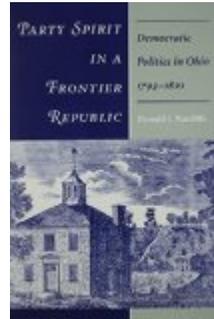


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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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The state of Ohio is often seen as a microcosm for national issues, and for more than a century, scholars have assessed different aspects of its political development. They have been aided by extensive manuscript repositories and supportive universities. Collectively, scholars have argued that the authoritative political system of the Northwest Territory period helped produce a democratic response exemplified by Thomas Worthington and Edward Tiffin, former Virginians who dominated the Scioto Valley and were important political leaders. Andrew R.L. Cayton has modified this interpretation by suggesting that Worthington was as much a patrician as his Federalist counterparts but more adroit in dealing with the changed political atmosphere of the early nineteenth century. Donald J. Ratcliffe, a faculty member at the University of Durham and the author of numerous articles about early Ohio, has now published *Party Spirit in a Frontier Republic: Democratic Politics in Ohio, 1793-1821*, a book that assesses the entire scope of party competition in the Northwest Territory and Ohio during this period.

During the first two decades of the nineteenth century, Ohio's political system grew increasingly complex. While the Northwest Territory held only about 8,000 adult males in its Ohio region in 1800, the state swelled to more than 500,000 inhabitants in 1820. As a consequence of growth and the strong popular desire to have local, accessible government, the assembly created many new counties (each with a full set of officeholders), while more newspaper editors brought political news to the masses, and the state acquired numerous post offices and six Congressional districts. It was split by economic and religious rivalries, and by the cultural clashes that emerged in a state with Southern Quaker, frontier Pennsylvania, Virginia, and New England set-

tlers. Ohio seemed to produce an endless number of ambitious politicians, and the fact that one-tenth of adult white males served in some county or state office at given moments indicates the degree to which issues of government and politics permeated the state.

Ratcliffe's most significant contribution is his attempt to assess this complex political system on a genuinely state-wide basis. Using an impressive array of documentary sources, the book covers numerous political gatherings, papers, and candidates over a twenty-year period, and brings into his story dozens of political leaders and editors who have been relatively overlooked by other scholars.

Ratcliffe argues that although political attachments during the Territory period stemmed from Governor Arthur St. Clair's patronage and on rivalries pitting Marietta and Cincinnati against Chillicothe, a much more open and competitive system developed immediately before and after statehood, in 1803. Its features included numerous counties and districts, a broad suffrage law, and the permission for voters to cast ballots at township sites rather than distant county seats. The limitation of elections to one day gave politicians an additional incentive to carefully create tickets, publicize their candidates, and strive for a good turnout.

The Republicans tried to organize the growing body of voters. Each county acted relatively independently, carefully developing tickets at nomination meetings. The party won additional followers from the continual stream of new residents, who often carried political loyalties developed from their home states. In this context, it is worth noting that many of Ohio's settlers came from such relatively politicized states as New Jersey, New York, and

especially Pennsylvania. Although some Federalists eschewed the new form of politics, many copied their Republican counterparts. Thus, Ohio quickly developed a competitive party system, with struggles between Federalists and Republicans, and within the majority Republican party. Ratcliffe rejects James Roger Sharp's contention that only proto-party systems existed during much of this era and argues that Ohio's political parties closely resembled their Jacksonian successors.

Ratcliffe points out that cultural backgrounds, regional economic rivalries, and an abiding interest in such issues as the cost of federal land, tax exemptions on former federal land for five years after sale, the location of the National Road, and defense against potential British or Indian attack gave rise to a kaleidoscope of regional alliances and rivalries. Eastern Ohio counties, settled largely by Pennsylvanians familiar with the Whiskey Rebellion, held deep suspicions about the government in general, while Carolina Quakers were strongly anti-slavery and pacifistic. The New England Republicans who settled near Lake Erie differed from New England Federalists in southeast Ohio, but they combined to support candidates who supported judicial independence and the supremacy of the state constitution rather than legislative supremacy.

Leaders in both parties strove to develop tickets for state-wide offices that included men from each of the state's major regions. In this system, the Scioto Valley was powerful, particularly when Thomas Worthington was able to name postmasters who in turn could help committees of correspondence to function, but it was only one of a number of competitive regions in the state. As politicians sought public support, many began to argue that their role was to represent the will of the majority of the voters and not to vote for their own ideas. Vigorous competition helped produce an enormous rate of turnover in office, and candidates had to win support based on what they could achieve for their constituents, rather than their backgrounds or personal accomplishments.

Ratcliffe notes that Ohio's ambitious politicians periodically alienated voters by vigorously seeking patronage, salaries, and laws benefiting only their own communities. Like Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and other states discussed in Richard Ellis's *The Jeffersonian Crisis*, Ohio was riven by a radical-conservative split that led to legislative efforts to throw out office-holders and control the courts, and to alliances between Federalists and conservative Republicans. The alliance elected conservative Re-

publican candidates such as Governor Samuel Huntington, while Federalists such as Mayor Levin Belt of Chillicothe or Congressman Philemon Beecher of Lancaster also won office. The more extreme Republican wing organized Tammany chapters to influence voters and dominate their party, and by the War of 1812, Federalists created Washington Benevolent Societies as organizational counterparts.

Although Federalists adeptly exploited the Republican schism, they succeeded in part because they were weak enough at the polls so that Republicans felt free to split into factions. When the Federalists began to revive during the Embargo era, and with Ohioans increasingly concerned about the growing likelihood of war with Great Britain and Indian nations, Republicans began to re-unite. Party loyalties grew so strong that voters in Steubenville supported a candidate who proposed to bring the National Road to a rival community. During the war, however, Ohioans became less concerned about candidates' party ties than whether or not they supported the war effort. Federalist politicians who supported the war became acceptable to Republicans after the war. By the early 1820s, a series of developments, including support given by many national Republicans for tariff, road, and bank programs, the post-war boom and Panic of 1819, the Missouri Crisis, and the continuing influx of new settlers made earlier political divisions relatively less important.

Donald Ratcliffe demonstrates that Ohio had a complex and quickly-changing political system that included active committees of correspondence, political clubs, party newspapers, and an interested and vocal electorate. He suggests that the state had few wealthy men who could dominate voters, and that the bulk of Ohio's leaders in 1803-1821 were Northerners who came to assume that governments could shape moral behavior, provide for public education, and act to strengthen the economy. Ohio's increasingly complex set of counties and Congressional districts made its politics difficult to manage without careful party organization. Its citizens clearly developed strong political allegiances, and the state had a thriving party system well before the Jacksonian period, during which many earlier political processes simply continued. Although Ohioans often said that party allegiances were generally bad for a republic, they exempted their own parties from this charge.

This book raises a number of issues for scholars to debate. Was Ohio's political culture in large part a reflection of the vigorous political systems that had devel-

oped in such states as New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania? Should Ohio during this era be seen primarily as a frontier extension of the Mid-Atlantic states, rather than of Virginia and/or New England? Did other frontier states display a politicized electorate and active party organizations at an early date? To what degree did Federalist or Republican allegiances affect the Jacksonian politi-

cal system in these states? Scholars of the early national period will benefit by reading this book and reflecting on these issues in their own areas of study.

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