goods, and made, it seems, no progress towards financial stability. He would return to Indiana for a few months each year, but mostly their relationship lived on in yearning, heart-rending letters. Uriah would write from makeshift camps in frontier Minnesota, a rifle by his side and a good dog on watch, and Mattie would respond from the stifling comfort of her parents' kitchen. They exchanged photographs, reminisced about their time together, and promised kisses (and much more)

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[452] Mattie V. Thomas to Uriah W. Oblinger, November 4, 1866, Oblinger Collection.
[453] Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*,
[454] Uriah W. Oblinger to Mattie V. Thomas, August 26, 1866, Oblinger Collection.

when they were next together. Mattie, or her father, continuously pushed back the date when they could wed, from 1866, to '67, to '68.

By the summer of 1868 the couple was trapped in an unspoken standoff. Mattie's father did not permit her to marry, and she may have been secretly reticent as well. Uriah grumbled that her father was "glad that I am absent" and vaguely threatened that he could not stand "this single wretchedness" much longer.[455] But he was no closer to the wealth and stability he needed to win her family's approval. The only leverage Uriah had was distance; he implied he would stay away from Indiana until she relented to marry. Mattie desperately wanted to see Uriah but she could not yet offer him the one thing he wanted. As the tension grew in their seemly unending courtship, the 1868 presidential campaign played a convenient, surprising role.

Mattie and Uriah were both Republicans, or more accurately, they both hated Democrats, who they usually referred to as "copperheads" or "rebels." The central issue for both was not slavery or an active federal government, but the punishment of the South and the prevention of another war. Politics was warfare by other means and Uriah bragged to Mattie that, when a "copperjohnson" tried to win his vote in a Minnesota settlement, he threatened the hustler: "I could kill him and all others like him with better grace than I ever shot a Johnny."[456] Mattie agreed that the conflict was not resolved in 1865, and spent the rest of the decade worrying that a big Democratic win would undo all

[455] Uriah W. Oblinger to Mattie V. Thomas, May 3, 1868; September 14, 1866, Oblinger Collection.
[456] Ibid., October 25, 1866.

the good "the war has done."[457] Both fit perfectly into paranoid postwar climate; while Grant's campaign promised "Let us have peace," many felt that war was more likely.[458]

So Mattie Thomas began a campaign of her own as summer ended in 1868. If she could not bring Uriah back to marry, she might retrieve him to vote. For Mattie, the coming campaign did a double duty. She genuinely hated the Democrats and prayed for Grant's victory, but she also hoped to see "Uriah coming with his bright blue eyes danceing."[459] She displayed this overlap between her political and romantic self by angrily promising her family that she would "leave this Copper County."[460] She hoped to get out of Democratic Cass County, and also to live with Uriah in a cottage somewhere in the West, bundling together her romantic and political goals.[461] Mattie also knew Uriah well, and though he resolved to stay away he often reminded her: "you know how easily persuaded I am."[462]

At first Mattie tried to use political jealousy to bring Uriah home to vote. In one letter she mentioned a run-in with a mutual acquaintance, an underage Democrat who taunted Mattie, saying that if he were old enough he would deliberately vote to cancel out Uriah's ballot (and, by extension, hers as well). Mattie told Uriah how she spat back that the boy should have to "fight the Rebels" before he voted Democrat.[463] A few weeks later

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[457] Uriah W. Oblinger to Mattie V. Thomas, July 12, 1868; September 14, 1866, Oblinger Collection.
[458] Mark Wahlgren Summers, *A Dangerous Stir*: *Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[459] Mattie V. Thomas to Uriah W. Oblinger, June 7, 1868, Oblinger Collection.
[460] Ibid., November 4, 1866.
[461] Ibid., June 7, 1868.
[462] Uriah W. Oblinger to Mattie V. Thomas, June 28, 1868, Oblinger Collection.
[463] Mattie V. Thomas to Uriah W. Oblinger, August 13, 1868, Oblinger Collection.

she was more direct, nudging Uriah: "I fear you will have trouble in getting to Vote by staying away so long."[464]

But Uriah stayed away, trying to peddle pumps in Illinois. Either he still hoped to force Mattie to consent to a fall marriage or he did not notice her attempts to persuade him to return. So in early September, as the campaign warmed and the weather cooled, Mattie made one strident bid to bring him home. In a flurry of frustrated and partisan letters, she warned that not coming home would be the same as voting "on the rebles side," and added that it would be easier for him to "cast your ballot than shoulder a musket." In the most forceful tone she had ever mustered Mattie chided: "Uriah I would feel real vexed if you would not vote this fall…Do not say you are not comeing home to vote." She concluded this letter, which had stomped well beyond the bounds of ladylike diffidence: "do not get offended at what I have said for you know I am true blue…your true and devoted Mattie."[465]

If her message had not been clear enough, she added, as a final postscript: "Come soon."

Mattie's firm words broke their standoff. Uriah came home, voted, and their tortured letters ceased. In addition to financial concerns, Mattie's father had worried that Uriah would not treat his daughter well, but would "keep me at home."[466] Perhaps Uriah's responsiveness to Mattie's pleas won him some credit, and eventually permission

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[464] Mattie V. Thomas to Uriah W. Oblinger, September 1, 1868, Oblinger Collection.
[465] Ibid., September 3, 1868.
[466] Ibid., June 8, 1865.

to marry. When Uriah next took up his pen, a few months after Grant's victory, it was to contact the preacher who would officiate at their wedding.[467]

Hustles Loud and Soft

Nineteenth-century politicking got no quieter than the scratch of Mattie Thomas' pen, inking her romantic and partisan emotions in carefully ruled letters to Uriah. Such intimate politics are easy to overlook, buried deep in personal relationships. Historians are lucky that Mattie Thomas was not the type to whisper, but set her jaw, balled her firsts, and inscribed so forcefully.

Politics rarely boomed louder than that shoot-out in Baltimore, with a barrage of gunfire shaking the Light street polling place. The racket that left Adam Kyle and Basil Elmore dead echoed through the tense newspaper network and into several high-profile trials. Such violence, though not frequent, raised the volume of even the most tranquil American elections.

What do the yearning letters of an Indiana Sunday school teacher have to do with the execution of a wealthy hustler in a Baltimore candy shop? This chapter, begun with a shoot-out and ended with a wedding, shows how Americans in the final years of their youth persuaded others to participate in popular politics. While Adam Kyle worked as an overt arm of a political movement, and Mattie Thomas lobbied with more tangled motives, both sought to determine the actions of the young people around them. In the last step before maturity, young adults often formed political habits that would last the

[467] L. W. Monson to Uriah W. Oblinger, March 10, 1869, Oblinger Collection.

rest of their lives, shaped by the lobbying of their friends, their loved ones, and absolute strangers.

How many women were willing, like Mattie, to put such pressure on the men in their lives? And how many men were willing, like James Logan and Adam Kyle, to stroll to the polls with revolvers under their coats? Probably not many. In their final sprint towards maturity, young Americans spread out along the track. Some burst ahead, diving into campaign organizations and personal lobbying, others turned to encourage flagging runners, and some stopped completely. Unlike the political socialization of children, which was usually mandatory, young adult persuaders chose their paths. Those who continued to pursue partisanship, more than anyone else in society, helped sustain the age of popular politics by transmitting it to rising adolescents. The final sprint of their youth often involved passing on their political excitement, before stumbling off into adulthood.

But where exactly were these young adults running? For most of their lives, young Americans – be they Oscar Lawrence Jackson, Susan Bradford, Benjamin Brown Foster, or J.J. McCarthy – headed out into the public world of politics. What would they find as they entered the private club of adult partisanship? Were adult politicians, as Benjamin Brown Foster put it, "spiders" preying on young men's votes? Or were they representatives, looking out for this uncertain constituency? Which stereotype – the greedy boss or the wise statesman – beckoned generations of young Americans into politics?

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Every One is Fifty

No recluse had greater reach. For decades, Samuel Tilden, an odd little frog of a man, directed campaigns, tallied margins, and mobilized voters, all from the ornate seclusion of his Manhattan mansion. More than any other leader, Tilden participated in the span of popular politics, from the 1830s through the late 1880s. And though hidden away in the cloistered elegance of his Gramercy Park hermitage, Tilden grasped the vital importance of young Americans.[468]

The "Sage of Gramercy" would never bring a revolver to a polling place, or ride his horse through an icy river, or flirt at a torch-lit procession. Since his youth Tilden had been weird and retiring: a chronic hypochondriac who complained of Victorian afflictions like "corrugated tongue," a brilliant student who dropped out of Yale because he disliked the food, a passionate Democrat for whom the party served as "wife, children, and church."[469] But this introverted oddball showed an unrivaled grasp of youth politics. While young people expressed their aspirations by heading out to noisy rallies, men like Tilden stepped back from the raucous public, binding their individual enthusiasms into something larger.

Tilden was once one of those American boys for whom politics was a dire, ubiquitous, engrossing sport. His family ran a country store in the Hudson valley in the

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[468] Robert Kelley, "The Thought and Character of Samuel J. Tilden: The Democrat as Inheritor," *Historian*, 26, (Spring, 1964), 176-205; John Bigelow, *The Life of Samuel J. Tilden*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1895).

[469] Alexander Clarence Flick, *Samuel Jones Tilden: A Study in Political Sagacity*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1939), 6; Bigelow, *The Life of Samuel J. Tilden*, 47; Kelley, "The Thought and Character of Samuel J. Tilden," 189.

1820s and '30s, frequented by many of the founders of the Democratic party. His father would sit young Samuel on the counter and have him explain the finer points of Loco Foco ideology to Martin Van Buren or William Cullen Bryant. Tilden spent his teens writing policy papers for fun and giving speeches against the Bank of the United States, moneyed privilege, and his lifelong foe: "centralism." The sickly, cautious boy disappeared when he took the stage, shouting about "the eternal struggle between the aristocracy and the humble people."[470]

He grew into a political mastermind. Tilden loved organization and learned to delegate canvassers, woo editors, and unite his big state's feuding factions. He also delighted in statistics. When he ran for governor of New York, Tilden not only won, but accurately calculated his margin of victory almost to the voter.[471]

This genius operator faced his greatest challenge in the late 1860s. The Civil War had devastated Tilden's beloved Democrats. His old allies had seceded, died, or converted to Republicanism, joining millions of Union veterans and newly enfranchised African-Americans in that party. In the North, Tilden's organization stunk of treason, in the South, former-Confederate Democrats were defeated and disillusioned. From his isolated perch on Gramercy Park "the Sage" set about rebuilding his damaged party.

Tilden turned to young voters to rejuvenate his movement. In the process, he perfectly explained how politicians viewed young Americans. Tilden's letters, speeches, and pamphlets make three crucial points. Politicians relied on young supporters, first-

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[470] Kelley, "The Thought and Character of Samuel J. Tilden," 176-185.
[471] Roy Morris Jr., *The Fraud of the Century: Rutherford B. Hayes, Samuel J. Tilden, and the Stolen Election of 1876,* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 105.

time voters were most useful to opposition parties, and winning over young Americans was harder than it seemed.

The "Sage" explained the need for young supporters in a pamphlet he circulated plotting the 1868 presidential campaign. Most Democrats hoped for whatever help they could get, but Tilden especially believed that "*fresh* and unwearied *young* men, just coming upon the stage of action" brought superior enthusiasm.[472] Older campaigners, Tilden and presidential candidate Horatio Seymour agreed, burnt out quickly, becoming demanding, expensive, and lazy as they aged.[473] But young partisans – unsullied by the recent war – brought "alacrity, zeal, persevering and patient energy" to the muddled movement.[474]

Tilden spoke for his struggling party, but most organizations over the age of popular politics agreed on the need for youth. Politicians knew that bringing in first-timers was a better bet than luring unreliable independents with cash or beer. Leaders of the Democrats, Whigs, Liberty Party, Free Soilers, Know Nothings, Republicans, and Populists preferred "attracting and interesting young men" to doling out "2 dollar bills to

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[472] Samuel Tilden, "To perfect the organization of the Democracy of this state," Circular to New York State Democrats, March 31, 1868, Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress.
[473] Horatio Seymour to Samuel Tilden, January 13, 1867, *Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden*, *Two Volumes,* Ed. John Bigelow, (New York: Harper and Brothers Pub., 1908), 1: 214.
[474] Samuel Tilden, "To perfect the organization of the democracy of this state," Circular to New York State Democrats, March 31, 1868, Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress.

purchase floaters."[475] They all loudly proclaimed, usually with no evidence, that their movement was the true "party of young men."[476]

While politicians agreed that they wanted young supporters, some were more desperate than others. Parties in power tended to rely on comfortable networks and rarely bothered to reach beyond old allies to excited (but annoying) twenty-one year olds. Parties out of office, casting about for a path to victory, were more likely to value young voters. Outs who believed that the next election would bring them into office spilled the most ink appealing to young Americans. These opposition organizations, hoping to build a new movement, were also more likely to incorporate young women. Samuel Tilden understood this perfectly. Acknowledging that his movement had been "a long time out of power" the Sage of Gramercy declared: "We must ally the Democracy with the future. We must strike the roots of its growth into fresh soils."[477]

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[475] "A Neighbor's Complaint," *New Haven Evening Register*, April 28, 1892.

[476] Claims of being the preferred party of young Americans proliferated in the press of each major and minor party. For National Republican and Whig assertions, see "Young men of Boston! Broadside for Charles Wells as Boston Mayor, 1832," Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress; "Nominating Rally for Delegates to National Convention of Young Men, National Republican Party," (Baltimore: Sand & Neilson, 1831), Library Company of Philadelphia, PA; "The True Spirit," *Cleveland Herald*, October 9, 1843; "Young Whigs," *Mississippian and State Gazette*, May 28, 1852.
For Republican claims, see "The Duty of the Republican Part," *Boston Daily Atlas*, November 26, 1856; "The Party for Young Men, "*Boston Daily Advertiser*, July 30, 1880; "Migma," *The Continent; an Illustrated Weekly Magazine* June 27, 1883; Daniel J. Ryan, "Clubs In Politics," *North American Review,* 146, (February 1888).
For Democrats, see "Wm. A. Neil, Esq," *Daily Ohio Statesman*, October 02, 1850; "10 out of 12 of the Young Voters," *Macon Weekly Telegraph*, October 17, 1876; *News and Courier*, July 28, 1884.
For third party claims, see "Young Men of Massachusetts," *Emancipator*, September 3, 1840; *Emancipator and Weekly Chronicle*, December 18, 1844; "Young America," *Semi-Weekly Raleigh Register*, August 16, 1856; "The New York Greenbackers," *Milwaukee Daily Journal*, August 30, 1884.

[477] Samuel Tilden, "To perfect the organization of the democracy of this state," Circular to New York State Democrats, March 31, 1868, Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of

From the dawning of the age of popular politics until the 1880s, these Outs made alternating bids for young voters. At first they treated young Americans as a useful device, a crowbar to help pry their rivals from office, lacking interests of their own. Because parties only slowly learned to tailor their specific appeals to young people, whether they held power was usually more relevant than their ideology or policies. The issue these out-of-office campaigners most consistently pitched to young audiences was not the role of the federal government, or the economy, or slavery, but the corruption of those in power.

This brings up the Sage of Gramercy's third insight. In an 1874 address to the Young Men's Democratic Club of New York – an elite group, toasting the awkward politico in Delmonico's grand dining room – Tilden told his audience about a conversation he had with an elder statesman of the party in the late 1860s. The two leaders agreed that the Democrats should promote their most promising young members. Tilden then asked the politician to list his favorite new leaders. After listening to the roster of rising stars, Tilden informed the boss – in his cold and withering way – that everyone he named was middle-aged.[478] "You are fifty, and I am fifty, and every one is fifty," he scolded.[479]

Tilden's story showed politicians' struggle to bring young people into their parties. Elite leaders looked down at new generations from atop tall hierarchies, over which they had limited control. Nineteenth-century political parties were massive

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Congress; Horatio Seymour to Samuel Tilden, July 20, 1868, *Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden,* 1: 242.

[478] Kelley, "The Thought and Character of Samuel J. Tilden," *Historian*, 176-205.

[479] Samuel J. Tilden, "The Political Duties of Young Men – Address to the Young Mens' Democratic Club," Fall, 1874. *The Writings and Speeches of Samuel J Tilden, Volume II*, Ed. John Bigelow, (New York: Harper & Bros Pub, 1885), 16.

contraptions, only a tiny fraction of which could actually be operated by deliberate leadership.[480] Historians tend to exaggerate politicians' agency, fooled by leaders' verbose self-importance. But the old metaphor is wrong: parties were not machines, and leaders were not engineers. The fact that politicians had more power than anyone else in American society does not mean that they had enough power to coordinate millions of young people's intimate, disorganized political socializations into a mechanized system.

