

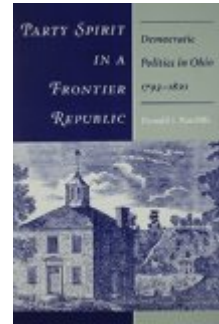
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Donald J. Ratcliffe. *Party Spirit in a Frontier Republic: Democratic Politics in Ohio 1793-1821*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998. Xii + 336 pp.

Donald J. Ratcliffe. *Party Spirit in a Frontier Republic: Democratic Politics in Ohio, 1793-1821*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998. xii + 336 pp. \$26.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8142-0776-5; \$66.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-0775-8.

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Party Spirit in Frontier Historiography

Donald J. Ratcliffe of Durham University, England, has been publishing significant articles about Ohio politics for twenty years. For much of that time he has also been promising a book. The volume under review is that long awaited study. Ratcliffe has performed an impressive job of research and the result is the most complete modern interpretation of Ohio politics in the early republic.

Ratcliffe presents his book as a contribution to the political history of the early republic, especially as an entry into the debate about party systems theory, and as a challenge to recent studies of Ohio political culture. Ratcliffe announces in his introduction three basic themes for his book. The first is that politics in Ohio was “as democratic as representative politics ever can be in an inegalitarian society” from a very early period (p. 12). The second theme is that Ohio politics was partisan. That is, political parties that focussed on national issues for their defining characteristics existed in Ohio from the earliest days of the state. The third theme is that the divisions created by these parties defined the future of mature Jacksonian politics.

The idea of party systems gives the book theoretical focus and direction. In the 1960s, Richard P. McCormick and other historians argued that a well-developed party system existed in the United States in the years of

the early republic. In the 1970s and 1980s Ronald P. Formisano attacked the notion party *system* in the early republic, and in the 1990s James Roger Sharp challenge the notion of *party* as applicable for those years. According to Ratcliffe, these historians have looked at the writings of political elites from the 1790s to the 1810s, noted that these elites deplored parties, and concluded that if political elites disliked parties, then they must not have been a part of them. But Ratcliffe insists, “The historiographic pendulum has swung too far. The tendency to deny that proper institutionalized parties existed before 1815 has led historians to underestimate how far the political experience of these years was structured by partisan division, how far these divisions penetrated into the electorate, and how significant the experiences of these years proved for subsequent party development” (p. 4). Ratcliffe then turns to frontier Ohio as a test case for his argument. Ohio interested him because not only did Formisano deny the existence of political parties in the state before the age of Jackson, even McCormick placed Ohio outside of his party system model.[1]

Ratcliffe also challenges prevailing ideas about Ohio political history. In the 1980s, a new generation of Ohio historians began studying the political history of the state. Finding a consensus that political parties would not provide a useful analytic tool for understanding Ohio politics, they turned to culture. The most prominent of these

“political culturists” have been Andrew R. L. Cayton, Jeffrey P. Brown, and Emil Pocock.[2] Historians of political culture argue that ethnocultural divisions defined the politics of the early statehood period: the Virginians of the Virginia Military District, for example, battled it out with New Englanders in the Western Reserve for regional dominance. Ratcliffe admits that studies of political culture do produce insights, but he complains that the work is social and cultural history, not political history. In particular Ratcliffe rejects the idea that, once one has discovered cultural attitudes, one doesn’t need to “investigate what actually happened in politics because behavior is the result of values, perceptions, and attitudes” (p. ix). Ratcliffe criticizes the political culture school for not paying close enough attention to the specifics of politics, particularly elections.

Ratcliffe admits that election results are tricky to find and use. Election returns have not been uniformly preserved. Because Ohio counties changed rapidly during the early 19th century as the state’s population grew, comparisons across time are difficult. One of the advantages of the political culture approach is that it allows one to get around these difficulties. But Ratcliffe will have none of it. He has scoured local newspapers, manuscript collections, and official records, going so far as to examine “dusty parcels” of Washington County voting records in the “grimy, sweaty attic of the Marietta Courthouse” (p. 303) (Ratcliffe reports that later researchers will be spared this rite of passage, perhaps unfortunately, because the collection is now on microfilm).

