

## [Feller on Cheatham, 'Andrew Jackson and the Rise of the Democratic Party'](#)

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**Mark R. Cheatham.** *Andrew Jackson and the Rise of the Democratic Party*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2018. 277 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-62190-453-3.

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In 2015, Mark R. Cheatham published *Andrew Jackson and the Rise of the Democrats: A Reference Guide* in the ABC-CLIO Guides to Historic Events in America series. In keeping with the series format, the book offered a narrative overview of its subject along with a chronology, short topical essays and capsule biographies, a selection of primary documents, and a bibliographic essay, the whole clearly aimed mainly at a classroom clientele.

Cheatham has now republished the narrative overview and bibliography, both slightly revised, in a University of Tennessee Press paperback with a slightly different title, *Andrew Jackson and the Rise of the Democratic Party*. Declaring that "the political climate of the twenty-first century is remarkably similar to that of the Early Republic," he sets out to show that rancorous partisanship, candidate image-making, dirty tricks and mudslinging, corruption and fears of corruption, ideological polarization, and histrionic rhetoric were all rife in Andrew Jackson's day (p. 11). In fifteen quick chapters, Cheatham traces how Jackson's personal saga converged with the vestigial stages of Federalist/Jeffersonian party competition to give birth to the Jacksonian Democratic Party and the democratic antebellum political universe.

Centering on Jackson and on such familiar national events as presidential campaigns, the "corrupt bargain," Indian removal, nullification, and the Bank War, Cheatham's narrative covers territory that period scholars will find well trod. There is no great pretense of anything new here, albeit also very little to disagree with. As perhaps befits a student reference guide but less so a stand-alone monograph, Cheatham does not advance much by way of thesis beyond the familiar commonplaces. His copious footnotes show him both working very close to the sources and keeping abreast of current scholarship; yet he does not press for fresh insights, nor offer arresting authorial judgments or novel points of view. A prolific author on things Jacksonian, Cheatham has situated himself to inherit the late Robert V. Remini's mantle as his generation's leading authority on Jackson. *Andrew Jackson and the Rise of the Democratic Party* reminds one of Remini's later works, which offered quick packages of conventional knowledge wrapped in breezy prose.

Unfortunately, *Andrew Jackson and the Rise of the Democratic Party* also in places recalls the later Remini's penchant for carelessness. Stretching his narrative from the Federalist Era to the eve of the Civil War, Cheatham covers a lot of ground very fast—indeed so fast, especially toward the end, that to a novice reader some of it may not make much sense. By contrast, the scholar who already knows

the story will detect a number of small mistakes, awkward locutions, and unexplained terms.

One particular use of careless language undermines the very title and premise of the book. It is an unfortunate habit of Jacksonian scholars to be unusually sloppy with party names—for instance, to prematurely label the followers of John Quincy Adams in 1828 as National Republicans, or Henry Clay's adherents in 1832 as Whigs. Cheatham early on warns of these anachronistic labels, which muddle the chronology and belie the uncertainty and contingency of events by anticipating later outcomes. The issue is not merely one of nomenclature but of substance: the moment at which a group of cooperators find ground enough to unite under a common banner, especially an ideologically charged one, is clearly of significance in charting both their individual affirmation of political identity and their formal organization as political partisans.

Yet, even after alerting readers to the issue, Cheatham himself confuses it by speaking of "Jacksonian Democrats" as early as the 1828 presidential campaign, well before the label was coined and years before it won general acceptance (p. 101). In his telling, the Democratic Party does not "rise" but rather stands forth, already fully realized, upon Jackson's election in 1828.

It was not nearly that simple. Jackson's winning electoral coalition evolved over time (and under his tutelage) into the Democratic Party, but it was not the same thing. The men who backed Jackson in 1828 mostly called themselves Jackson men or Republicans, not Democrats. Jacksonians held their first national convention in 1832, to nominate Martin Van Buren for vice president. Cheatham calls the conventioners "Democrats" (p. 183), but their official report of convention proceedings gave no name at all, while thanking the "Jackson republican party" in Baltimore for handling local arrangements. During the 1832 campaign, Jackson himself began to speak freely of Democrats and the Democratic Party, especially in his correspondence with Van Buren. By then the words had indeed taken firm hold in some places, notably New Hampshire and Pennsylvania, but not in others, and for meaningful reasons. Not until 1835 would Jackson's and Van Buren's adherents in national convention finally—and while still using the word Republican—proclaim themselves as the Democracy. By that time many one-time Jackson men had left the fold.

Cheatham makes hash of these complexities, and in so doing obscures much of the story his title promises to tell. He misleadingly identifies John C. Calhoun and Duff Green as Democrats in 1830, and later speaks of Virginia during the 1832–33 nullification crisis as a "Democratic stronghold" where "leading party members" like John Floyd and John Tyler "were lukewarm or even hostile toward Jackson and Van Buren" while "other Democrats" like Abel Upshur opposed the president absolutely (p. 168). Given that fealty to Jackson was the first defining feature of his party, this literally makes no sense. These men were not Democrats, though they had once been Jacksonians. They would have bridled at the very word "Democrat," since Jackson's championing of majoritarian democracy was precisely the source of their discontent with him. Particularly in Virginia but also elsewhere, it took years for budding party organizations to monopolize political space to the point where "Whig" or "Democrat" represented binary and exclusive choices of affiliation. The "Rise of the Democratic Party" was thus an elongated and highly contingent process, far more so than readers will learn here.

Still, overall *Andrew Jackson and the Rise of the Democratic Party* offers a serviceable introduction to its subject for student use. The illustrations, retained from the earlier book, include some nice

contemporary cartoons, but several that are crammed with illegibly small speech balloons do not make ready sense and are not explained. However, the twelve-page bibliographic essay has been freshly updated and is very good. Cheatham concludes about Jackson that his "modern-day significance lies not in the way in which he epitomized democracy; rather, his relevance stems from the way in which his failure to embody democratic ideals during the nineteenth century reveals twenty-first-century shortcomings.... The inability of Jackson and his contemporaries to realize the fullest expression of a democratic society should challenge us to examine whether the United States has achieved that goal and, if not, to consider how we can transcend our own societal prejudices" (p. 216). Well said.

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