"Politician" is a broad cloak, which covers a diverse crowd, from "practical politicians" who maintained on-the-ground movements to elected leaders who made laws and gave speeches. This chapter focuses on the campaign architects, party bosses, and prominent editors who coordinated unwieldy groups into mass movements. While youths entered democracy in very similar ways over a long stretch of time, politicians' efforts to fold young people into their organizations steadily evolved over the age of popular politics. Because campaigners were so distant from the average eighteen-year-old, however, these improvements did not fundamentally change the nature of popular politics. Instead they show campaigners' building awareness of young people's interests, identities, and importance.

These campaigns fought an ongoing battle for young supporters. Their alternating attempts provide a survey of American democracy. From the cautiously innovative anti-Jacksonians of the 1830s, through the blustery Whig "whirlwind" of 1840, to the progressive nationalist Young American Democrats of the 1840s, the militaristic Wide Awake Republicans before the Civil War, and the rejuvenating Democrats in the 1860s

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[480] The unresponsive nature of nineteenth-century party structures is best explained by Roy Nichols in *The Disruption of American Democracy,* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1948), 20.

and '70s, parties out of power demonstrated their slowly improving understanding of young Americans.

These alternating parties built on previous tactics until the mid-1870s when something changed dramatically. For the rest of the century, parties in and out of power faced off in an increasingly fervent and self-conscious struggle to determine what role young people should play in democracy.

Samuel Tilden watched it all. In his ornate headquarters he munched stale bread – the mainstay of his bizarre diet – and puzzled over how to recruit young Democrats.[481] He knew that his party was not a self-perpetuating machine, a metaphor too easily appealing in an age obsessed with steam and coal, but a plant blooming and dying in each generation. Campaigners were not mechanics tweaking a long-running engine, but gardeners planting "the roots" of old movements in "fresh soils."[482] After decade upon decade of growth, who could see that they would eventually overcrowd their field?

On the Advice of Our Elders

Politicians looked to young supporters during the nasty birth of popular politics in the 1830s. Before that, leaders sometimes addressed young men's associations, but these groups actually incorporated all ages and were mostly passive listeners.[483] The rise of the Democrats in the late 1820s left a large number of passionate dissenters feeling like Outs.

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[481] Morris, *The Fraud of the Century,*105.
[482] Horatio Seymour to Samuel Tilden, July 20, 1868, *Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden*; Samuel Tilden, "To perfect the organization of the democracy of this state," Circular to New York State Democrats, March 31, 1868, Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress.
[483] Carolyn Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Public after the Revolution*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in American 1790 to the Present,* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 12-64.

This position blended with the rising tide of democratic populism, Andrew Jackson's pugilism, devastating economic turmoil, and a general sense that society was crumbling, leading panicked anti-Democrats to recruit their young men as "self protection" in the '30s.[484] At first they stumbled blindly towards youth politics but slowly learned to use the rising generation to uplift their prostrate party, culminating with the whirlwind campaign of 1840.

The anti-Jackson party crept cautiously towards youth politics in the 1832 election. These National Republicans coveted all the votes young people might cast against Jackson, but seemed only dimly aware that they would come from individuals with interests of their own. In Baltimore, they assembled a crowd of young men in a massive saloon to denounce the Democrats. The youths came "on the advice of our elders," to halt the Democratic "torrent which now boils in turbid impotence around the base of the deep seated Temple of Liberty." They worried that, should Jackson win a second term, he would leave his "slimy mark" on the foundations of democracy.[485] Taking a bold step into the age of popular politics, the Outs of the 1830s sought new voters to overthrow a popular and entrenched party.

Baltimore's National Republicans stopped far short of empowering their youth. Although they hoped that young Americans would rise up against their enemies, they were clearly conflicted about relying on them. In the saloon campaigners debated whether youths were "overstepping the modesty which befits our age" by taking an active role in the race. Although they concluded that young people had a right to voice their

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[484] "Nominating Rally for Delegates to National Convention of Young Men, National Republican Party," (Baltimore: Sand & Neilson, 1831), Library Company of Philadelphia, PA.
[485] Ibid.; "National Republican Convention," *Baltimore Patriot*, December 20, 1831.

hatred for King Andrew, the question signaled the novelty of youth politics. Though elite Maryland politicians made use of this dawning innovation, they – like similar campaigners in many other states in the 1830s – made no mention of concerns specific to young people.[486]

The National Republicans failed to rile enough young voters to throw out Andrew Jackson. The Democrats won reelection in 1832 and 1836, relying on a powerful campaign machine and a clear identity as the party of the people, allied against the forces of privilege. But the earthshaking depression of 1837 offered a new anti-Democratic party, the Whigs, an opportunity. Going into the 1840 election, with food prices skyrocketing and the Van Buren administration caricatured as a champagne-swilling old guard, the new movement hoped a rising generation of young Whigs might lift them up.[487]

To win in 1840, Whig leaders realized that they would need a united, excited campaign. For too long, Whig Executive Commissioner Leverett Saltonstall wrote to his wife, the party had attacked the Democrats individually, "*careening* upon their flanks,

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[486] For other examples of 1830s appeals to youth that neglect young Americans unique interests, see National Republican Young Mens' Meeting, March 22, 1832, Washington, DC, Library of Congress; "Proceedings of a national republican convention of young men, November 2, 1832, Providence, Library of Congress; "Great Whig meeting in New York, Nominations For Governor," September 8, 1833, Library of Congress; "History," *American Monthly Review***,** December 1833.

[487] See Michael Holt's essay on the role food prices in the rise of the Whig party in the late 1830s. Michael Holt, "The Election of 1840, Voter Mobilization, and the Emergence of the Second Party System," *A Master's Due: Essays in Honor of David Herbert Donald*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) and Alasdair Roberts, *America's First Great Depression: Economic Crisis and Political Disorder after the Panic of 1837*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

charging upon them with desperation but without system."[488] To unite against the Democratic Ins, Whigs planned a popular movement that would "bring out the hurra boys."[489] They opened their ratification rally with a dramatic appeal to "the young men of half a Continent," and put twenty-nine year old Horace Greeley in charge of their chief campaign publication, *The Log Cabin,* which reached 90,000 readers nationwide.[490] The brilliant young editor "set the campaign to music" with catchy, funny, biting songs that enthralled a new generation expecting entertainment from their politics.[491] In doing so, Whigs launched a race so loud that it became inescapable in the culture, setting a precedent for the next five decades of popular politics.

The Whigs improved upon the National Republicans' earlier innovation. In Philadelphia, a city ravaged by the Democrats' war on the Bank of the United States and the 1837 Depression, campaigners organized a massive event for young men.[492] Jesper Harding, the outspoken editor of the *Pennsylvania Inquirer*, printed daily advertisements calling upon young Philadelphians to exterminate the "vandal horde that infests the high places of the government." Thousands of young Whigs turned out, filling a massive saloon within sight of the Bank of the United States and adopting a series of angry resolutions. But these appeals were more targeted than the National Republicans' had been eight years earlier. The Philadelphia ralliers focused on the impact of the depression

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[488] Joel Silbey, *The American Political Nation, 1838-1893*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 36-7; Robert Gray Gunderson, *The Log Cabin Campaign*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1957), 149.
[489] Gunderson, *The Log Cabin Campaign,* 52
[490] Ibid.*,* 1; Whitelaw Reid, *Horace Greeley*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1879), 8.
[491] Gunderson, *The Log Cabin Campaign,* 285.
[492] Roberts, *America's First Great Depression*, 160-172; Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975).

on young people, accusing the ruling Democrats of making it impossible for "young men to make an honest living." The Whigs hoped their specific appeals to young people's economic concerns would terrify the "pensioned satellites of power" and make clear "the MAJESTY OF YOUTH."[493]

Around the country, young people noticed the sudden efforts of elite Whigs to highlight the "MAJESTY OF YOUTH." John Parsons, a twenty-three year old wandering in Indiana, disliked the Whigs' "parades of unmeaning contrivances" and embarrassingly heavy drinking, but noted that campaigners practically dragged him to "monster Whig barbecues."[494] Young Democrats grumbled at this craven outreach. One boy orator in Tennessee dismissed Whig leaders' efforts as "the silliest political exploitation this country ever witnessed."[495] His frustration serves as a reminder that no one party ever monopolized the youth vote. Many young Democrats participated for the first time in 1840 – the party won nearly 50% more votes than it had the last time around – and some Whig campaigners paid no attention to young people. Though the rising Whigs made the more concerted bid for youth, their efforts were neither exclusive nor exhaustive.

The same principle that had politicians pouring cider for virgin voters led the Whigs to a breakthrough in gender politics in 1840. For the first time, large numbers of

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[493] "Harrison, Democracy, Reform and Better Times: Gathering of the Young Men," *Pennsylvania Inquirer and Daily Courier* March 12, 1840; March 13, 1840; March 14, 1840; March 16, 1840; March 17, 1840; March 18, 1840; "Another Great Meeting in Philadelphia, The Young Men in Motion," *Pennsylvania Inquirer and Daily Courier*, March 19, 1840.

[494] John Parsons, *A Tour through Indiana in 1840,* (New York: R. M. McBride & Co., 1920), 82-7.

[495] Parmenas Taylor Turnley, *Reminiscences of Parmenas Taylor Turnley : from the cradle to three-score and ten,* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1892), 22; "Hurra for the Young Democracy," *Weekly Ohio Statesman*, May 29, 1844; "To the Young Men of Orleans Co." *Vermont Patriot*, July 13, 1840; "Our Glorious Hickory Club," *The Ohio Statesman*, November 29, 1843.

young women marched in demonstrations – costumed as allegorical figures – organized events, and prepared banners, uniforms, and floats. As ascendant Outs, the Whigs tried to bring in any heretofore unrealized advantages, and young Whig women joined in the thrilling race from Maine to Virginia to Tennessee.[496] Democrats denounced Whig women's public activism as an "aberration from the sacred domestic routine" but nonetheless tried to copy it themselves.[497] Whig leaders saw young men and women as keys to their strategy of – as congressman Saltonstall told his wife – "keeping in play every mind and every hand."[498]

The 1840 campaign overflowed with ironies. Whigs who had formerly scoffed at democracy as mob rule ran the most populist campaign to date. A party that often preached Temperance poured out thousands of gallons of liquor. William Henry Harrison – an elite Virginian born before the Declaration of Independence – depicted the younger Martin Van Buren – the striving son of a tavern keeper, the only president who spoke English as his second language – as the old guard. And the Whig whirlwind came to a terrible halt, just thirty-one days after inauguration, when Harrison dropped dead. The vice president, "His Accidency" John Tyler, turned out to oppose most of the Whig's big ideas. Most ironic of all, that brief victory positioned the Democrats as the Outs, ready to come roaring back with a new ideology that stressed youth in the 1840s.

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[496] Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray, *Voices without Votes: Women and Politics in Antebellum New England,* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2010), 79-98; Elizabeth Varon, "Tippecanoe and the Ladies, Too: White Women and Party Politics in Antebellum Virginia," *Journal of American History,* 82 (September, 1995); Jayne Crumpler DeFiore, "Come, and Bring the Ladies: Tennessee Women and the Politics of Opportunity During the Presidential Campaigns of 1840 and 1844," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 51, Issue 4, December 1992, 197-212.
[497] "Female Politicians," *United States Democratic Review*, 30, (April 1852), 355**.**
[498] Silbey, *The American Political Nation,* 36.

The Great Difference between Young America and Old Fogy [499]

Democratic leaders launched their own drive for youth in the mid-1840s; a political, cultural, and literary appeal they called "Young America." This new vision for American greatness stressed youth literally – as an appeal to new voters – and figuratively – as a progressive nationalist spirit juxtaposed to the hidebound regimes of "Old Europe."[500] Young America was primarily a metaphor, an "allusion to youth, purity, and freshness," an idealistic vision for a maturing nation.[501]

The new guard of Young Americans – men like Samuel Tilden, born during the 1812 war and rising to power in their thirties – saw themselves as incoming Outs, reclaiming their nation from the Whigs' phony populism. Their brief sojourn in opposition allowed them to reinvent themselves for a younger audience. John L. O'Sullivan, spokesman for the movement and coiner of the phrase "Manifest Destiny," artfully compared his progressive movement to a snake. Time out of office had rubbed off the dead skin of backward-looking Democrats – old Jacksonians who picked

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[499] Abraham Lincoln, "Lecture on Discoveries, Inventions, and Improvements," Springfield, Illinois, February 11, 1859, in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Eight Volumes*, Ed. Roy P. Basler, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 3: 358.

[500] Robert Walker Johannsen, *The Frontier, The Union, and Stephen A Douglas*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 80; Yonatan Eyal, *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3.

[501] Eyal, *The Young America Movement,* 3; David Hackett Fischer cleverly explores the implication of the titles "Young" and "Old" in nineteenth-century America, David Hackett Fischer, *Growing Old in America,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 131-3.

unnecessary fights, seemed to hate the entire government, and rarely looked toward the future – so that a rising generation of "unsophisticated youth can come forward."[502]

So the Democratic Party, out of power for only a few years, borrowed from the Whigs' 1840 campaign and recast themselves as underdog Outs looking to move forward. In the 1844 election, darkhorse candidate James K. Polk cast himself as "Young Hickory" and portrayed the oldest political party in the country as the rising "Young Democracy." In Ohio, Democrats claimed that the Whigs were "behind the age," while progressive Young Americans were "in keeping with the spirit of the times."[503] In Virginia, campaigners asserted that they represented "new youth," "new era," and "new life."[504] Even their campaign songs took on a youthful tempo in 1844, Democrats distributed lively "quicksteps" and "gallopades," unlike the plodding marches of their earlier campaigns.[505]

During the "roaring forties," when young people seemed increasingly "go ahead," technological breakthroughs heralded a new world, and anti-corruption made an easy slogan, Young Americans trumpeted the Democratic party as "buoyant and bracing for

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[502] Eyal, *The Young American Movement,* 7-8.
[503] "Wm. A. Neil, Esq," *Daily Ohio Statesman*, October 2, 1850.
[504] "An Appeal to the Young Democrats of Frederick, Virginia," University of Virginia, Special Collections, Charlottesville, VA.
[505] F. A. Wagler, "Govr. Polk's march and quick step," (Baltimore: Geo. Willig Jr., 1844); A. Tennessean, "Hickory waltz and gallopade," (New York: John F. Nunns, 1844); Lewis Clark, "Polk quadrilles," (Baltimore: Samuel Carusi, 1844); John F. Goneke, "James K. Polk's grand march and quick step," (Philadelphia: G. Willig, 1844), All collected from "Music for a Nation: American Sheet Music, 1820-1860," Library of Congress, Last modified June 11, 2013, http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/smhtml/

the future."[506] They cast their Whig rivals as atavistic old Federalists, a zombie party refusing to die, the very embodiment of that new slight: Old Fogies.[507]

Much of their talk of being the party of the future was pandering, but Young Americans found something very concrete to offer young people: western lands. As president, Polk picked a fight with Mexico and ultimately won what would become California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, and Wyoming. All that new territory let rootless young Americans envision the West as their birthright, an escape valve for when they felt trapped by life in the crowded East.[508] Though not initially intended for young people, the Democratic Party now had something real to entice all of those anxious youths stifled by the uncertainties of nineteenth-century life. It was the closest any party had gotten to a concrete offer to young people. Some prominent Young Americans even began to talk about free homes for settlers, a policy which would benefit rootless young people most of all.[509]

The Young American movement was not necessarily a movement of young Americans. Most of its leaders were in their thirties or forties, young for politicians but still twice the age of the average American. Some of its most prominent supporters were old frontier warriors, contemporaries of Andrew Jackson like Thomas Hart Benton and Sam Houston. The movement was always strongest as a political faction in Washington and as a literary movement in New York; it did not find much mention in the diaries of

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[506] "An Appeal to the Young Democrats of Frederick, Virginia," Broadside, University of Virginia, Special Collections, Charlottesville, VA.
[507] David Hackett Fischer explores the emergence of the term "Old Fogy," in the antebellum era, *Growing Old in America,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 91.
[508] Eyal, *The Young American Movement,* 147.
[509] Ibid., 147-9; Mark Lause, *Young America*: *Land, Labor, and the Republican Community*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

nineteen-year-olds across the country. Young America revitalized the Democratic party and reached out to young people in innovative ways, bringing a progressive worldview and concrete offerings, but it did not establish the kind of campaign organizations, on-the-ground, that could continuously filter virgin voters into their party.

Republicans Wake Up

The first volley of youth-focused Outs – the Whigs of 1840 – used young people's economic anxieties to overthrow the status quo. The second round – Democratic Young Americans – volleyed back with talk of progress, generational excitement, and a concrete offer for young supporters. It was not until the third volley, of a meteoric party rising in the 1850s, that a movement incorporated all of these tricks into the most successful bid for youth support.

