Forming American Politics
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Conclusion

The most noticeable feature of the political cultures of early New York and Pennsylvania is the extent to which they centered on popular politics. Of course, politically active colonists recognized that they were members of a monarchical empire; yes, they appreciated the importance of integrating themselves within the larger administrative and political networks that emanated from Great Britain. But the primary political arena for all but a few upper-level placemen was the provincial one, where imperial ties could best be exploited or circumvented in the interest of North American concerns. And whatever the character of those psychological, social, and material concerns—insofar as they gained integration into political dialogue—they were shaped by the demands of popular politics.

How can we best understand the dynamics of provincial politics? First, there is the issue of context. Judging from the parameters of political debate, the practices of governmental administration, and the range of activities associated with legislative processes, the provincial assemblies were the primary locus of politics in New York and Pennsylvania. The confluence of British constitutional practice, popular belief in the fundamental character of representative institutions, and pointed, if truncated, assumptions about the validity of popular sovereignty all encouraged such an outcome; and the quick development of the New York and Pennsylvania assemblies into two
of the most powerful legislatures in the British dependencies guaranteed it. In consolidating and defending their public prominence, and in reconciling their position with gubernatorial privilege and executive demands, assembly spokespersons established themselves as the foremost continuing architects of colonial political culture.

The language in which colonial politicians repeatedly expressed their affinity for popular, as opposed to prerogative, power was an effusive one of rights and liberties, which possessed a momentum of its own. It had the potential to range beyond immediate legislative concerns and encourage the wider development of popular political sensibilities. Such was the case in the controversies over freedom of speech and freedom of religion in New York and Pennsylvania. These were important issues, which expanded the breadth of provincial political debate and illuminated some of the easily overlooked dimensions of colonial rights consciousness. At the same time, however, in demonstrating the explosive potential of libertarian thought, they underscored the problem of maintaining control in a popular political environment. When cast in the language of popular rights, any innovative challenge to authority or orthodoxy was bound to meet with opposition flowing from the accepted ways of thinking about the dangers posed by disorder to the existing structure of politics.

Whatever their positions on specific rights issues, popular politicians were always concerned about order, because only by having a hand in controlling the legislature could they and their friends fulfill their various public ambitions. If they were to be effective in extending or protecting from abuse the power the assembly had accrued, if they were to safeguard the liberties of the people, serve what they believed to be worthwhile interests, and enjoy the eminence elective office could bestow, they needed more than individual effort. They needed to cooperate. To that end, they formed loosely organized political groups, shaped in ways that both reflected and befitted the circumstances of their respective colonies. The conflicts these factional and party organizations generated, the amplification of their views in paper wars, and the engagement of both vocal partisans and auditors in those battles were instrumental in creating the two provinces' political identities.

Although the formation of factions and parties arose mainly from attempts to control the processes of legislative politics, the inevitable result of such a development was to place greater emphasis on the popular aspects of colonial political life. The fate of factions and parties always lay in the hands of the electorate, and provincial elections in which popular politicians proposed and voters chose were frequently the most important occasions for explicating and strengthening factional or party identity. Candidate selection, acknowledgment of factional or party allegiances, the activities of
nominators and other partisans, and, ultimately, the activities of voters, periodically reminded contemporaries that the practice of representation was a crucial aspect of their political system. The importance of electoral activities in provincial politics was, perhaps, the most important demonstration of the fact that popular politics lay at the heart of political culture in New York and Pennsylvania.

But if the popular character of politics was a dominant feature of colonial political culture, so too was the restricted way in which power was held. Notwithstanding dramatic demographic change and rapid population growth, most popular politicians in both New York and Pennsylvania were quite content to see their assemblies remain small, fraternal gatherings. Their commitment to representation was overwhelmingly to the system that had brought them electoral success. They understood the eminence that membership in each colony’s most exclusive corporate body could confer, and once in the assemblies, they were not averse to emphasizing that exclusivity by occasionally indulging authoritarian tastes in the name of the people’s rights and liberties. And, as a group, they recognized the importance of mastering the informal processes of politics. The effective use of patronage, skill at developing an interest, an ability to manage private meetings, a nose for established patterns of public behavior, and some understanding of how best to follow that scent were important requisites of sustained political success. Most important, there was the sense of who belonged “inside” the political world, along with a determination to respect rather than challenge that limitation.