Ratcliffe roots Ohio parties in the territorial politics that led to statehood. The “proto-parties” of that time were largely involved in a court versus country dispute over local power. But throughout the book he stresses that the political tensions evoked in America by the French Revolution were felt in Ohio. These tensions resulted in a state that was largely Jeffersonian Republican but contained a significant Federalist minority. Ratcliffe shows that there was much straight party voting, suggesting a high degree of popular identification with particular parties among the voters. He disputes what he calls the “myth of gentry control” (p. 107). Focusing in part on the rivalry between Worthington and Michael Baldwin that Cayton has written about, Ratcliffe argues that across the state, gentry leaders were challenged for office and even lost elections if they did not listen to the views of their constituents.[3] In the years after 1805, Ohio developed into a one party state. However, Ratcliffe argues that partisan differences shaped politics especially at the county level. Ratcliffe discusses the party nominat-

ing conventions that functioned to give people say in the choice of candidates and to ensure party discipline. Ironically, the convention system also led to opposition to parties as critics complained about the influence of a few men dominating the nominating process and thus the determining the outcome of elections. These concerns fed into opposition to the Tammany Political clubs and, along with the dispute over the power of the judiciary, led to factional divisions among the Republicans. The Federalists exploited these divisions, of course, only to see the War of 1812 reorganize Ohio partisanship yet again. In fact, the Federalists were too much of a minority and too discredited by the national party’s opposition to the war to be a strong party at more than the local level, and that only in a few places.

Ratcliffe maintains that the bank war, the Panic of 1819, and the Missouri compromise fundamentally changed Ohio politics. Many Ohioans began to see themselves as Westerners with economic interests different from other regions of the country and as Northerners with a concern about slavery that separated them from Southerners. Unfortunately, a single candidate that combined all of these qualities was hard to come by. John Quincy Adams did in a pinch, but subsequently Ohioans would divide into various types of Whigs and Democrats depending on how they defined and valued their western and northern interests.

In evaluating this work, one is immediately drawn to compare Ratcliffe with Cayton and the political culture school. Indeed, the book could be read as an ongoing campaign against Cayton. Ratcliffe says he is not partisan: “Fundamentally this book does not attempt to contradict the understandings generated by historians of political culture” (p. x). But behind anti-party rhetoric, he does attempt to score points for his partisan view of Ohio politics. Ratcliffe maintains that Cayton described Ohio politics as largely non-partisan and based on personal rivalries among the gentry. Ratcliffe argues that the gentry ruled only when they satisfied their constituents. He also contends that partisan loyalty shaped the views of those constituents. Ratcliffe also argues that Cayton paid too much attention to the Chillicothe gentry led by Worthington and Edward Tiffin. This group has long been called the Chillicothe Junto, and Ratcliffe derives much pleasure from quoting a letter by Tiffin in which he calls the local opposition “the Junto” (p. 110). Probably Ratcliffe’s most important contribution is to take the story of early Ohio politics out of the Virginia Military District and Scioto Valley. A comparison of Ratcliffe’s index with that of Cayton’s *Frontier Republic* illustrates the dif-

ferences. Ratcliffe's index has almost twice as many references to Cincinnati and Hamilton Counties as Cayton; for the Western Reserve, Cayton has one reference, Ratcliffe a dozen; for Bezaleel Wells, again Cayton has one reference, Ratcliffe seven.

There are significant points of overlap. Ratcliffe's interpretation of the statehood movement is not fundamentally different from Cayton's and Cayton has written on the opposition between Worthington and fellow Chilli-cothean Michael Baldwin.[4] What strikes me as most significant about this debate is that the history of early Ohio, after decades of languishing, is finally moving beyond the work of Randolph Downes and William T. Utter in the thirties and forties.[5] This is especially true in the area of political history. Now, not only do we have cultural interpretations of early Ohio politics, but also Ratcliffe's political interpretation. It can only be hoped that the work of Cayton, Ratcliffe, and others will encourage historians to turn to the social and cultural history of the state. It is significant, too, that both historians define their work as contributions to American history and set Ohio in the context of the nation. There is a parochialism among American historians that, to put it crudely, defines the state and local history of Virginia or New England as national history; while the history of Ohio or other states west of the Alleghenies, is dismissed as at best local history, at worst antiquarianism. I do not intend this review to be a manifesto for the creation of a Mississippi and Ohio Valley Historical Association, but I do believe that the revival of interest in frontier history, along with the new western history, is a much needed corrective to unconscious, but very real, biases American history.[6]

Ratcliffe notes in the beginning that his book is likely to be dismissed as "old fashioned political history" (p. ix). My training in cultural and intellectual history schooled me to be dismissive of a stereotypical political history that narrated one damned election after another without attention to larger meaning. Ratcliffe's work is hardly that. There is much that is very traditional in this book: the work is chronological, and it narrates many stories, some only a paragraph, others several pages. But more importantly, the work is both highly analytical and, in an understated way, contentious. All of his examples were chosen and are used to advance his argument. The details he presents are tied to larger themes and issues. The meaning of it all is central to the book.