The Republican party, organized in 1854 and holding two branches of government within six years, rose so quickly that many forget it was ever a third party. During the excited and unstable 1850s, the movement coalesced out of dying parties and fading factions. They shared an opposition to the extension of slavery and a frustrated belief that conspiratorial southerners blocked the northern majority's rightful dominance. They hoped to leave behind old alliances and build their new movement among young voters. It is no coincidence that the best-organized bid for youth support came from this party rising from non-existence to dominance.[510]

As their first presidential candidate, Republicans chose the adventurous John C. Frémont. The illegitimate son of a dashing French immigrant, Frémont gained national

[510] William Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

fame exploring the West and conquering California. He had eloped with the blue-eyed, raven-haired Jessie Benton Frémont, the brilliant daughter of the tough old Jacksonian senator Thomas Hart Benton, who raised her to speak five languages, attend cabinet meetings and orchestrate campaigns. The couple promised youth, vigor, Democratic connections and romantic adventurism.[511] The fact that Frémont was just forty-three, and Jessie barely thirty, further appealed to a new generation.[512]

Among Frémont's strengths as a candidate, behind closed doors Republican leaders most valued his inexperience. He was, Horace Greeley bragged, the "merest baby in politics," allowing the party to move beyond the vicious partisan battles of the last decade.[513] The leaders who guided the Republican Party made newness their watchword in 1856, like the Young Americans before them they used "new" and "young" interchangeably. In their letters, prominent politicians like Francis Preston Blair, Martin

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[511] For the most enjoyable book on Frémont and Benton, read Sally Denton's *Passion and Principle: John and Jessie Frémont*, (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007). See Lyman Abbott's *Reminiscences* for a stirring portrait of the cult of personality Jessie Benton Frémont in 1856, Lyman Abbott, *Reminiscences* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1914), 107-111.

[512] Whether young people preferred younger candidates is open to some debate. Campaigners certainly believed they did, and were sure to stress the youth of any politician under fifty. Sometimes this got out of hand, with "bald and toothless" old candidates asserting their youth in print. On the other hand, some of the most popular candidates among young voters, men like William Henry Harrison and Andrew Jackson, were well over sixty-five. Ultimately, young people had little say in the nominating process, so a candidate's age was often an afterthought, mentioned when convenient. ("Indication of Progress," *Washington Post,* September 12, 1882; "Young men! Vote for Edgar Tehune for Congress" [Chicago, 1886], Broadside in Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress; "A Ticket for Young Republicans," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 10, 1890).

[513] Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party*, 325. What experience Frémont did have, Greeley noted, was as a Democrat, proving that the Republicans were not merely a "Whig trick." *New York Tribune,* June 7, 1856.

Van Buren, and Horace Greeley all referred to Frémont as a "*new man*."[514] This young face might bring in young voters, another Republican newspaperman cheered: "a new man and a new party will take thousands!"[515]

Not only was John C. Frémont young and dashing, but his dramatic career summiting Western mountains also allowed Republicans to cash in on a decade of expansionist Young American rhetoric. The *New York Times* – a stuffy paper read mostly by men who would hardly venture above Forty-Second street, let alone across the Rockies – boasted that the intrepid explorer was the very "embodiement of the spirit of Young America."[516] Republicans distanced themselves from the Whigs' earlier caution about western expansion and even began to talk about Free Homes, a movement formerly associated with Young American Democrats.[517] The Republicans' appropriation of the Young American movement particularly spoke to youths "who are about to become voters" and might not remember a time when such rhetoric was distinctly Democratic.[518]

If conventions decided elections, Frémont would have been president. However, James Buchanan, perhaps the stogiest president in American history (before Benjamin Harrison, at least) won a weak plurality and almost all electoral votes outside of the upper North. Republican leaders were excited, but lacked strong ground operations, while the Democrats benefitted from established campaign techniques, despite their dull candidate. A third party, the nativist American movement, split the anti-Democratic popular majority. Also, the Republicans had existed for barely two years, not long enough to

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[514] Gienapp, *Origins of the Republican Party,* 324; Denton, *Passion and Principle,* 234.
[515] Ibid.*,* 324.
[516] "The Flag-Bearer of the Republicans," *New York Times,* June 19, 1856.
[517] Jonathan Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil: 1824-1854*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 135-138.
[518] "The Duty of the Republican Party," *Boston Daily Atlas*, November 26, 1856.

socialize generations of young people to give their virgin votes to the new movement. Suffering from this lag-time, the Republicans considered themselves lucky to win a "Victorious Defeat" and looked forward to 1860.[519]

Republican politicians had studied the previous round of rising Outs, borrowing the Young Americans' generational stirring and western expansion. Yet in their haste to learn from the Democrats, Republicans forgot many of the tricks the Whigs had debuted back in 1840. Reflecting on the 1856 defeat, one Massachusetts Republican wrote: "we were a sort of mob, unorganized, contending with a well drilled and bold enemy."[520] He sounded like the Whigs of the late 1830s, who chastised their party for operating "with desperation but without system."[521] Finally in 1860, Republican politicians reached out to young men with both youthful rhetoric and a new type of "systematic organization."[522] Combining the lessons of two generations of rising Outs, the Republicans launched an unprecedented drive for young supporters in 1860.

It all began in the spring, when a few young clerks at Hartford's rifle factories started working as bodyguards for Republican speakers. When the brawling emancipationist Cassius M. Clay spoke in town, one of his young guards supposedly used his torch to clobber a hostile Democrat. The story spread. Soon the group began holding rowdy meetings above a local drug store, wearing shiny black capes to rallies, and calling themselves the Wide Awakes. The strange club – made up of political novices in their early twenties – began to promote their movement through newspapers and pamphlets. In

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[519] Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party,* 413-447.
[520] Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party,* 415.
[521] Silbey, *The American Political Nation,* 36-7.
[522] Thurlow Weed, "The Revolution of the Parties," *Albany Evening Register,* July 6, 1860.

their circulars they self-consciously sold themselves as rising young Outs, working to bring about "the ascendancy of the principles of the Republican party."[523]

The Wide Awakes incited political passions in an innovative way. Their torch-lit demonstrations presented the dramatic image of hundreds of stern young men, clad in dark, shimmering uniforms, marching in unison to a stirring drumbeat. Instead of the "spontaneous hullabaloo" of the drunken Whigs of 1840, the militaristic Wide Awakes signaled a kind of serious young manhood, appealing to northerners who felt emasculated by years of Slave Power conspiracies.[524] They deliberately targeted young people, calling massive crowds of youths to "wake up," and helping to organize roughly one thousand Wide Awake companies from Maine to San Francisco.[525] By the summer, most Americans believed – incorrectly – that there were at least 500,000 Wide Awakes in the nation.[526]

Their movement presented the Republican establishment with an unwieldy gift. The Wide Awakes debuted a bold campaign model that inspired new voters, but could the leadership collaborate with the grass-roots movement? Republican leaders faced

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[523] "The Republican Wide Awakes of Hartford: Organized March 3, 1860." *Connecticut Historical Society*, Hartford; Julius G. Rathbun, "'The Wide Awakes': The Great Political Organization of 1860," *Connecticut Quarterly,* 1 (Oct. 1895), 335.
[524] George Templeton Strong, *Diary, Young Man in New York*, Ed. Allan Nevins, (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 43.
[525] Elizur Wright, "An Eye-Opener for the Wide Awakes," (Boston, 1860), *Pennsylvania Historical Society,* Philadelphia PA; Carl Schurz, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz: Volume 2, 1852-1863,* (New York: The McClure Co, 1907), 193; Mary A. Logan, *Reminiscences of a Soldier's Wife,* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1916), 65.
[526] Jon Grinspan, "Young Men for War": The Wide Awakes and Lincoln's 1860 Presidential Campaign," *Journal of American History,* 96 (Sept. 2009), 360; Julius G. Rathbun, "'The Wide Awakes': The Great Political Organization of 1860," *Connecticut Quarterly,* 1 (Oct. 1895), 335.

Samuel Tilden's challenge: were they dexterous enough to incorporate an excited, youthful movement into their existing hierarchy?

At first, many were hostile. The Wide Awakes had a habit of congregating, uninvited, before the homes of prominent Republicans late at night, waking leaders with brass bands, stinking torches, and unrehearsed serenades. Politicians disapproved. Carl Schurz complained to his wife that Wide Awake troops seemed to trail him across the midwest, hollering outside whatever inn he spent the night.[527] William H. Seward, famously fond of a quiet cigar and a good night's rest, frequently begged noisy Wide Awake companies to "allow me to go to sleep."[528]

Top Republican organizers realized that snubbing excited young Wide Awakes meant squandering a valuable resource.[529] Thurlow Weed, the party's best strategist, called on his Republicans to remember that they were still the Outs and needed the support of young "Wide Awakes by the hundreds and thousands."[530] Seward stopped shushing Wide Awakes and instead became their loudest supporter. In a late-summer speaking tour, Seward complimented massive crowds of uniformed youths in bustling cities and quiet towns from Michigan to Kansas. In the past, such a movement was not

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[527] Schurz, *The Reminiscences of Carl Schurz,* 2: 194-5.
[528] "Mr. Seward and Party En Route," *New York Herald*, September 4, 1860; "Senator Seward Down East," *New York Herald,* August 15, 1860; "Political Affairs," *New York Herald*, September 3, 1860.
[529] The push and pull between a youth movement and the national leadership resembled the development of the phrases "virgin vote" and "start right." Though established leaders did not introduce the Wide Awake clubs or the term "virgin vote," they quickly adapted these trends to their own interests. Often, adult politicians during the age of popular proved better at managing existing youth movements than they were at introducing their own organizations.
[530] "Thurlow Weed, "The Revolution of the Parties," *Albany Evening Register,* July 6, 1860.

possible, Seward shouted, but the Wide Awakes were rising and "none but Republicans will be born in the United States after the year 1860."[531]

No politician courted the young Wide Awakes with more enthusiasm than Charles Sumner. The crusading senator spoke to multiple Wide Awake companies a week in the final rush of campaigning. Sumner made a particularly moving icon: the brutal beating he had suffered on the Senate floor fed young northerners' frustrated desire to answer cowardly fire-eating Democrats. Sumner stoked their fury, goading young Wide Awakes to "leap forward in defense of Northern rights."[532] This appeal was particularly popular. When George Templeton Strong happened upon a Manhattan Wide Awake rally, he felt convinced "the North must assert its rights, now, and take the consequences," and walked away musing "I think I'll vote the Republican ticket next Tuesday."[533]

While everything else about American politics seemed to be crumbling in 1860, the Wide Awakes established a model for youth-oriented campaigns that would be copied by most parties, in most major elections, over the following three decades. They blended the expectant anxiety of ascendant Outs with a militaristic organization and broad lessons drawn from past Whig and Democratic races. Observers constantly compared the 1860 campaign to "the good old days of 1840," and the election even topped 1840's record-

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[531] "Mr. Seward to the Wide Awakes," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel,* September 10, 1860. For a dramatic account of this trip, and a sixteen-year-old girl's view of the Wide Awakes, see Seward's daughter diary entries from the trip: Fanny Seward, "Stumping for Lincoln in 1860: Excerpts from the Diary of Fanny Seward," *University of Rochester Library Bulletin*, Ed. Patricia C. Johnson, 16, (Autumn 1960).
[532] Charles Sumner, "The Victory and the Present Duties," *The Works of Charles Sumner, Volume 5,* (Boston, Lee and Shephard, 1875-83), 351.
[533] Strong, *Diary of the Civil War,* 57.

breaking turnout rate, drawing 81.2 percent of voters.[534] But the Wide Awakes also built on Democratic advances, appealing to the kind of generational excitement previously seen "in the anatomy of Young America."[535] Their iconography – an open eye, talk of throwing off past stupor – played on the same progressive notes with which Democrats had previously enchanted Young Americans. Replicating the success of the Wide Awakes became a goal – not of Hartford factory boys, but of established politicians – for the rest of the age of popular politics.

The Charm of Novelty

Seward's claim that "none but Republicans" would be born in America after 1860 turned out to be less ridiculous than it sounded. The upheavals of the Civil War threw off the wobbly cycle of party politics, fraying Jacksons' old coalition and pushing millions of young northerners and freedmen into the Republican Party. Radicals' calls for a "hard war" on the Confederacy helped enforce the view – promoted by the Wide Awakes – that their party spoke for an assertive, vengeful northern masculinity. At the same time, the Union army served as a gigantic recruiting machine for the Republicans. Three out of every four Union soldiers voted for Lincoln in 1864. Many of these young men put down lifelong roots in the Republican Party.[536]

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[534] "Mass Meeting at Woodsville," *Trenton State Gazette,* September 15, 1860; John P. McIver, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition*, Ed. Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), Series Eb62-113.

[535] "The Struggle in Pennsylvania," *New York Herald,* October 8, 1860.

[536] Walter Dean Burnham, *Presidential Ballots: 1836-1892,* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1955)*,* 260; Phillip Shaw Paludan, *The Presidency of Abraham Lincoln* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 274-293; Oscar O. Winther, "The Soldier Vote in the Election of 1864," *New York History,* 25 (Oct. 1944): 440-58.

The war and its aftermath caused an unusual period of one-party dominance. Over most of the age of popular politics, control of the House of Representatives changed every three and a half years on average. But from 1861 to 1875, the Republicans held the majority for fourteen years straight. And they occupied the White House from 1861 to 1885, not counting Andrew Johnson's accidental tenure.

This was the situation Samuel Tilden faced in the late 1860s, with his Democrats stuck as an archetypal party-out-of-power. He and his ally Horatio Seymour responded with the Democrat's "New Departure," an attempt at "burying out of sight all that is of the dead past."[537] Trying to move beyond their party's old fights over slavery and secession, the post-war Democrats focused on denouncing Federal "centralism" and manipulating racial tensions. They redirected their efforts, abandoning old fire-eaters of the Deep South for a new generation of young, white, small farmers and wageworkers in the lower North. In many of these states campaigners organized semi-secret Jackson Clubs to "train up" new Democrats.[538]

By the 1870s, Tilden and Seymour's innovation – bringing in young voters to raise up a struggling party – should have been strikingly familiar. In fact, Horatio Seymour's 1868 call for more Jackson Clubs sounds almost identical to Abraham Lincoln's plan to help struggling Whigs, twenty years earlier. In 1848, Lincoln hoped to

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[537] James L. Vallandigham*, A Life of Clement L. Vallandigham*. (Baltimore: Turnbull Brothers, 1872), 338.

[538] Horatio Seymour to Samuel Tilden, July 20, 1868, *Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden,* 1:242; Rebecca Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997)*,* 27; Edward Lee Gambill, *Conservative Ordeal: Northern Democrats and Reconstruction, 1865-1868*, (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1981); Mark Wahlgren Summers, *A dangerous Stir: Fear, Paranoia, and the Making of Reconstruction*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

organized clubs by gathering up "all the shrewd, wild boys around town," providing "an interesting pastime" and offering young Whigs importance in their communities.[539] Twenty years later, Seymour expressed the same goals. Writing to Tilden, Seymour claimed that Jackson Clubs would offer young people a "motive as well as a method," provide a "charm of novelty," and give young Democrats "power in their towns."[540] Two politicians, representing two parties, two decades apart, both looked to the same basic solution.

This parallel highlights the cyclical nature of Outs' reliance on the young. From the 1830s through the 1870s, diverse parties fell back on the same basic tactic: turning new voters against the corruption of the party in power. Though each wave innovated in some way – bringing in hard cider, or generational excitement, or promises of western land, or uniformed marching clubs – they applied the same premise each time. And as each generation of excited young campaigners grew up and burnt out, another followed, raising a new movement with it.[541]

This cycle became so predictable that political families passed down the tactic. In October 1860, at the height of the Wide Awake movement, Illinois gubenatorial candidate Richard Yates stood before a sea of young Republicans and declared: "I love

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[539] Abraham Lincoln to William H. Herndon, June 22, 1848, *Abraham Lincoln: The Collected Works, Eight Volumes*, Ed. Roy P. Basler, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 1: 491.

[540] Horatio Seymour to Samuel Tilden, July 20, 1868, *Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden,* 1:242

[541] This cycle of excited youths and burnt out older activists was a constant refrain in politicians search for new, energetic campaigners. "The Continuation of a Political Reconnoisence of the Key Stone State," *New York Herald*, September 28, 1848; Marianne Marbury Slaughter, "Letter from Pleasant Riderhood," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, August 25, 1878; *Washington Pos*t, September 12, 1882; "The Grand Army Anniversary," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 5, 1891.

my wife first, my boy and little girl next, and after that the Wide Awakes."[542] A generation later, that boy Yates mentioned, Richard Yates Jr., gave a similar address. This time over Blue Points and roast quail, Richard Yates Jr. gave his own encouraging talk on "The Young Man in Politics."[543] Pandering to youth seemed timeless in the age of popular politics.

