



J. Matthew Gallman. *The Cacophony of Politics: Northern Democrats and the American Civil War (A Nation Divided: Studies in the Civil War Era)*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2021. 416 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-4656-6.

Reviewed by Lauren Haumesser (Independent Scholar)

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Commissioned by Evan C. Rothera (University of Arkansas - Fort Smith)

By the 1850s, more than half of Americans were Democrats. Yet for decades the literature on the Democratic Party languished as historians focused instead on Republicans, their ideology, and their leader, Abraham Lincoln. In the past twenty years, however, that trend has changed, as a new generation of scholars has examined who the Democrats were, what they stood for, and where they got their ideas. Following Jean Baker's lead, the majority of recent work has focused on Northern Democrats. Jonathan Earle showed that Free Soil Democrats broadened the antislavery movement. Adam I. P. Smith and Jack Furniss have studied how the Northern wing of the party and its members identified as conservatives. Jennifer Weber waded into the debate over Northern Democrats' loyalty to the Union and support for the war.[1] Naturally, many of these historians have disagreed about whether Northern Democrats threatened the war effort, whether they were traitors, and what they really stood for.

In *The Cacophony of Politics: Northern Democrats and the American Civil War*, J. Matthew Gallman synthesizes this literature, offering six core arguments. Gallman's first point is that historians have to use labels with care. This applies to the

use of "War Democrats"—Democrats who supported the war effort—and "Copperheads," who sought peace. It applies to the use of the word "conservative"—a mantle that, as Furniss and Smith have shown, Americans of all political stripes tried to claim. And it applies to the use of the word "racist," which Gallman uses to describe people whose views were particularly appalling even for the nineteenth century.

Second, Gallman argues for defining politics expansively. Politics in this era did not merely take place in elections, in party back rooms, and in Congress. Rather, Gallman contends, debating secession, arguing about emancipation, resisting conscription, and writing angry letters all constituted politics—no matter where those events took place or who was involved.

Third, Gallman urges readers and historians to pay close attention to chronology. With the state militia draft, the federal draft, the Emancipation Proclamation, and the vicissitudes of the Union Army's fortunes, politics changed rapidly during the Civil War. "As events unfolded," Gallman writes, "both national political parties jockeyed over how to define themselves and present their case to voters," and voters responded by adjusting

their labels and identities over the course of the conflict (p. 14). When trying to categorize Northern Democrats, historians and students thus have to pay close attention to the shifting military and political ground.

Similarly, Gallman argues that geography influenced people's politics. (Such an argument will be familiar to students of Southern politics before the war, including works by Frank Towers, William Link, and Edward Ayers.)^[2] Peace Democrats were concentrated in New Jersey, Ohio, Connecticut, and New York. Secret societies found more fertile ground in larger cities. Midwestern Democrats worried about tensions caused by guerrilla warfare.

Fifth, Gallman asserts that we must expand our understanding of civil liberties violations during the Civil War. Historians typically focus on episodes like the arrest of Clement Vallandigham and the suppression of the *New York World* and the *Chicago Times*, in which the federal government restricted civil liberties. But when civilians attacked Democratic newspapers and Confederate sympathizers, Gallman argues, they played an equally important role in threatening Americans' civil liberties.

Finally, Gallman takes up the issue of the Democratic Party's racism, holding that that racial animus defined the party and undergirded Northern Democrats' opposition to emancipation, especially among immigrant groups who worried about competing with free Black people for jobs. Democrats insisted on seeing slavery as a practical political issue rather than a profound moral one.

The above six themes appear periodically throughout the text—but what do they all add up to? Readers searching for an overarching argument will be disappointed. By his own admission, Gallman “is not attempting historiographic interventions here” (p 10). Gallman claims that this approach is due to the subject at hand: Northern Democrats defied neat categorization. Indeed, inasmuch as there is unifying argument, it is

about the diversity of Northern Democrats, whose views and identities shifted depending on geography and chronology. Gallman organizes the book to support this argument. The first three chapters proceed chronologically from the election of 1860 until the beginning of 1863. Gallman then departs from a straight chronological narrative to offer two chapters' worth of case studies: one on politics in the streets, in which Gallman deftly uses postwar district provost marshal reports to describe resistance to the war effort, and one on regional differences among Northern Democrats. Gallman then returns to a chronological narrative for the final four chapters, which take readers through the end of the war.

How effective is *The Cacophony of Politics*? The book's weaknesses are largely a product of its aims. Gallman argues that the Democrats defy categorization and refrains from engaging in historiographical debates. But given Gallman's expertise, readers may find themselves wanting him to weigh in—to try to characterize this diverse group that we may understand them better. One more point: Gallman professes a desire to contribute to the literature on Northern Democratic women—a literature that is woefully thin, especially when compared to work on women who aligned themselves with the Republican Party. Yet though Gallman includes Democratic women throughout the book, his only overarching analysis of their activities is that “northern women thought about politics” (p. 13). For scholars of Northern Democrats and of women in politics, this will feel like a missed opportunity to say something greater about conservative women.

Despite these deficiencies, Gallman succeeds in his aim of capturing the diversity of the Democratic Party. Readers will benefit from hearing from Democrats from across the North, coming from all walks of life, arguing about politics everywhere from their living room to their draft office to the halls of Congress. To capture the diversity of beliefs in the Democratic Party in one election

cycle would be difficult; to have captured it across the course of a contentious and nation-changing war is a remarkable achievement. The scope of the work and the diversity of the sources will make this book especially useful for two audiences: readers and scholars who are new to the field and are looking for an entry point into the literature, and scholars who are well versed in the literature but wish to learn more about a specific actor, region, or event.

Notes

[1]. Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983); Jonathan H. Earle, *Jacksonian Antislavery and the Politics of Free Soil, 1824-1854* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Adam I. P. Smith, *The Stormy Present: Conservatism and the Problem of Slavery in Northern*

Politics, 1846-1865 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Jack Furniss, "'To Save the Union 'In Behalf of Conservative Men': Horatio Seymour and the Democratic Vision for War,'" in *New Perspectives on the Union War*, ed. Gary Gallagher and Elizabeth R. Varon (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019); Jennifer Weber, *Copperheads: The Rise and Fall of Lincoln's Opponents in the North* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[2]. Frank Towers, *The Urban South and the Coming of the Civil War* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2004); William A. Link, *Roots of Secession: Slavery and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies: War in the Heart of America, 1859-1863* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003).

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