What is that meaning? Ratcliffe presents his book first and foremost as a contribution to the historiography

of party development. I think he effectively shows that political parties did exist in early Ohio and that national party issues shaped local politics. This historiographic concern gives an analytical focus to the argument, but it is also a weakness. It is a weakness, first, because by the end of the book Ratcliffe left me wondering just what he was asserting. Early in the book he says boldly, "after 1800 ... [proto-parties] did develop ... into formations that deserve the name party-which is what contemporaries called them" (p. 5) and "the new world of populism and parties was becoming commonplace in some areas long before Andrew Jackson's name was put forward for the presidency" (p. 12). Yet in the conclusion he concedes that the politics of the time he is studying "certainly did not constitute a 'party system' in any meaningful sense of the term." The best he can say is that the first decades of the century "foreshadowed" the "partisanship, vitriol, and passion" of the 1820s and thirties (p. 242). What he presented us in two hundred and forty pages of closely reasoned text he takes away in just a few lines. He wants to argue that this was a time of transition, a time of evolutionary emergence from "proto-parties" to parties. He is looking, one might say, for the missing link. But in the end he waffles. I think he owed it to us to come down somewhere. What were Thomas Worthington and Michael Baldwin doing? Were they part of parties, proto-parties, or mere shadows? Ratcliffe is the expert on this. If he doesn't tell us, who will? Perhaps we see here a culture conflict between English reticence and American bluster. But I think Ratcliffe's evidence and argument are strong enough that he can run against Formisano and Sharp with more than just bluster. I think in short, that Ratcliffe has the votes.

Ratcliffe's historiographic interests weaken the book in a second way. The debate about political systems detracts from the larger meaning of these events for American history. That larger meaning is the relationship between the development of political parties and the practice of American democracy. American political parties emerged from a political culture that deplored parties, especially when the parties politicians favored were out of power or seriously challenged. Political parties exist to give legitimacy and direction to the different opinions people have about how they should be governed. In the early republic, Americans were learning how this process worked. Ratcliffe discusses, for example, Charles Hammond of St. Clairsville "who started the *Ohio Federalist* because he objected to the Democratic doctrine that criticism must not be allowed in time of war, and so 'by the exercise of my rights I practically demonstrated

their existence' ” (p. 199). The appropriateness of partisan disagreements over foreign policy, in war or peace, remains a subject of debate among Americans. In 1818 Hammond stated the philosophical issues very well, describing a Republican editor as part of “that class of politicians who identify their party with the country, and who consider every measure directed against the party as a species of high treason. He looks upon the agents employed or appointed to administer the government, as the government itself, and hence he interprets every attempt to expose the imbecility and wretchedness of the administration, as an attack upon the [system of] government” (p. 200-201). Ratcliffe concludes that the Ohio Federalists “made a decisive contribution to the development and acceptance of the concept of a loyal opposition, and so helped to ensure the ultimate acceptance of the legitimacy of political parties” (p. 200). The idea of a loyal opposition is a truism today, but Americans had to learn how to do this. The history of the Cold War in America demonstrates that these issues are still matters of unresolved debate in the United States. This theme could have been developed and especially emphasized more. It is larger and more important than the historiographic debate. Ratcliffe, one could say, is somewhat lacking in the vision thing. He could have been bolder here.

And no doubt we can all be bolder. This is an important contribution to the history of Ohio and the early Republic. It is well researched and engagingly written. Utter and Downes have met their match.

Notes:

[1]. Richard P. McCormick, *The Second American Party System: Party Formation in the Jacksonian Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1966); Ronald P. Formisano, “Federalists and Republicans: Parties, Yes-System, No,” in Paul Kleppner et al., *The Evolution of American Electoral Systems* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1981), 33-76; James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation*

in Crisis (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

[2]. Jeffrey P Brown, and Andrew R. L. Cayton, eds., *The Pursuit of Public Power: Political Culture in Ohio, 1787-1861* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1994); Andrew R. L. Cayton, *The Frontier Republic: Ideology and Politics in the Ohio Country, 1780-1825* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1986); Emil Pocock, “Frontier Dayton: Dayton, Ohio, 1796-1830” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1984).

[3]. Andrew R. L. Cayton, “The Failure of Michael Baldwin: A Case Study in the Origins of Middle-Class Culture on the Trans-Appalachian Frontier,” *Ohio History* 95 (1986), 34-48.

[4]. Ratcliffe’s model for understanding Ohio statehood politics is the same as that used by Andrew R. L. Cayton, *Frontier Indiana* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[5]. Randolph Downes, *Frontier Ohio, 1788-1803* (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1935); William T. Utter, *The Frontier State: 1803-1825*, vol. 2 of *History of the State of Ohio*, Wittke, Carl, ed. (Columbus: Ohio State Archaeological and Historical Society, 1942).

[6]. For some the newest work on American frontiers, see for example, Andrew R. L. Cayton and Fredrika J. Teute, eds., *Contact points : American frontiers from the Mohawk Valley to the Mississippi, 1750-1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Craig Thompson Friend, ed., *The Buzell About Kentucky: Settling the Promised Land* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1999).

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