Chasing the High Tide

Such appeals were not timeless. In the mid-1870s the system dramatically changed. Instead of the alternating rounds of Outs reaching out to young Americans, both parties began to make continuous bids for their attention. At first this competition positioned young voters at the very center of American politics and pushed campaigns into a kind of frenzied overdrive. Ultimately, the parties' competitive obsession with youth would break the entire system. It all began with the fading memory of the Civil War.

By the mid-1870s, many young Americans had lost interest in the long saga of slavery and secession. Men and women born in the 1850's, who could barely remember Appomattox, let alone Fort Sumter, were rising as mature citizens. They cared more about the interminable depression, partisan corruption, and their expanding nation. Campaigners realized that this rising generation had little interest in, as one comedian put it, "the cut of trousers that prevailed in 1861."[544] Even in the deep South, where the Lost

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[542] "A Great Day for Joliet," *Chicago Tribune*, October 12, 1860.
[543] "The Young Man in Politics," *Daily Inter Ocean,* January 12, 1892.
[544] "Private Dalzell," *Wheeling Register*, September 8, 1887; "A Dinner Given for Carl Schurz," *Hartford Daily Courant*, April 28, 1875; "Other Republican Rallies," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, October 11, 1879; "A Young Voter, "Young Men and the War Issues,"

Cause flourished among veterans, some young Texans demanded to know why they should bother "yelping about niggers and yanks to accommodate old suckers."[545]

Young Americans' fading interest in the Civil War upended the partisan status quo. Northern voters ceased to associate the Republicans with the victorious war or see the Democrats as traitors. Why should young people care what the Democratic Party had done years before they were born?[546] Why should they support a Republican party, which may have once stood for youth and progress, but by the 1870s seemed to be made up of "rotten old hulks who monopolize the offices and dwell upon the past"?[547]

If the coming of the Civil War benefitted the Republicans, its going worked in the Democrats' favor. In 1874 they took control of the House for the first time in fourteen years, briefly grabbed the Senate in '78, and won the presidency in '84. Though aware that many voters were just "prattling infants when Lincoln was elected," elite

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The Century, 33, (March, 1887), 312; "Narrow Partisanship," *New York Times,* January 8, 1888. Even historians, those most prone to linger on the conflict, began to introduce a "reunion school" of Civil War interpretation, shading down the rough edges and old grudges, in the 1880s. (Thomas Pressly, *Americans Interpret their Civil War*, [New York: The Free Press, 1965],)

[545] "Peets Store," *Houston Union*, January 16, 1869. For other examples of young southerners' desire to move on after the conflict, see Sarah Ann Ross Pringle, interviewed by Effie Cowan, McLennan County, Texas, (Undated), American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers Project; Marcus Sterling Hopkins, November 3, 1868, Diary, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA; Edward Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 34-55; Summers, *A Dangerous Stir*.

[546] "Young Men and the Union," *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier*, March 30, 1880.

[547] "A Word to Our Young Men," *Rocky Mountain News,* September 17, 1880. Denver Democrats went on to accuse Republicans of being "fossils who have bonanzas," echoing the young Texans who felt constrained by rich "old suckers." Relying on a mixture of class and age resentments, the Democrats offered a future to younger, poorer voters who had not made their identity, and their fortunes, in the 1860s. "Peets Store," *Houston Union*, January 16, 1869; see Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery*, 60 for a strong discussion of this trend.

Republicans still clung to the past.[548] Perhaps they were too attached to their party's proudest era, or maybe they found it difficult to simultaneously pander to veterans and to young people as those groups grew further apart. For whatever reason, the GOP grew grumpier as younger voters pushed for new issues. When a twenty-eight year old wrote to the *Boston Transcript* asking the paper to discuss topics other than the Civil War, its Republican editors angrily complained that "young men of this type have great political influence" but "should be handled as they are – babies."[549]

The battle over the memory of the Civil War led the parties to broadly rethink the role of young people in politics. The war left a distinct marker in time, a 'remember where you were' milestone, and highlighted just how rapidly generations age and new cohorts rise. Forward-looking politicians began see the decisive role young voters played in American elections. Previously, young people were a temporarily useful bloc, sought by Outs but neglected by Ins. Around 1876, campaigners started to count the massive numbers of young people who determined increasingly close elections and concluded that new voters required constant attention. As popular politics reached a fevered pitch in the 1880s Democrats and Republicans realized what had been true, on-the-ground, all along. Virgin voters decide victory.

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[548] This suggests that all the waving the bloody shirt done by Republican politicians was not an initial response to the Civil War, but a delayed effort to remind a younger generation, a decade or more after Appomattox, of events they had not experienced. ("The Party for Young Men," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, July 30, 1880; "Mothers Vote This Year," *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 26, 1884; "To Honest Young Men"**:** *Wisconsin State Journal*, August 1, 1884).

[549] "Letter," *Boston Transcript*, October 16, 1879. The *New York Tribune* also published a notable editorial titled "Why the Nation Forgets," accusing new voters of ungratefully scoffing at veterans. The *Tribune* sarcastically blamed school textbooks for being "delightfully nonpartisan," when they should heap scorn on the Democrats for slavery, secession, and war. "Why the Nation Forgets," *New York Tribune*, May 27, 1888.

This obsession with young voters took place during the overlooked high tide of political excitement. American democracy was never more fevered and intense than it was between 1876 and 1896. Voter turnout hit its peak in 1876, drawing even more voters than the 1860 campaign that sparked the Civil War. In hotly contested states like Indiana, more than ninety percent of eligible citizens turned out for five straight presidential contests stretching over twenty years. These Gilded Age elections were also the closest in American history. The popular vote between 1880 and 1888 was fourteen times closer than the average for the rest of the age of popular politics, with three elections in a row won by less than half a percentage point. Some races were won by fewer than two thousand votes – in a nation of fifty million – and others went to the loser of the popular ballot. Such razor-thin margins left both parties feeling like Outs and hoping to build among new voters.[550]

These competitive races threw fireworks into blazing partisan bonfires. Evenly matched parties battled to turn out more marchers, louder bands, and tastier barbecues. A cottage industry grew up selling club uniforms and banners, with artists in such high demand that they frequently reused old flags, painting the face of this year's candidate over last's, adding a mustache or muttonchops as needed.[551] Newspapermen churned out more partisan rags per person than at any other time in American history. By 1890 there were six times more papers in the nation than there had been in 1840, shrieking their

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[550] Mark Lawrence Kornbluh, *Why American Stopped Voting: The Decline of Participatory Democracy and the Emergence of Modern American Politics*, (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 13 – 16.

[551] Harry Germaine, "A Campaign Club's Equipment," *Daily Inter Ocean*, May 31, 1896; "The Making of Campaign Banners," *Harper's Weeky*, September 10, 1892; "In a Campaign Banner Factory," *Rocky Mountain News,* August 23, 1896.

opinions as loudly as ever.[552] Historians tend to overlook these blustery Gilded Age campaigns, because they did not represent major innovations – as in 1840 – or deal with slavery and Civil War – like in 1860. For an excited seventeen-year old with a short memory, however, politics never roared louder.

Finally, in the 1880s, politicians placed young Americans at the center of this fevered political culture. Parties that could agree on little else recognized that victory depended upon wining over "1000s of budding youngsters."[553] Newspapers ran long articles declaring that virgin voters would decide a coming election. This awareness grew so commonplace that the *New York Times* could eventually yawn: "Young voters will determine this election, as they have determined every election in this state and city for the last five years."[554]

Party leaders, however, did not yawn. Instead they became fixated, in a typically Gilded Age way, on calculating the exact number of young men attaining majority with every election. Whereas earlier leaders had been satisfied with vague pronouncements that "a large proportion" of young people supported their cause, by the 1880s Republicans and Democrats printed elaborate statistics – many of them bogus – claiming that "the equivalent of a new state" would cast a first ballot every four years. In doing so

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[552] There were 2,270 American newspapers in 1840, 4,459 papers in 1860, and 13,489 papers by 1890. As far as citizens per newspaper, in 1840 America had 7,519 citizens per paper, in 1860 the ratio was 7,051 citizens per paper, and it was 4,666 citizens per paper by 1890. After this historic low, the ratio went back up as newspapers began to consolidate in the twentieth century. Krissy Clark and Geoff McGhee, "Did the West Make Newspapers, or Did Newspapers Make the West?" *Stanford University, Rural West Initiative,* last modified February 22, 2013, http://www.stanford.edu/group/ruralwest/cgi-bin/drupal/content/rural-newspapers-history.

[553] "Grant in Chicago," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, October 23, 1879.

[554] "The Young Vote," *New York Times,* October 13, 1897.

politicians joined Samuel Tilden, embracing the bureaucratizing era's fascination with the power of quantification.[555]

These numbers-obsessed partisans had no idea how close they were to a thrilling revelation. Over the nineteenth century, American women steadily limited how many children they had, cutting the number in half between 1800 and 1900. As a result of this, and the fact that Americans were living longer, the average age crept up. The average American was around seventeen in 1840, by 1880 they were twenty and nine-tenths, and in 1890 they reached twenty-two. This means that during the high tide of popular politics in the 1880s, the average age finally met the voting age.[556] Due to the immigration of so many European men, America was also becoming more white and more male. Suddenly, in the 1880s, virgin voters – most of them white men in their early twenties – were no longer a sideshow courted solely by striving parties. Politicians seemed to realize, without ever calculating this statistic, that virgin voters were now their biggest audience.

Campaigners fell all over themselves appealing to this decisive bloc. Previously leaders often used the phrase "generous and unsophisticated" when describing young people's political contributions.[557] The idea was that young citizens were helpful in

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[555] "The Mothers Vote This Year," *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 26, 1884; "A Dinner Given for Carl Schurz," *Hartford Daily Courant*, April 28, 1875; *The New Mississippian*, November 18, 1884.

[556] Michael R. Haines and Richard H. Steckel, *A Population History of North America*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 702-4. Though the other momentous realization of 1890 – that America no longer had a single line of frontier – has received frequent discussion, the significance of the change in American age and demographics still needs exploration.

[557] This phrase appears in over five hundred political articles from 1840 to 1890, for a brief sampling of its uses, see: Abraham Lincoln, "Letter to William H. Herndon," July 10, 1848, *Lincoln: The Complete Works,* 1: 497; Jacob Frey, *Reminiscences of Baltimore*, (Baltimore: Maryland Book Concern, 1893), 69; *"*The Duty of the Republican Party," *The Boston Daily Atlas*, November 26, 1856; Samuel Tilden, "To perfect the organization

campaigning and liberal with their time, but mindless cogs in partisan hierarchies. By the 1880s campaigners stepped beyond this utilitarian view. In 1882, the *Washington Post* begged politicians to respect young activists and not make them "do all the work of the campaign."[558] Instead, during the political high tide of the '80s, campaigners cycled through a number of desperate and contradictory efforts to appeal to young citizens.

At first campaigners revisited the logic of "virgin voters," stressing the importance of partisan monogamy. One's first ballot, they taught, meant a lifelong commitment. This was particularly popular in the negative form among panicked Republicans trying to dissuade young voters from experimenting with the Democrats. In a widely reprinted 1879 speech, part of his bid to become a senator, James A. Garfield addressed new voters who might consider joining the Democrats. Garfield's speech, quoted in Republican pamphlets long after his assassination, warned the virgin voter: "you are about to pitch your tent in one of the great political camps." He pointed to the Democracy's long list of skeletons, barely hidden in shallow graves, and declared "don't pitch young tent among the dead."[559] Republicans picked up on this ghastly imagery, warning virgin voters that one misguided vote might leave them forever "fastened to the festering, putrid corpse of a bogus Democracy."[560]

Ominous warnings of what would happen to insufficiently partisan young people went hand-in-hand with phony paeans to political independence. In the 1880s,

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of the Democracy of this state," Circular to New York State Democrats, March 31, 1868, Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress.

[558] "It is Gratifying," *Washington Post,* September 19, 1882.

[559] "'Don't pitch your tent among the dead.' An appeal to young men, 1879," Blaine and Logan Campaign Pamphlet, 1884, Library of Congress; "Garfield to Young Voters. Do Not Pitch Your Tent in the Camp of the Dead. Come into the Camp of Glory and Life," *Daily Inter Ocean*, November 5, 1888.

[560] "Our Young Voters," *Trenton State Gazette*, October 30, 1884.

independence attained newly positive connotations – especially amid the upper-middle class – and desperate campaigners paid empty lip service. Truly independent young citizens, they claimed, would examine both sides, then slavishly follow theirs. Democrats warned young men not to let "torch light processions influence your vote" but to objectively look at the records of the parties, particularly the heinous corruption of the Republicans.[561] The Republicans – even while hissing about "festering corpses" – claimed to want young voters who would objectively evaluate the parties.[562] The nation's comedians mocked this façade, satirizing politicians who claimed: "I don't want to influence you, so long as you vote my ticket."[563]

More often than voicing nasty threats about partisan monogamy or ridiculous claims to love independence, most campaigners simply idealized young Americans. Before, leaders usually viewed young people as a useful but potentially dangerous force, helpful on the ground but in need of constant guidance from higher up. In the 1880s, bosses and intellectuals switched to a view of virgin voters as pure, earnest, and wholesome. They assured themselves that a man "never casts a purer ballot than when he votes for the first time" and that a young American growing up in the 1880s is "sure to be

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[561] "Over the Field, Pertinent Advice to Young Colorado Electors," *Rocky Mountain News*, October 5, 1880.

[562] "Claims of Independence: The Young Voters" *Cleveland Gazette"* September 27, 1884; "The Year of the Full Vote," *Daily Inter Ocean*, November 6, 1888; "Etc." *Overland Monthly and Out West Magazine*, 4, (September 1884) 327; "The Young Man's First Vote," *Rocky Mountain News*, November 1, 1890.

[563] The popular bit by humorist and preacher Robert Jones Burdette advised young voters that if they support "any candidate but the one I vote for and the country is ruined," and accused the opposition of throwing banana peels on the sidewalk and planning to force married men live with their mother-in-laws. Robert Jones Burdette, "Burdette's Advice to Young Voters," *Burlington Hawkeye*, August, 1884, "Advice to Young Voters," *Wheeling Sunday Register*, August 17, 1884; "Burdette's Advice to Young Voters," *The Wisconsin State Register*, September 13, 1884; "Burdette's Advice to Young Voters," *Daily Evening Bulletin*, September 19, 1884.

wiser than his father."[564] Parties imagined that this purity meant young people might revolutionize politics, overthrowing the bosses and perfecting society. [565] Jaded machines quickly learned to parrot the idealism of liberal reformers, using this optimism to lure another generation into their corrupt organizations.

Joining the Sage

Those years of close elections and partisan pandering were also the peak of Samuel Tilden's power and influence. He ran for president, winning the popular vote in the confused, contested, and monumentally excited 1876 election, but losing the disputed electoral vote process that followed. He finished major renovations of his Gramercy mansion and lived his final years there as a partisan sage, pondering campaign tactics. His three insights about youth politics were never truer. All sides believed that young people were, as the Populists put it, "the most important animal upon the farm."[566] They all considered themselves the Outs, continuously looking to virgin voters to bring victory in the next close race. Most of all, they acknowledged, with their desperate and contradictory appeals, just how hard it was for politicians to reach young Americans.

On a broader level, many Americans borrowed some of Tilden's characteristic introspection. Between 1876 and the end to the century, citizens began an increasingly thoughtful discussion about what a democracy should be, who should vote, and who should lead. After decades of seemingly perpetual and instinctual partisanship, ordinary

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[564] "A Fresh Suggestion" *Inter Ocean*, March 30, 1876; Tourgée, *Letter to a King*, 43; Daniel J. Ryan, "Clubs In Politics," *North American Review*, 146, (February 1888); "Young Voter" *Trenton State Gazette*, September 10, 1878.
[565] "Young Men in Politics," *Trenton State Gazette*, July 3, 1884; Edward A. Ross, "Raising the Standard of Suffrage," *La Follette's Weekly Magazine*, April 1, 1911, 7.
[566] "Among Our Exchanges," *The American Nonconformist*, November 9, 1893.

citizens became noticeably self-aware in the 1880s and 1890s. In previous eras, only a handful of visionaries expressed a holistic understanding of their democracy, but in the 1880s hundreds of writers, publishing in dozens of journals, considered their entire system. The best articles on the role young people played in the age of popular politics were all written during the 1884 election, while the greatest book on the subject, Albion Tourgée's *Letters to a King,* came out four years later.[567] Far from the mechanistic and thoughtless Gilded Age politics often depicted by historians, a growing number citizens experienced a dawning self-awareness.

A number of factors, some of them unrelated to youth, contributed to this new thoughtfulness. The fading of the Civil War era, the string of close elections, the pervasive sense of political corruption, and a drumbeat of depressions in 1873, 1883, and 1893, all contributed. Massive numbers of workers and farmers felt increasingly distant from their supposed representatives. A growing electorate, brimming not just with twenty-one year olds but with millions of new immigrants, seemed disorganized and unpredictable.

Yet the usual Gilded Age tale of woe does not explain this new self-awareness. For all the impoverished workers raging against the railroads and the bosses, there were idealistic and optimistic upper-middle class liberals, filled with a faith that they could improve long-flawed systems. A proliferating population, ranging from businessmen and lawyers to clerks and schoolmistresses, reassessed their political structure with a

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[567] "Young Reformers Club," *The American Reformer*, November 8, 1884, 364; "Mothers Vote This Year," *Salt Lake Tribune*, June 26, 1884; "The Young Voters," *Cleveland Gazette*," September 27, 1884, 2, 2; "Violent Little Partisans," *Newark Evening News*, October 10, 1884; Albion Winegar Tourgée, *Letter to a King*, (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1888).

progressive faith in the perfectibility of all institutions. Many burned with the belief that democracy, like all social institutions, was malleable and improvable.[568] Unlike past generations over the age of popular politics, they had lost interest in partisan inheritance and sustainability. They wanted progress.

These reformers had no idea that they teetered on the brink. The majority were still intensely partisan. Most simply wanted to fix the democracy so that their own right-thinking party could dominate it. Many hoped to throw immigrants, non-whites, non-Protestants, and the poor off the voting rolls.[569] Almost none grasped the change their improvements would bring.

It was hard to see how fragile popular democracy was, because from the perspective of the 1880s, everything about politics was superlative. Americans lived with the highest turnouts, the closest elections, the wildest swindles, and the most young voters. Middle class improvers could debate the latest article on democracy from the newfound privacy of their drawing rooms, while their sons and daughters still went out to rallies – hollering, marching, flirting, and fighting. During this inundating high tide, public hoopla and private contemplation swirled together. Americans seemed drenched in politics.

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[568] Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in American, 1870-1920* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 80; Robert H. Wiebe, The Search for Order, 1877-1920, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967), 111-196.
[569] Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 94-139; McGerr*, The Decline of Popular Politics*, 43-65.

Conclusion:

Things ain't what they used to be

Graziano's shoeshine stand in Manhattan's Tweed courthouse seemed like the ideal compromise between public and private politics. The worn wood and cracked leather chairs stood within the halls of power, but still out in the airy seven-story rotunda, amid the defendants, janitors, and clerks. So that was where George Washington Plunkitt, the perfect caricature of a nineteenth-century ward boss, made his office for three decades.[570]

"Plunky" would storm in every day at ten. Graziano always had the boss's mail waiting. The tall, angular politico would hoist himself into a chair, plop his boots down on the brass shoe-stands and hold court. His broad mustache waggled as he spoke, his cloudy blue eyes darted from face to face. Plunkitt was restless and jerky and loud. Even after a half century in politics he never mastered the winks and nods of a close-mouthed city boss.[571]

Plunkitt was born in a shantytown on the fringes of what would become Central Park in 1842, and came to embody the bombastic youth-focused democracy of the time. He left school at age eleven to work as a butcher's boy in the meatpacking district, but dreamed of "winning fame and money in New York City Politics."[572] So he started to

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[570] "'Plunky,' The Picturesque" *New York World*, June 8, 1901; "George W. Plunkitt Dies at 82 Years," *New York Times*, November 20, 1924; William L. Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, (New York, McClure, Phillips, & Co., 1905).

[571] "'Plunky,' The Picturesque" *New York World*, June 8, 1901; "George W. Plunkitt Dies at 82 Years," *New York Times*, November 20, 1924; "Senator Plunkitt's 'Office,'" *New York Times*, January 29, 1902.

[572] Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall,* 8.

round up his voting-age friends – a cousin who didn't care about elections, neighbors who followed his lead – and formed the "George Washington Plunkitt Association." He then promised their votes (which he called "marketable goods") to a district boss in exchange for a political position.[573]

From there Plunkitt wormed his way into city politics, becoming an inescapable presence on the west side and in Albany between the 1860s and the 1900s. At one point he held four different positions, drawing three government salaries, simultaneously.[574] He made millions fleecing the booming city's construction projects. Though he called this "honest graft," the Brooklyn bridge and the Museum of Natural History cost more because Plunkitt wanted a cut.[575] He bragged about these deals to journalist William Riordan at Graziano's stand. In 1905 Riordan published a widely popular book of Plunkitt's "plain talks on practical politics."

He never forgot that young voters underwrote his wealth and power. Plunkitt framed his lectures to Riordan as advice for "young men who are goin' to cast their first votes."[576] When not "hanging out" at Graziano's, he spent his restless energy bouncing from boxing matches to fires to wakes, "holding his district" by mentoring its young people.[577] Plunkitt found these youths jobs or opportunities. Though he expected their votes, he did not "trouble them with political arguments."[578]

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[573] "George W. Plunkitt Dies at 82 Years," *New York Times*, November 20, 1924; Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall,* 8-10.
[574] Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall,* XXIII.
[575] "'Plunky,' The Picturesque" *New York World*, June 8, 1901.
[576] Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall,* 7.
[577] "To Sweep Plunkitt Out," *New York Tribune*, January 24, 1902; Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall,* 25-35, 49.
[578] Ibid., 25.

Around 1900 the view from Graziano's stand began to dim. In his candid talks with Riordan, Plunkitt struck an ominous tone, worrying about "the change that had come over the young men."[579] As the oldest district leader in Tammany hall, he noticed that young men and women seemed to have far less interest in parades, fireworks, and election-day whiskey then previous generations.[580] He blamed elite reformers' war on corruption, asking: "how are you goin' to interest our young men in their country if you have no office to give them when they work for their party?"[581] Benevolence and reciprocity drove machine politics, and Plunkitt claimed that good government-types were causing working class young men to hate their country, and to become anarchist terrorists.[582]

As usual, Plunkitt mixed self-serving nonsense with trenchant insight. Something *was* changing among the young. The ranks of virgin voters, who for sixty years marched into public democracy, stopped turning out around 1900. Voter turnout fell six percent from 1896 to 1900, then eight percent from 1900 to 1904, and it just kept plummeting. By 1924 it was down to less than half of eligible voters, a low not seen for a hundred years.[583] Young voters led the way. New voter turnout fell by more than fifty percent between 1888 and 1924 in the most populous parts of the country.[584] Older partisans kept

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[579] Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall,* 14.
[580] "'Plunky,' The Picturesque" *New York World*, June 8, 1901.
[581] Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall,* 11.
[582] Ibid.*,* 11-16.
[583] John P. McIver, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition*, Ed. Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), Series Eb62-113.
[584] Paul Kleppner calculated new voter turnout in the "metropole" (the center of population in the Northeast and Midwest) as 87.5% in 1888 and just 34.5% in 1924. This means that, in addition to falling by 53% in three decades, first-time voters were overrepresented by 8.2% in 1888, and in 1924 new voters were 14.4% less likely to vote

voting, as they were raised to do, but there were fewer and fewer virgin voters at each election.

What was wrong with young people? Though turnout numbers fell in the early twentieth century, the Americans who failed to vote in 1900 were born around 1880. Something happened to their socialization as children in the '80s and as adolescents in the '90s to cause them to come of age with little concern for democratic participation. Once that first round lost interest they failed to guide "that army of younger brothers," a quarter generation below them, into politics. From there the collapse was inexorable.[585]

Plunkitt was right to blame meddling elites – "dudes who part their name in the middle" – but wrong to think Civil Service reform was the culprit.[586] Very few young Americans got jobs or money from politics outside of the big cities. Instead it was actually reformers' new and hopeful interest in young Americans that chased away virgin voters and suffocated the age of popular politics.

Three factors drove their efforts. The first was a revolution in the way wealthy Americans viewed democracy. For decades, the well-off had controlled business, law, education, and even elected leadership, but working-class men like Plunkitt dominated "practical politics." Beginning in the mid-1880s, however, wealthy reformers made it their mission to retake democracy.[587] At the same time, political parties were nurturing that desperate mania for virgin votes discussed in the previous chapter. Finally, a larger

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than experienced voters. Paul Kleppner, *Who Voted? The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout, 1870-1980*, (New York: Praeger, 1982), 68-9.

[585] "Young Reformers Club," *The American Reformer*, November 8, 1884, 364.

[586] Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall,* 55.

[587] The greatest source on the subject of elite reformers renewed interest in politics in the 1880s and '90s is Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, *The American North 1865-1928*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)*,* 42-107. This chapter owes a great debt to McGerr's work on the subject.

cultural shift taught that age groups should not mix freely, but that children, youths, and young adults needed to mature in isolation. These three factors combined in the second half of the 1880s, spelling an unexpected end to the era of youth politics.

Reforming partisans began to construct optimistic new youth organizations. Their intentions were good: to introduce youths to politics in an rational manner, and avoid the spectacle, noise, and peer pressure which excited young men and women but failed to inform them. They succeeded, in one generation, in doing more to clean up the democracy than any other movement in American history. And there was much cleaning to be done, thanks to men like Plunkitt.

But good government helped kill popular politics. The new youth outreach produced stiff and formal organizations, lacking the casual social mixing that had brought young people into political life since the 1840s. This new style could not promise advancement for ambitious youths or fun at drunken rallies. Though they explicitly valued young people in ways earlier campaigners had left unsaid, reformers unbundled political life from social life, and few young Americans wanted a part of such an isolated movement.

For fifty years the system had thrived because young people and political parties were inadvertently useful to each other. When those parties made an intentional effort to do what had once happened mostly by chance, they threw off that accidental balance. The more reformers tried to encourage youth participation, the more they squelched what had made it so enticing.

Not even Plunkitt's "office" could withstand this new love of cleanliness, order and privacy. In 1902 the bureaucrats who ran the courthouse decided to expel the crowd

of favor-seekers forever swarming around Plunky's shoeshine throne. They ordered him to find a private office, announcing "the reform broom will sweep Plunkitt out," and sparking a standoff breathlessly reported in papers.[588] Plunkitt fought back, bringing in his biggest, meanest friends to guard the stand from the unlucky custodians ordered to remove it. Yet even he could not fight city hall. First Plunkitt had to take down his portrait hanging over the stand. Then he allowed janitors to mop the floor around the platform, which after thirty years had accumulated thick strata of dried tobacco spit. Finally, poor Graziano was forced to relocate to a quieter corner of the building.[589]

Graziano got his start as a young Italian immigrant and lived for decades under the protection of the bombastic, charming, corrupt Plunkitt.[590] By the turn of the twentieth century men like Plunkitt could no longer guide, or manipulate, younger generations. A new order – private, segmented, rational, and bureaucratic – redefined politics. The forces that drove Plunkitt off, emerging in the 1880s and dominant by 1900, highlight what had made politics so appealing to young men and women to begin with. They explain what had compelled Plunkitt, as a young butcher's boy, to put down his cleaver and start hustling voters, and why similar young Americans would not make that same choice in 1900.

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[588] "To Sweep Plunkitt Out," *New York Tribune*, January 24, 1902; "Plunkitt Tries Diplomacy," *New York Tribune*, January 25, 1902; "Senator Plunkitt's 'Office,'" *New York Times*, January 29, 1902; "Plunkitt Dares the Town," *New York Sun*, March 15, 1902; "George W. Plunkitt Dies at 82 Years," *New York Times*, November 20, 1924.
[589] "To Sweep Plunkitt Out," *New York Tribune*, January 24, 1902; "Plunkitt Tries Diplomacy," *New York Tribune*, January 25, 1902; "Senator Plunkitt's 'Office,'" *New York Times*, January 29, 1902; "Plunkitt Dares the Town," *New York Sun*, March 15, 1902; "George W. Plunkitt Dies at 82 Years," *New York Times*, November 20, 1924.
[590] "To Sweep Plunkitt Out," *New York Tribune*, January 24, 1902.

A Gentleman Never Votes

The fire of popular politics began to dim when the respectable classes finally took interest. For much of the age, the well-to-do had tried to ignore the "stupid utterances" of "beardless boys" shouting at public events.[591] When upper-middle class reformers began to pay attention they brought habits and values that were powerfully unappealing to the young people who fueled popular democracy. Most of all, they preferred a new style that cut the links between the stages of youth, making political socialization difficult. Before they could do so, however, they had to change their minds about the nasty business of campaigning.

The wealthy had never really fallen for popular democracy.[592] Though active in the deferential republicanism of the early republic, the twin forces of popular politics and market revolution pointed the rising merchant classes away from the public square in the antebellum era.[593] Even when campaign excitement reached frenzied peaks, affluent professionals were often the least passionate.[594] Though the upper classes frequently held

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[591] "Night after Night; November," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 8, 1880; "State Legislature Remarks," *Raleigh Register, and North-Carolina Gazette*, February 24, 1843; "Riot," *Liberator*, December 20, 1850; "Political Painters," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, January 12, 1876; "The Ball Opens," *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* June 20, 1876; "To Anti-Gang Democrats," *Daily Inter Ocean*, March 26, 1893; "Latent Forces and How to Develop Them," *The Independent*, February 14, 1895.

[592] McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 42-69; Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States*, (New York: Basic Books, 2009), 94-139.

[593] Daniel Dupre, "Barbeques and Pledges," *The Journal of Southern History*, 60, (August 1994), 479-512; Morton Keller, *America's Three Regimes,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007)*,* 7-67; Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, *Rude Republic: Americans and their Politics in the Nineteenth Century,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 9, 125-151.

[594] For a few of the upper-middle class youths who tended to look down on popular politics, see George Templeton Strong, *Diary: Young Man in New York, 1835-1849*, Ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, (New York: Macmillan Press, 1952), 94, 137;

office, they rarely dirtied their hands by organizing the campaigns that got them there. Particularly for the newly wealthy, reliant on money and alliances and building a good name, appealing to the "fickle popular breath" of democracy seemed like an unnecessary risk.[595] Why set one's reputation out before the rabble, to absorb the "dishonoring hints" and "monstrous vilifications" of partisan mudslinging?[596]

As self-made capitalism came to dominate American culture in the mid-nineteenth century, the affluent also began to view political involvement as an illegitimate route to power. For them, power came from money, and money came from business. In the 1850s and '60s especially, the well-to-do snarled that politics represented an unfair shortcut around capitalism. Party activists were derided as pathetic "merchants who have failed in everything but Democracy," and who preferred "dive politics to honest business."[597] Elections caused an irritating "paralysis of business," as employees begged off work to vote or march. What had made popular politics so enticing to

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John Parsons, *A tour through Indiana in 1840,* (New York: R. M. McBride & Co., 1920), 5-15; Rutherford B. Hayes, *Diary and Letters of Rutherford Birchard Hayes*, (Columbus: The Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1922), 69, 126; Almira Heard to John Theodore Heard, November 2, 1860, *Letters*; "Young Men in Council," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 27, 1878; E. L. Godkin, "The Political Campaign of 1872," *North American Review,* 115, (October 1872), 410.

[595] William A. Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men on Various Subjects: Designed as a Companion to the Young Man's Guide*, (Buffalo, Geo H. Derby & Co, 1850*,* 96.

[596] Elizabeth Emma Sullivan Stuart to William Chapman Baker, March 2, 1855, *Stuart Letters of Robert and Elizabeth Sullivan Stuart and Their Children 1819-1864,* (New York, NY: Privately published, 1961), 2: 479; Andrew Dickinson White, *Autobiography of Andrew Dickinson White, Two Volumes,* (New York: The Century Co., 1904)*,* 1: 46.

[597] Wilder Dwight, *Life and Letters of Wilder Dwight,* (Boston: Ticknor & Co., 1891) 349; *The Daily Inter Ocean*, March 26, 1893,

struggling young Americans – that it had little to do with how much money one had – made it repellent to those with cash to spend.[598]

"Young men of fortune" were the least excited by popular politics. Older gentlemen could afford to take risks, but young professionals rarely wanted to chance the "personal degradation" that came with losing a campaign.[599] Elite politicians complained that their sons lacked partisan vigor. George Boutwell, Commissioner of Internal Revenue under Lincoln, Secretary of the Treasury for Grant, and Governor, Representative, and Senator from Massachusetts, published an essay in 1879 worrying that "young men of culture and ability are less disposed than formerly to accept either the honors or duties of public station."[600] Albion Tourgée agreed, in his landmark *Letters to a King* he argued that prosperous youths had begun to "avoid the responsibility of self-government" in the decades after the Civil War.[601] Boutwell and Tourgée expressed growing concerns that white-collar youths were weaker, lazier, and less masculine than the working class young Americans marching in the streets.

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[598] Charles Astor Bristed, *The Upper Ten Thousand*, (New York: Stringer & Townsend, 1852), 285; Junis Henri Browne, *The Great Metropolis: A Mirror of New York* (Hartford: American Publishing Company, 1869), 73.

[599] George Boutwell, "Young Men in Politics," *North American Review,* Vol. 129, No. 277, (December 1879), 537-544; Wilder Dwight, *Life and Letters of Wilder Dwight,* 349; Alcott, *Familiar Letters to Young Men,* 96; T. H. Hoskins, "Editor," *Vermont Watchman*, June 25, 1884. Advice writers frequently warned "respectable" young people to stay away from public democracy James Isaac Vance, *The Young Man Foursquare*, (New York: F.H. Revell Co. 1894), 57-60; Constance Cary Harrison, "Boys, Evenings, and Amusements," *Before He is Twenty: five perplexing phase of boyhood considered; Essays from* Ladies Home Journal, (New York: F.H. Revell, 1894); L.K. Washburn, "An Original Lecture A Lecture to Young Men," *Boston Investigator*, October 3, 1888; "The Morals of the Campaign," *The Congregationalist*, August 28, 1884.

[600] Boutwell, "Young Men in Politics," *North American Review,* 537-9.

[601] Tourgée, *Letters to a King,* 58.

The professional classes articulated a resigned sense of being trapped in Gilded Age democracy. They dominated so many other aspects of the increasingly unequal society, but the workings of the parties seemed to grow more distant every year. For a time all they did was grumble about the seemingly indomitable political system, calling it "the most atrocious tyranny ever invented."[602] E.L. Godkin, editor of *The Nation* and exemplar of upper-middle class reformers, complained that there never was a political system like popular democracy, from which "there seemed so little prospect of escape. It has, in spite of its imperfections and oddities, something of the majesty of doom."[603]

Until the 1880s these "men of culture" had been a grumbling minority, wincing as poor and middle class young Americans embraced popular politics. Two major changes took place in the 1880s. First, as discussed before, the parties concluded that new voters decided close elections and tried to recruit young Americans with frenzied appeals. At the same time, well-to-do reformers gave up complaining about popular politics or trying to suppress undesirable voters (although in the South they succeeded in driving African-Americans and poor whites from the voting booth). Instead they launched a mission to retake democracy for the upper classes. Driven by a new zeal, wealthy reformers compared themselves to abolitionists, declaring "we mean to emancipate the respectable white man."[604]

Reformers echoed the party leaders who spent the 1880s crowing about the importance of young people. A gathering of business-minded young Republicans in

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[602] Tourgée, *Letters to a King*, 70.
[603] Edwin Lawrence Godkin, *The Problems of Modern Democracy*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1896), 202.
[604] James Russell Lowell, *Lowell's Works, Literary and Political Addresses*, (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Co., 1886), 6: 201; McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 42-85; Keyssar, *Right to Vote*, 94-139.

Boston condemned the axiom "a gentleman never votes" and declared that government "of, by, and for the people" could only be maintained with the "political education of our young men."[605] Albion Tourgée riled reformers with his 1888 defense of popular democracy, mocking wealthy youths as "neuters who eschew politics." Elite young men had no choice in the matter, Tourgée declared, "The citizen-king cannot abdicate. I mean that you are required to 'go into politics' whether you desire to do so or not."[606]

By the mid-1880s two of the three weights that eventually dragged down popular politics were in place. The small but highly organized movement of upper-middle class reformers made it their mission to uplift "practical politics." The sprawling Republican and Democratic machines seemed willing to try anything that might win over the few thousand new voters who would offer them victory. The reformers and the party men were on the same side for the first time since Reconstruction. All they needed was a new style.

As some elite reformers puzzled over how to introduce politics to wealthy youths, others considered how age groups should relate. A growing core of educators, parents, and social scientists argued that the casual mixing of age groups in America's schools, factories, and parties had dangerous effects on young people. They began to advocate for dividing groups based on age. In fact, reformers fell in love with the idea of age and time in general. It was these same thinkers who introduced phrases like "on time" and "ahead

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[605] "Young Men in Council The Conference of Young Republicans," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 27, 1878; John Lockwood Dodge, "College Republicans" *North American Review,* 154, (June 1892); "Young Men Dissatisfied," *Baltimore Sun*, November 25, 1881; "Young Men in Politics," *Trenton State Gazette*, July 7, 1884; "Young men should be Independent," *Kansas City Star*, August 1, 1884; "The Young Voters Party," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 7, 1888; "Religion in Politics," *Weekly Register-Call*, September 5, 1890.
[606] Tourgée, *Letters to a King,* 49, 70

of time" to popular speech in the 1870s, and related railroad men who, in November 1882, imposed standardized time zones on the United States. Many hoped to divide America's young people just as neatly.[607]

Their logic grew from a rethinking of the vulnerability of young people. As well-to-do Americans had fewer children, and asked them to do safer work at an older age, it became easy to idealize youths and make a fetish of their weakness.[608] Whereas earlier generations believed young people had destructive energies they needed to expel, Gilded Age parents and educators concluded that their sons and daughters needed protection and structure. Psychologist G. Stanley Hall's defining work *Adolescence* made the case for allowing teens to mature in sheltering isolation in 1904, but his work synthesized and codified two decades of reformist sentiment.[609] As Frances Hodgson Burnett, the author of *The Secret Garden* and *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, wrote in *Ladies Home Journal*, the safest way for an adolescent to mature was "to be buried when he was fifteen and not dug up again until after he was twenty."[610]

This ideal of age-separation began among the wealthy, but was largely meaningless to laboring parents who depended on their children for as much as twenty-

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[607] Howard Chudacoff, *How Old Are You? Age Consciousness in American Culture,* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 6, 49; Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in American 1790 to the Present,* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 111-211.
[608] David Hackett Fischer, "The Revolution in Age Relations" and "The Cult of Youth in America," *Growing Old in America,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, Ed. Richard L. Rapson, (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1971),
[609] Kent Baxter aptly described adolescence as a "reactionary concept that was 'invented' for rehabilative purposes." Kent Baxter, *Modern Age*: *Turn-of-the-Century American Culture and the Invention of Adolescence*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 24.
[610] Frances Hodgson Burnett, "When He Decides," *Before he is Twenty: Five Perplexing Phases of Boyhood Considered,* (New York: F.H. Revell, 1894), 31.

percent of their family income.[611] Age separation slowly radiated out into the rising middle class over several decades. It began in the schools, which had once grouped eight year olds and twenty year olds into one room, but increasingly divided children into grades. The number of public schools proliferated in the Gilded Age, growing 750% between 1880 and 1900, and more educators believed that schoolchildren "must be isolated."[612] From schools, age-grading took over children's medicine, workplaces, literature, and associations like the YMCA and eventually the Boy Scouts.[613] Even Jane Addams' crusade to build playgrounds can be seen as part of the movement to raise different age groups in different settings.[614]

In the mid-1880s this new way of organizing young people converged with a wealthy population bent on redesigning young Americans' politics and two massive machines looking for an edge. The reformers' brought a motive, the age-separators a method, and the parties supplied the means. The result was a new style that produced youth organizations that were noticeably passive, insular, and adult-led, in a democracy which had thrived on working class foot soldiers, attracted by the promises of age-

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[611] Stephen Mintz, *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood*, (Boston: Belknap Press of Harvard Universty Press, 2006), 136.
[612] Chudacoff, *How Old Are You,* 68; Darrel Drury and Justin Baer, *The American Public School Teacher: Past, Present, and Future* (Cambridge: Harvard Education Press, 2011); Paul H. Mattingly *The Classless Profession: American Schoolmen in the Nineteenth Century*, (New York: New York University Press, 1975).
[613] David Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The YMCA, The Boy Scouts, and their Forerunners, 1870-1920*, (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1983); Chudacoff, *How Old Are You,* 29-65; Kett, *Rites of Passage,* 116-211.
[614] Jane Addams, "Organizing Play," *The Cult of Youth in Middle-Class America*, Ed. Richard L. Rapson, (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1971); McGerr, *Fierce Discontent*, 39-136.

mixing. [615] It should be no surprise that the rise of this new style coincided with the birth of a generation that would develop little interest in politics.

Parties are Business Organizations

Samuel Tilden could not have been more different George Washington Plunkitt. Though both were members of the New York Democratic machine, Plunkitt saw politics as a social endeavor, fought out loud and based on corrupt human dealings, while the meticulous and scrupulous Tilden preferred quiet meetings, reams of data and rational argument.[616] Bosses like Plunkitt defined the style of politics, and its appeal to young people, for generations. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, however, Samuel Tilden and his followers redesigned popular democracy in ways that would make men like Plunkitt obsolete.

Tilden stood at the nexus of all the forces aligning to alter youth politics. He was an unabashed party man, a lifelong Democrat who understood how to manipulate that sprawling apparatus. But his position in New York society also introduced him to the wealthy reformers who looked down on both political parties as corrupt. Tilden could get the two sides talking. He had even spent years as a railroad lawyer, making millions and rubbing shoulders with the very men who divided America into time-zones.[617]

Finally, like many reformers, Tilden disliked public campaign spectacle. As one journalist put it, the Sage of Gramercy "never believed in skyrocket and the Roman

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[615] Kett, *Rites of Passage,* 211.
[616] "George W. Plunkitt Dies at 82 Years," *New York Times*, November 20, 1924; Robert Kelley, "The Thought and Character of Samuel J. Tilden: The Democrat as Inheritor," *Historian*, 26, (Spring 1964), 176-205.
[617] Kelley, "The Thought and Character of Samuel J. Tilden," 176-205; John Bigelow, *The Life of Samuel J. Tilden*, (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1895).

candle system…as a rule he considered brass bands and orators a waste of money and time."[618] Many wealthy reformers were equally hostile to hoopla, disparaging parades, bonfires, and fireworks as expensive displays that did more to entertain the rabble than guarantee victory.[619] So in his 1876 presidential run Tilden set up a "Literary Bureau" in a Manhattan office, and used it to distribute twenty-seven million pieces of educational campaign literature.[620] The style, which relied on ideological information distributed by a private, isolated office, presaged the campaigns of the early twentieth century.

Tilden's foray into "educational campaigning" had little effect on the hugely popular 1876 race. It would take another decade for a critical mass of reformers and party men to appreciate his approach, heavy on information and light on fun. The turning point came in 1887, a year after Tilden died. In that year two revolutions, one in clubs and the other in voting, would outline a new partisan landscape in which democracy ceased to be "part of the every-day business of American life."[621]

The change began in the clubs. Those "shrewd, wild boys" characterized every election since 1840, serving as the public nucleus to entertain and recruit. They offered the ideal structure for reformers to remake politics. The problem was that they were just too entertaining. Most clubs were "organized in a spirit of fun, simply for the pleasure

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[618] "Tilden," *Kansas City Evening Star*, October 25, 1884; McGerr*, The Decline of Popular Politics*, 71.
[619] McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics,* 83; "Letters to the People," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, July 14, 1888; John Lockwood Dodge, "College Republicans" *North American Review,* Vol. 154 No. 427 (June 1892); Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery*, 66-68; Daniel J. Ryan, "Clubs In Politics," *North American Review,* Vol. 146, No. 375 (February 1888), 172-177.
[620] McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics,* 70-75.
[621] Tourgée, *Letters to a King*, 71.

they afford."[622] This fun helped draw in working or middle class young men and women, but it repelled more "respectable" youths. It also failed to inform voters about the issues. The "trouble" with these clubs was that they involved a lot of "shouting and marching" but were not "associations intended for deliberation. The *better* class of people," wrote one of the chief Democratic reformers, "will not join 'clubs.'"[623]

So the Republican party set out, in the run-up to the 1888 presidential campaign, to form clubs that were civil, deliberative, centralized, and maintained "on a permanent basis."[624] In December 1887 fifteen hundred delegates from around the nation met in New York to convene the National League of Republican Clubs.[625] This "Republican League" stressed main two points. First: the new clubs existed to organize the "beardless and boyish workers of the Republican party."[626] Youth-focused campaigning peaked with

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[622] John Lockwood Dodge, "College Republicans" *North American Review,* 154, (June 1892).
[623] Chauncey F. Black to Daniel Lamont, August 18, 1888, quoted in McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics,* 83.
[624] "Republican Clubs," *The Daily Boomerang*, March 5, 1890; James Poster, William Walter Phelps, Henry Cabot Lodge, et al., "Permanent Republican Clubs," *North American Review*, 146, (March 1888), 241-265.
[625] McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics,* 79; Daniel J. Ryan, "Clubs In Politics," *North American Review,* 146, (February 1888), 172-177; James Poster, William Walter Phelps, Henry Cabot Lodge, et al., "Permanent Republican Clubs," *North American Review*, 146, (March 1888), 241-265; *The History of the National Republican League of the United States,* Ed. John F Hogan, (Detroit: National Republican League of the United States Print, 1898), 316; Executive Committee of the Republican League of Oregon, *The Republican League Register*, (Portland, OR: The Republican Register Publishing Company, 1894).
[626] Ryan, "Clubs In Politics," *North American Review*, 173. For examples of the Republican League's focus on recruiting young members over the following years, see "Thurston in Tennessee. The Nebraska Orator Talks Politics to the Republican League," *Omaha World Herald*, March 5, 1890; "Young Men in Politics," *Daily Inter-Ocean*, March 26, 1890; "Young Men of Hope, a Republican League to Fight for a New Philadelphia," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 23, 1890; "Private from Clarkson Kentucky," *New York Times,* August 9, 1892; "Students for Sound Money," *Sioux City*

the previous election in 1884, won by the Democrats, and it was time for Republicans to put their own sons forward.

Second, the Republican League stressed that young people should follow the orders of national campaign headquarters. This would mean less hollering in the streets and fewer community events; the Republican League preferred a corporate model. One speaker reminded young Republicans of "the necessity of organization," shouting: "this is an age of activity and progress…parties are business organizations."[627] The clubs would act as their directors ordered, mostly distributing pamphlets about tariff reform.

Permanent clubs seemed to be the new model of popular politics. Within four months of the formation of the Republican League, the Democrats set up a very similar organization.[628] Both sides told themselves that permanent clubs would be the best way to bring in respectable young voters. One of the founders of the Republican League dismissed all clubs dating back to 1840 as a "temporary effervescence," and claimed that "there can be no weighty objections" to the new model.[629]

But there were weighty objections. The "temporary effervescence" of the old clubs was actually their greatest strength. Youth clubs from 1840 through 1887 provided a collapsible network of loose bonds that could be reestablished and altered as the election required. Any historian trying track young men's associations in archives sees

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Journal, August 2, 1896; "Legislative Acts or Legal Proceedings," *Duluth News-Tribune*, August 28, 1896.

[627] *The History of the National Republican League of the United States,* Ed. John F Hogan, (Detroit: National Republican League of the United States Printing, 1898), 316.

[628] National Democratic Committee, "National Association of Democratic Clubs," *The Campaign Text Book for the Democratic Party of the United States*, (New York: Bretano's, 1888), 436.

[629] Ryan, "Clubs In Politics," *North American Review*, 175, 177; James Poster, William Walter Phelps, Henry Cabot Lodge, et al., "Permanent Republican Clubs," *North American Review*, 146, (March 1888), 241-265.

this: they appear and disappear every few years. These temporary clubs easily incorporated new members with each election, while permanent organizations maintained the same aging rosters over decades.[630] Additionally, the earlier clubs' demonstrations caught the attention of uninitiated adolescents, an appeal sorely lacking in organizations that simply distributed circulars. Finally, the old model carefully balanced national campaigns with local social structures, granting distant Federal races personal significance. Permanent clubs, with national headquarters in Washington, New York and Chicago, threw off that balance.[631]

Perhaps worst of all, the new model isolated the age groups. Though club members had mostly been in their late teens or early twenties, rosters from 1840 through 1888 showed a wide range of ages. Clubs always had a few fifteen-year-olds and a

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[630] For examples of club rosters from the beginning of the age of popular politics until the introduction of permanent clubs in 1887, see "Proceedings of a National Republican Convention of Young Men," November 2, 1832, Providence, Library of Congress; "Great Whig meeting in New York, Nominations For Governor," September 8, 1833, Library of Congress; "Young Men's Ratification Meeting, "*Boston Daily Advertiser*, August 25, 1857; Young Man's Republican Union, "Report From Young Mans Republican Union, Head Quarters Stuyvesant Institute," November 5, 1860, Printed Ephemera Collection, Library of Congress; "New England Maine," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, March 6, 1878; "A Political Sangerfest," *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*," August 27, 1880.
For rosters following the shift to permanent political clubs, see "Their First Vote," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 29, 1888; "Young Men of Hope, a Republican League to Fight for a New Philadelphia," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 23, 1890; Young Republican Club, "Young Republican Club of the Twenty-Second Ward minute book 1892-1912," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; National Democratic Committee, "National Association of Democratic Clubs," *The Campaign Text Book for the Democratic Party of the United States*, (New York: Bretano's, 1888), 436; Executive Committee of the Republican League of Oregon, *The Republican League Register*, (Portland, OR: The Republican Register Publishing Company, 1894); "Political Organizations, National, State, Local Members," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle Almanac, 1901,* 16, (January 1901), 311; Young Republicans of Philadelphia; Young Republican Club, "Young Republicans of Philadelphia, Minutes 1903-1919, "Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

[631] McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics,* 75-88.

handful of fifty year olds: it was rare to find an organization made up purely of virgin voters. Their meetings provided an informal social space for generations to mix and for adults to inspire ambitious youths. The new model endorsed the age-separation of the era. Organizations established separate "Boys Clubs" for members under twenty-one, and adults began to simply donate a few dollars rather than join. The Republican League used inspiring rhetoric, telling young partisans that they were casting off "the shackles of old fogeyism," but really they were denying younger members the benefits of adult socialization.[632]

The Republican League and the National Association of Democratic Clubs won out over the older model with the help of generous reformers and national party organizations. Clubs were suddenly major financial institutions. The Republican League in Ohio established a board of stockholders to oversee operations.[633] Well-documented Republican clubs in Philadelphia bought ornate houses and set up growing budgets. By the 1890s their finances were immense, one organization brought in $5,293 in 1898, at a time when the national per capita income was around $200.[634] This club had a special

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[632] "Private from Clarkson KY," *New York Times* August 9, 1892; "Young Men of Hope," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 23, 1890; Young Republican Club, "Young Republican Club of the Twenty-Second Ward minute book 1892-1912," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; "Political Organizations, National, State, Local Members," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle Almanac, 1901,* 16, (January 1910), 311.
[633] Ryan, "Clubs In Politics," *North American Review,* 175.
[634] Young Republican Club, "Young Republican Club of the Twenty-Second Ward minute book 1892-1912," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia; Young Republicans of Philadelphia; Robert W. Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Reinterpretation of American Economic History,* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 40.

committee for entertainment, spent over $1,000 on games and cigars, and even held a monthly "Ladies Night."[635]

New clubs did not abandon the entertaining aspects of earlier youth organizations, but they did close off the fun from the public. During the age of popular politics most clubs met in stores or warehouses, but the permanent clubs bought private homes or, even more isolated, set themselves up in hotel suites. There was little chance of a curious potential member happening by a meeting held on the top floor of a Chicago hotel.[636]

Likewise, they spelled the end of the big public barbecues, held in a town square and centered around a roast ox or hog, that inspired social mixing and young ambition. Instead, parties held invitation-only banquets in private halls, where select guests enjoyed the era's fascination with French cuisine.[637] The *carte de menu* from one 1892 political banquet lists Consommé Souveraine, Turbotins of Bass a la Gugiere, Potatoes Vienneise, Filet of Beef a l'Aquitanne, Cromesquis of Sweetbread a l'Andalouse, and Fancy Ices.[638]

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[635] Young Republican Club, "Young Republican Club of the Twenty-Second Ward minute book 1892-1912," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.
[636] "A New Republican Club House the Young Voters of Chester," *Philadelphia Inquirer,* October 7, 1889; "Young Men of Hope," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 23, 1890; National Young Mens Taft Club, Broadside, Special Collections, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA; Daniel J. Ryan, "Clubs In Politics," *North American Review,* Vol. 146, No. 375 (February 1888), 172-177; *The History of the National Republican League of the United States,* Ed. John F Hogan, (Detroit: National Republican League of the United States Print, 1898); McGerr, *The Decline of Practical Politics,* 82-3.
[637] Harvey A. Levenstein, *Revolution at the Table: The Transformation of the American Diet*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 10-22.
[638] "The Young Man in Politics," *Daily Inter Ocean*, January 12, 1892; "Banquet Held for the Republican City Committee," *Boston Daily Advertiser*, January 20, 1888; "Feasting Republicans Banquet of the Union Club," *Rocky Mountain News*, April 1, 1888; "In Hotel Rotundas Cleveland Will Be Beaten in New York," *Daily Inter Ocean*, September 9, 1892; "Richmond's Democratic Banquet," *The News and Observer*, January 26, 1893; "Banquet by Democrats The Jefferson Club's Spread at the Pabst Hotel," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, March 5, 1893.

While the sweetbreads sound excellent, this was not the kind of shared meal at long tables that might inspire a new Oscar Lawrence Jackson take up politics.

Permanent clubs' most idealistic goal – to present political issues in an enlightened, thoughtful manner – ultimately did the most damage. This "educational campaigning" came to dominate popular politics by 1892. It appealed to reformers' legitimate concerns about the miserably misinformed electorate, and was cheaper and more refined than spectacular public rallies. Young partisans had a new job: to facilitate the "methodical dispensing of correct, practical political information."[639] Over and over again, permanent club promoters called their organizations "schools" for young voters, inspired by educators' increasing love of age-separation.[640]

Educational campaigns, however well intentioned, failed to understand the nature of popular politics. Human interaction and social aspiration drove young people's involvement, literature on the tariff did not. One Democratic proponent of direct-mailing bragged that a voter who received campaign literature would feel "as if he were personally known to the sender, and he unconsciously feels that his importance as a voter is recognized."[641] A canvasser in a saloon, however, could offer that same sense, as well as a few beers and cigars along the way. The main drawback was that the canvasser cost

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[639] "Letters to the People," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, (Chicago, IL) Saturday, July 14, 1888; McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics,* 69-107; "Republican Clubs," *Daily Boomerang*, March 5, 1890; "Protection to Home Industries," *Daily Inter Ocean*, September 22, 1888; "Young Voters and the Money Question," *Omaha World Herald*, August, 1, 1896; "Legislative Acts," *Duluth News-Tribune*, August 29, 1896.
[640] Ryan, "Clubs in Politics," *North American Review*, 175; "Private from Clarkson, KY," *New York Times*, August 9, 1892; "Republican Clubs," *Atchison Daily Globe*, March 5, 1890; "Religion in Politics," *Weekly Register-Call*, September 5, 1890.
[641] William Andrews to Daniel S. Lamont, February 3, 1888, in McGerr, *The Decline of Politics*, 85.

more, and was likely to be a striving young adult, not a member of the "better class."[642] Educational campaigners meant well, but the rallying cry of one Duluth organization explains why they failed to excite many seventeen year olds. Instead of a nasty rhyme or a catchy slogan, the Duluth Republican League called upon young Americans to "study dispassionately."[643]

The forces that made political clubs increasingly stiff, formal, and private also began to alter an even more crucial aspect of youth politics. The actual process of voting had long been both a climactic rite for virgin voters and an ideal opportunity for sleazy ballot tricks. In 1887 reformers initiated a nationwide shift to "Australian ballots": nonpartisan voting forms printed by official state institutions and cast in private. By 1896 thirty-nine of the forty-five states had made the change.[644] Though ballot reform undoubtedly cleaned up democracy and wrested the tools of democracy from the hands of hustlers, it dramatically altered the rite of passage that had drawn in so many virgin voters.

The new government-printed ballots ended the social spectacle of nineteenth-century elections. What had been a thrilling confrontation and declaration of manhood, in which a first-time voter braved challengers in front of most of the adult men in his

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[642] For concerns over the cost of canvassers, see Horatio Seymour to Samuel Tilden, July 20, 1868, *Letters and Literary Memorials of Samuel J. Tilden, Volume 1*, Ed. John Bigelow, (New York: Harper and Brothers Pub., 1908); McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 69-85; "Night after Night; November," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, September 8, 1880.

[643] "Legislative Acts," *Duluth News Tribune,* August 29, 1896; "Letters to the People," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, July 14, 1888; "Republican Clubs," *The Daily Boomerang*, March 5, 1890; "Protection to Home Industries," *Daily Inter Ocean*, September 22, 1888; "The Registry of Voters and Population," *Daily Evening Bulletin*, November 03, 1888; "Students for Sound Money," *Sioux City Journal*, August 2, 1896.

[644] Kornbluh, *Why Americans Stopped Voting,* 123.

community, was now private, quiet, and cold. The ballot itself had been a totem of democracy, ornately designed, handed off by mature-seeming hustlers, and clutched by excited voters. After the rise of the Australian ballot, it was merely a complicated government document. Ballot reform perfectly encapsulated the trade-off between popular politics and good government.[645]

Ballot reform had the same intention and impact as the permanent clubs, private banquets and educational campaigns. The parties, driven by an influential class of reformers, sought to bring young people into politics but seemed incapable to seeing the benefits of existing mechanisms. For decades young people had gravitated towards popular politics, drawn by the casual, heterogeneous environment that promised introduction to elders, social mixing, public spectacle, and plenty of fun. Reformers hoping to bring young people into politics ignored the strengths of this system, cutting the strong but loose bonds of popular politics and replacing them with weak, stiff ties that offered neither maturity nor advancement.

Probably the best example of the new style's priorities can be seen in the efforts of Thomas P. Ballard. Ballard was a Chicago Republican who proposed "an excellent scheme" in the 1892 and 1896 elections. "It has always seemed strange to me," Ballard told the Chicago *Inter Ocean* in '96, "that we give no attention to young men when they mature and arrive at the age of manhood." He proposed a civic ceremony, overseen by

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[645] Kornbluh, *Why Americans Stopped Voting*, 123-6. The new ballots also made voting harder for illiterate, non-English speaking, and poorly informed voters. Selecting names on a complicated government document required better English skills than simply handing in a ballot. (Kornbluh, *Why Americans Stopped Voting*, 124-5; Crain, "Potent Papers: Secret lives of the Nineteenth-Century Ballot," *Common-Place*, 9, [October 2008]; Abbott, *Reminiscences*, 112; Charles A Murdock, *A Backward Glance at Eighty*, [San Francisco: P. Elder and Company, 1921], 122-3; "Complicated and Expensive," *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier*, December 1, 1890).

the mayor, in which all first-time voters in Chicago would gather for speeches on public duty. The Union League – that bastion of elite Republicans – endorsed his plan, with its members telling reporters: "In our country today the boy glides into his rights as a citizen almost imperceptibly…without instruction or advice."[646]

Ballard was no villain. He wanted to create informed, independent young voters, all part of the new and idealistic style of educational campaigning. These men simply overlooked the mechanisms that were already ushering virgin voters into manhood. American culture had rituals in place to celebrate the occasion, but they were maintained by friends, parents, siblings, and activists, not by the mayor or Union League orators. Such reformers had trouble seeing customs that were not sanctioned by the state or official associations.[647] Between Ballard's proposed scheme and the ballot reform actually underway, voting was becoming a stale civic obligation, offering few social benefits.

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[646] "A Chicago Boy's First Vote," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, May 17, 1896; "A Suggestion as to the Ceremony Marking the First Vote of Young Men Thomas P. Ballard," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, May 16, 1892; "Among Publishers and Agents," *School Board Journal*, 11, (June 1896).

[647] Thomas Ballard and the Union League were not alone in wishing that the value of a virgin vote be more explicit. Edward W. Bok, Dutch immigrant and editor of *The Ladies Home Journal* wrote in his autobiography about his struggle to determine the meaning of his first vote in his adopted country in 1884. American political socialization was so casual and social that he could find no clear, official explanation of the meaning of voting. Bok was one of the reformers who went on the champion age-separation and to encourage "respectable" young men to avoid public politics. Edward W. Bok, *The Americanization of Edward Bok*, (New York, Scribner & Sons, 1920), 441-446; Edward Bok, "The Boy in the Office," *Before He is Twenty: five perplexing phase of boyhood considered; Essays from* Ladies Home Journal, (New York: F.H. Revell, 1894) 55.

And Thomas Ballard's profession? He worked for Ginn & Company, owners of Athenaeum Press, selling tens of thousands of textbooks to new, age-graded schools nationwide.[648]

By the 1890s each stage of young peoples' political socialization was under attack. Age separation prevented children from mixing with the older classmates or adults who had explained partisanship to curious ten year olds. Private, elite, educational clubs no longer invited many struggling youths into partisan life with promises of maturity, importance, or "fun and frolic." The climactic act of casting a ballot took place behind closed doors, and the crowds of adults honoring the rite of passage began to disperse. Even young adults lost their ability to persuade Americans to vote, as educational committees and government ballot-printers replaced canvassers and hustlers. Young Americans who used to receive two decades of incubation in various mediums of popular politics now only saw their democracy in glimpses. To many citizens born around 1880 and maturing in the '90s, democracy looked like "a trade, a profession, or a calling" practiced by an interested few in secluded offices and banquet halls.[649]

Democracy goes Indoors

It is difficult to track the going of a cultural practice. Among young people in particular it is hard to point to rites not passed. Few twenty-one years olds explained in their diaries why they chose not to cast their first ballot in 1900. Yet we know that the soaring plateau of popular politics began to crumble, that between the 1890s and the

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[648] "Among Publishers and Agents," *School Board Journal*, 11 (June 1896); "Notes," *The Nation,* June 25, 1885, 522; "Personal" *Indiana School Journal*, Ed. William A. Bell, 35 (Indianapolis, 1890), 223.
[649] Tourgée, *Letters to a King*, 71.

1920s voter turnout went from a practice of the vast majority of enfranchised Americans to an odd activity, ignored by most eligible citizens.[650] And we can see, from available statistics and from the larger culture, that young Americans led the way.

At first, changes in the media obscured young American's flagging interest. In the 1890s newspapers that had documented political life in a dense, populist style shifted to human-interest stories on individual "young men in politics."[651] Those "young men" were often career politicians in their thirties or forties. Theodore Roosevelt, William Jennings Bryan, Albert Beveridge, George McClellan Jr., and Richard Yates Jr. all used their relative youth as a major selling point in their public careers.[652] Though some journalists joked about "young politicians" who were "bald and toothless," newspaper profiles allowed one prominent thirty-five year old to stand in for a hundred anonymous eighteen year olds.[653]

No paper could hide the falling away of the public political spectacles that had defined American democracy since 1840. Without a steady flow of excited young marchers, rallies and processions withered and died within a few years. In 1892

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[650] John P. McIver, *Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition*, Ed. Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), Series Eb62-113.

[651] "The Young Man in Politics," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, January 18, 1892; "Young Men in Politics," *Daily Inter-Ocean*, March 26, 1890; "A New Crop of Republicans," *Grand Forks Herald*, September 28, 1896. For a thoughtful analysis of nineteenth-century partisan newspaper style, see one of William Dean Howells' many memoirs: *Years of my Youth* (New York: Harpers and Brothers Publishers, 1916), 140-159.

[652] "Young Men in Politics," *Daily Inter-Ocean*, March 26, 1890; "The Young Man in Politics," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, January 18, 1892; "Young Men's Victory," *New York Times,* June 5, 1884; George B. McClellan Jr. *The Gentleman and the Tiger: The Autobiography of George B. McClellan, Jr.* (New York: J.B. Lippincott, 1956); Albert J. Beveridge, *The Young Man and the World*, (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905).

[653] "Gratifying Indication of Progress," *Washington Post,* September 12, 1892.

permanent clubs began to dismiss the idea of holding public rallies, by 1896 they were growing rare, and in the words of historian Michael McGerr "spectacular parades almost vanished in first decade of twentieth century."[654]

Memoirists recounting their youths during the age of popular politics document the changing attitudes. Use of the phrases "virgin vote" and "maiden vote" actually peaked in publications between the late 1880s and World War One, not by thrilled first-time voters but by older men and women marking a bygone era.[655] Though most memoirists "appreciate the progress" of cleaning up democracy, many complained that younger generations lacked their zeal for political engagement. Theologian Lyman Abbott's *Reminiscences* included letters he sent to his cousin as a twenty-year old in the 1850s, discussing his efforts as a Brooklyn ballot hustler and his near trampling by a stampeding Republican procession. Abbott concluded with the popular sentiment: "the conditions which I described to my cousin in 1856 could not be duplicated anywhere in America in 1913."[656]

The same change is clear in the New Deal's Federal Writers Project's American Life Histories. Though recorded long after the end of the age of popular politics, these interviews show that dividing line emerged in the 1890s on conceptions of public

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[654] McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 145-6.

[655] This is the case in Google Books' Ngram Viewer, which charts the number of publications of a given word or phase in their collections over two centuries. Google Books' collections are not, however, exhaustive. For "virgin vote" and "maiden vote" See http://books.google.com/ngrams/graph?content=virgin+vote%2C+maiden+vote&year_start=1800&year_end=2000&corpus=15&smoothing=3&share=

[656] Abbott, *Reminiscences*, 112; Charles A Murdock, *A Backward Glance at Eighty*, (San Francisco: P. Elder and Company, 1921), 122-3; Frank Aleamon Leach, *Recollections of a Newspaperman*, 13-4; Andreas Ueland, *Recollections of an Immigrant*, (New York: Minton, Balch & Co, 1929), 51-53; Jared Benedict Graham, *Handset Reminiscences, Recollections of an Old-Time Printer and Journalist*, (Salt Lake City: Century Printing Company, 1915), 105-107.

democracy and lingered well into the 1930s. Interviewees who mentioned casting their virgin vote almost all participated in nineteenth-century elections, supporting Grant or Garfield or Cleveland, those who voted for Taft, Wilson, or Coolidge rarely bothered to mention it. Tellingly, most subjects who grew up during the age of popular politics reminisced about "elections" as public, social events, while those born after the mid-1870s mostly spoke about people who were "elected," as a grant of individual power.[657]

One subject in the American Life Histories, a German-American born in 1870, recalled that "politics played a big part in the life of this town years ago," and even began to wax nostalgic about a particularly clever vote-buying "lad."[658] On the other hand, when an interviewer asked a subject, born in 1892, if he voted, the man replied: "No,

[657] For examples of American Life History interviews with Americans who recalled the age of popular politics, their first vote, and spoke mostly about "elections," see John J. McCarthy, "When I first voted the Democratic Ticket," collected by Bessie Jollensten, October 19, 1938; Sarah Ann Ross Pringle, interviewed by Effie Cowan, McLennan County, Texas, (Undated); W.A. Boyter, Interviewed by Ethel Deal, Newton, N.C. September 4, 1939; Mrs. Charley Huyck (first name unknown), collected by Harold J. Moss, January 17-24, 1939; Emil R. Kaiser, Interviewed by Francis Donovan, Thomaston, CT Thursday, December 15, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project.
For examples of Americans born after the 1870s, who did not mention their first vote and spoke primarily about who was "elected," see Frank Perciful, Interviewed by Annie McAulay, Robert Lee, TX, September 1, 1938; James Dowling, Interviewed by Edward Welch, Pittsfield, MA, December 22, 1938; DeWitt Hines, Interviewed by Adyleen G. Merrick, Columber NC, February 2, 1939; St. Elmo W. Acosta, Interviewed by Rose Shepherd, Jacksonville, FL, July 17, 1938; Cora Lovell, Interviewed by Rosalie Smith, Peru, MA, January 4, 1939; American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project.

[658] Emil R. Kaiser, Interviewed by Francis Donovan, Thomaston, CT Thursday, December 15, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project.

ma'am, I don't never vote. I don't believe in 'ssociation with folks that hang around the polls. That kind of trash don't suit me."[659]

One final force squelched young people's involvement in politics. American entertainment culture changed dramatically in the 1890s. For most of the nineteenth century, social life tended to be local, communal, interactive, and mixed-age. All of these factors helped draw young men and women into their communities' public events. Beginning in the 1890s, a new order emerged that valued the national, individual, consumption-oriented, and age-segregated aspects of life. This change particularly effected young people, pointing them towards nationwide sports and movies, individually oriented toys and pastimes, patterns of courtship and dating based around consumption, and a peer-culture with little interaction between generations.[660] None of these new forms of entertainment related very well to public democracy.

This new entertainment culture prized leisure. Americans increasingly divided their lives into labor and leisure, and defined the latter as endeavors that involved no work. So much of popular politics – the meetings, the rallies, and all that "hurrahing" – looked like a lot of effort to new generations of young people.[661]

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[659] Don and Susie Powers, Interviewed by John William Prosser, Columbia, SC, February 6, 1939, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project; McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 150.

[660] Mintz, *Huck's Raft*, 217; Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1988); Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, 179-285; Kett, *Rites of Passage*, 212-336; Kent Baxter, *Modern Age*: *Turn-of-the-Century American Culture and the Invention of Adolesence*, (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2008); Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York,* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Richard Ohmann, *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century,* (London: Verso, 1996).

[661] McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 145-153; Peiss, *Cheap Amusements.*

Many came to associate leisure with new technologies. A number of older Americans felt that the cars, telephones, movies, airplanes and other consumer technologies booming in the first quarter of the twentieth century drove off the remnants of public democratic culture. One elderly man pointed out that "back in the old days" rural Americans came together "from the outlying districts with their buggies – bring their lunches and spend the day in town on election day." "Now they all got cars," he complained, "they can dash in here and vote quick as anybody else."[662] An editorialist in California complained that young peoples' fixatation on "aeroplanes and gas engines…has the effect of deadening interest in politics."[663] No one technology caused the shift away from political entertainment, in fact most emerged after democratic enthusiasm had already ebbed, but each invention put more distance between young people and the world that had inspired virgin voters.

Even the writer who worried about aeroplanes and gas engines knew his time had passed. He went on to complain that, among the young, he was "liable to be considered an old fogey who wags his head and says: 'things ain't what they used to be.'" His concern, that adolescents fixated on the modern would not like being lectured about democracy, shows how finished the age of popular politics was. Young people began to use phrases like "old fogey," "old-time" and "old-fashioned" when talking about their democracy.[664]

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[662] Emil R. Kaiser, Interviewed by Francis Donovan, Thomaston, CT Thursday, December 15, 1938, American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project. As the *New York Times* put it in a 1924 piece on the decline of rural communities, "we are all children of the movie and the radio," *New York Times,* July 17, 1924; McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics*, 151.
[663] "We're Going Backwards" *San Jose Evening News*, December 21, 1917.
[664] Ibid.; McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics,* 147.

What once made youth politics so vital led to its undoing. The fact that young people just keep arriving, in an unceasing stream rather than distinct generations, inundated popular politics. All it took was a few small changes over a few short years to break up the flow of young people into democratic life. Once that began, every twenty-one-year-old who chose not to vote inspired a sixteen-year-old not to read a newspaper and an eight year old not to sing campaign songs. The fundamentally social appeal of popular politics, which had made it so alluring and useful, now made it irrelevant. The young men and women who used to fuel their democracy drowned it instead.

By the 1910s and '20s young people rarely considered politics a venue for their social needs. The diary of Yvonne Blue offers a good example. The fourteen-year old Chicago girl had many of the same concerns as fourteen-year-olds of previous eras, but she looked elsewhere for solutions. Instead of upcoming rallies, her friends talked about movies and fashion. Instead of teaching his daughter about his preferred party, Yvonne's dad showed her how to drive the family car. The fact that Yvonne was in the first generation of young women raised knowing that they could legally vote mattered less than her culture's growing political ambivalence. When Yvonne's teacher assigned her Mary Boykin Chesnut's classic Civil War diary, she was shocked that someone would fill their private journal with public events. Yvonne puzzled: "my diary is not in the slightest degree of political interest. I'm not much on politics. My diary is of interest only to myself." For the young people coming of age in the twentieth century, the world of politics and the world of self rarely overlapped.[665]

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[665] Yvonne Blue, January 16, 1926, *Private Pages: Diaries of American Women*, *1830s-1970s*, Ed. Penelope Franklin, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1986), 69-70.

That personal appeal had invited so many individual young people into their democratic system in the nineteenth-century. For Sally McCarty, the Virginia girl who stayed up late listening to her parents talk Whig politics in the 1840s, there was something powerfully unifying about the way interest in politics "affected people as vitally as their own private affairs."[666] For Benjamin Brown Foster, the nervous phrenologist arguing "a boys' opinion" at Maine polling places, it was the way issues "not intimately concerning myself" could reinforce his vulnerable sense of importance.[667] And for Oscar Lawrence Jackson, shouting before an Ohio audience of friends and rivals, it was the attention, novelty, praise, and infamy of his democratic grandstanding that could "tickle my vanity and rouse the ambition of anyone my age."[668]

Reformers' efforts to organize, rationalize and educate unbundled politics from the other rites and aspirations which thrilled ambitious young people. After the change, all that democratic participation had to offer was its official goals: governance, rational choice, and, worst of all, duty. The more reformers spoke about young people's responsibilities as citizens, the fewer seemed interested. Thomas P. Ballard's scheme to celebrate first-time voters demonstrates this, the short article proposing the ceremony used the word "duty" eleven times.[669] This new way of seeing voting as a solely civic act lowered young peoples' enthusiasm. Once politics was cut off from the rest of life, put in the realm of obligation rather than aspiration, it had little appeal.

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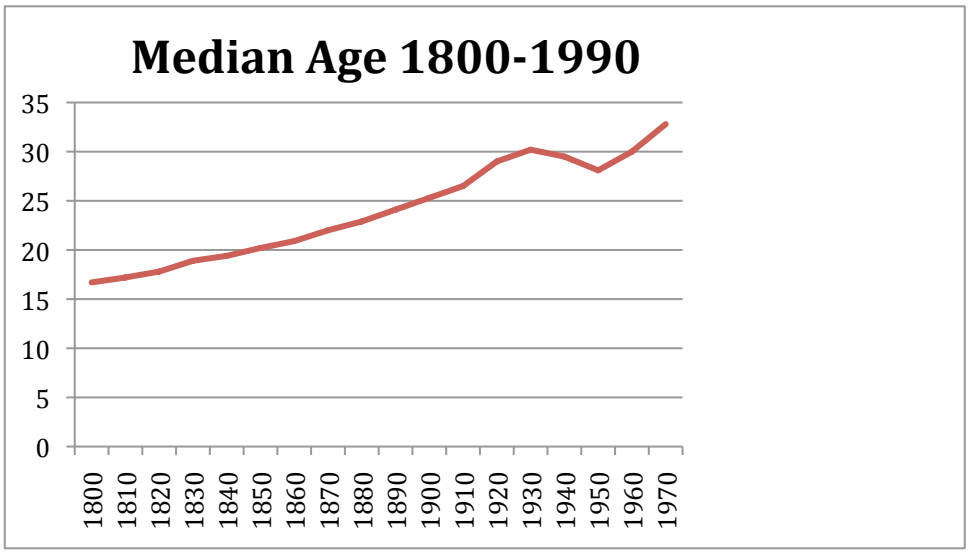
[666] Sally McCarty Pleasants, *Old Virginia Days and Ways, Reminiscences of Mrs. Sally McCarty Pleasants*, (Menasha: George Banta Publishing Company, 1916), 12.
[667] Benjamin Brown Foster, *Downeast Diary*, Ed. Charles H. Foster, (Orono, ME: University of Maine at Orono Press, 1975), 140.
[668] Oscar Lawrence Jackson, *The Colonel's Diary; Journals kept Before and During the Civil War*, Ed. David P. Jackson, (Sharon, PA: Privately Published, 1922), 27.
[669] "A Chicago Boy's First Vote," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, May 17, 1896.

George Washington Plunkitt saw the change unfold. As custodians moved Graziano's stand, mopped up the mess his friends had left, and shushed the favor-seekers making a racket in the courthouse rotunda, the pompous boss noted the end of the system he spent his life manipulating. He told a friend: "I have studied politics and men for forty-five years, and I see how things are driftin'. Sad indeed is the change that has come over the young men." As the twentieth century dawned, young Americans were "beginnin' to look coldly" on partisan spectacle, and fewer seemed to see the utility of parties in their own struggling and ambitious lives.[670]

"And why should they," Plunkitt asked, mixing the best and worst of the age of popular politics, "what is there in it for them?"[671]

[670] Riordan, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall,* 14.
[671] Ibid., 22.

Appendix One
Median Age 1800 – 1990



Year	Median Age
1800	16
1810	16
1820	16.7
1830	17.2
1840	17.8
1850	18.9
1860	19.4
1870	20.2
1880	20.9
1890	22
1900	22.9
1910	24.1
1920	25.3
1930	26.5
1940	29
1950	30.2
1960	29.5
1970	28.1
1980	30
1990	32.8

Michael R. Haines and Richard H. Steckel, A Population History of North America, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Table A-4, 702-4

Appendix Two
Year Property Requirements for Voting Removed

State	Year	Phase	% States with Property Requirements	
New Hampshire	1784	Revolutionary	1790	76%
Vermont	1786	Revolutionary	1800	62%
Georgia	1789	Revolutionary	1810	53%
Pennsylvania	1790	Revolutionary	1820	39%
Delaware	1792	Revolutionary	1830	33%
Kentucky	1792	New State	1840	27%
Maryland	1801	Revolutionary	1850	13%
Ohio	1802	New State	1855	9%
Indiana	1816	New State		
Mississippi	1817	New State		
Illinois	1818	New State		
Alabama	1819	New State		
Maine	1820	New State		
Massachusetts	1821	Reforming State		
Missouri	1821	New State		
New York	1821	Reforming State		
Tennessee	1834	Reforming State		
Michigan	1835	New State		
Arkansas	1836	New State		
Florida	1838	New State		
New Jersey	1844	Reforming State		
Connecticut	1845	Reforming State		
Louisiana	1845	Reforming State		
Texas	1845	New State		
Iowa	1846	New State		
Wisconsin	1848	New State		
California	1850	New State		
Virginia	1850	Hold Out		
North Carolina	1854	Hold Out		
Rhode Island	In Place in 1855	Hold Out		
South Carolina	In Place in 1855	Hold Out		

Alexander Keyssar, The Rite to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States, (New York: Basic Books, 2009), Tables A-1, 2 and 3.

Appendix Three
Eligible Voter Turnout in Presidential Elections, 1824 – 2012

Year	National Voter Turnout
1824	26.90%
1828	57.6
1832	55.4
1836	57.8
1840	**80.2**
1844	**78.9**
1848	**72.7**
1852	**69.6**
1856	**78.9**
1860	**81.2**
1864	**73.8**
1868	**78.1**
1872	**71.3**
1876	**81.3**
1880	**79.4**
1884	**77.5**
1888	**79.3**

1892	**74.7**
1896	**79.3**
1900	**73.2**
1904	65.2
1908	65.4
1912	58.8
1916	61.6
1920	49.2
1924	48.9
1928	56.9
1932	56.9
1936	61
1940	62.5
1944	55.9
1948	53
1952	63.3
1956	60.6
1960	64
1964	61.7
1968	60.6
1972	55.2
1976	53.5
1980	52.6
1984	53.3
1988	50.3
1992	55.1
1996	49
2000	49.3
2004	56.7
2008	63
2012	59

John P. McIver, Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition, Ed. Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), Series Eb62-113.

Appendix Four
Average Voter Turnout by State, 1840 – 1900

This table lists the average voter turnout for states that voted in the majority of presidential elections between 1840 and 1900. Owing to later admission into the Union or secession, some states participated in fewer elections than others.

State	Percent of Voter Turnout
Iowa	90.75
Indiana	88.56
New York	88.06
Ohio	87.59
New Jersey	86.86
New Hampshire	82.19
Nevada	81.58
Illinois	80.46
Pennsylvania	79.68
West Virginia	79.34
Maryland	78.83
Connecticut	78.76
North Carolina	78.48
Michigan	77.94
Delaware	77.9
Wisconsin	75.97
Kentucky	73.89
Kansas	73.81
Tennessee	73.15
Oregon	71.68
California	71.56
Vermont	70.54
Minnesota	70.38
Maine	70.18
Missouri	68.36
Massachusetts	67.51
Florida	67.3
Texas	67.08
Virginia	66.96
Alabama	66.26
Washington	65.1
Nebraska	63.85
Georgia	61.45

Regional Average	
Mid-Atlantic	82.26%
Midwest	77.76%
Upper South	74.36%
West	72.48%
New England	70.05%
Deep South	60.73%

Mississippi	59.72
Arkansas	59.2
South Carolina	52.8
Louisiana	52.09
Rhode Island	51.13

John P. McIver, Historical Statistics of the United States, Millennial Edition, Ed. Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006), Table Eb52-113.

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My friends helped me complete this project and cope with dissertating. Jenny Le Zotte and Oscar Ax pushed me to improve my work, or blow off steam, at every step. Mike Caires helped me more than anyone else, seeing the bigger significance in my work and tempering my own narrow-mindedness. I have no doubt that, should I have been struck by a comet, Mike could have written the rest of this dissertation on his own, a la Don Fehrenbacher.

Growing up in the Grinspan household prepared me for this dissertation. My parents Ed and Judy, my sister Elizabeth, and my brothers Benjamin and Michael all trained me to have an opinion about *everything*, to value writing, and to measure equal parts knowledge and irreverence. Their influence is stamped on every page.

Finally, Keiana Mayfield powered this project, from beginning to end. From our first meeting, during my first month of research, to my final edit, she has propelled me forward. She tolerated my compulsive work habits, my historical diatribes, and even my frequent, terrible singing of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. This project is for her, as will be the next, and all of them after that.

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