The fact that the political systems of New York and Pennsylvania were narrow does not, however, mean they were simple. In both colonies we can observe the importance of the legislators’ corporate awareness, as well as their understanding that the existence of a variety of interests required reconciliation. In both colonies we can appreciate something of the multiplicity of demands for accommodation with, and rejections of, social deference. In New York, provincial political life was sharpened by conflict and contention and shaped by the pretensions of patronalism and attendant localism. In Pennsylvania, we can see something of the effects of consensual values as they were reflected in ideological awareness. And in each province, ethnocultural consciousness clearly found expression both in tendencies toward religious and ethnic exclusivity and in the crosscutting patterns of intergroup cooperation that successful political practice frequently required.

The subtleties of the interplay among the various contextual strands of provincial relationships notwithstanding, the second fundamental feature of colonial politics was never in doubt. An oligarchic temper governed political affairs in New York and Pennsylvania from their earliest to their
latest colonial days. In neither case was that oligarchy the product of any set of simple and easily isolated structural features of society. More than we sometimes choose to acknowledge, the popular colonial leaders maintained a distance between themselves and other, nonpolitical elites. Although in profile, popular politicians inevitably mirrored particular socioeconomic interests, their success was, in fact, a product of the forces of both structure and agency that emanated from the concentric circles of provincial, regional, and local influence. Cumulatively, these circumstances created different patterns of political leadership in each colony. But no matter these differences, New York and Pennsylvania politicians shared the same oligarchic disposition.

The problem, of course, is how to reconcile oligarchy with popular politics. But in the colonial years, that was not as difficult as it may seem. On the one hand, there was considerable willingness to accept a system that claimed to protect the people’s liberties better than any other, there was a widespread belief in the efficacy of virtual representation, and there were no agreed-upon principles by which representation might be made more equitable. The system was what it was, and it repeatedly proved its worth. On the other hand, both the intimate and constricted dimensions of colonial citizenship and the parochial character of government and politics encouraged provincial politicians to be accessible. And the most successful of them made a point of being both accessible and responsive. Tied by common prejudices to their communities, sharing many of their neighbors’ values, often construing the obligations of legislators in the same rough way, and desirous of retaining the eminence that elective office had brought their way, provincial politicians found that they could both serve their constituents and retain their oligarchic ways. Forced as they were by the demands of a representative system to participate in popular politics, the former, in a sense, became a precondition of the latter. Put another way, it was the restricted scope of provincial politics and the very strength of provincial identities that reconciled the two sides of political behavior and fused the popular with the oligarchic temper.

While the context of politics is one basic issue, a second, equally important one is that of the political text. What do we find when we look at the continuous interplay between political rhetoric and behavior in New York and Pennsylvania?

One of the most striking features of political culture in colonial New York and Pennsylvania is the way in which both “countries” developed distinctive political profiles and related political dialects. While traditional patterns of British political discourse and behavior were equally available to all Atlantic provinces, ready for colonial adoption, in practice, the most significant feature of the New York and Pennsylvania record was the varied and flexible
ways in which they combined their British heritage with their colonial experiences to create innovative patterns of provincial politics. More than Pennsylvania, New York displayed noticeable streaks of Anglophilia, based on some prominent provincials’ desire to transform superficial resemblances to Great Britain into a more substantial similitude. In keeping with that urge, they clearly drew on the language of seventeenth-century English opposition in order to facilitate forging a strong popular political tradition centering on their provincial assembly. And from time to time, different groups of New York politicians deliberately drew on English country thought when they felt it strengthened their hands. But the most striking feature of New York politics was ultimately the way in which contemporaries combined the experiences and the cultural influences they felt most germane to the establishment of their own unique behavioral and discursive identity. Challenged by their notorious predilection for political fragmentation, New Yorkers tamed that tendency largely by structuring an oppositional relationship and an intermittent dialogue between successive factions of popular and provincial Whigs.

As for Pennsylvania, in that colony the innovative cast of mind was, if anything, more pronounced. Religious sensibilities of a radical sort, coupled with a proprietary form of government, produced a pride in provincialism and a way of approaching politics that not only distinguished Pennsylvanians from New Yorkers but also freed them more completely from the orthodoxies of British political paradigms. The language of seventeenth-century English opposition was, of course, useful to Pennsylvanians, just as New Yorkers found it efficacious in building the foundation for a strong assembly in the early eighteenth century. But because of the growing strength of their own provincial constitutional tradition, Pennsylvanians found the opposition rhetoric less serviceable in its unmodified, or mimetic, form than did New Yorkers. Of even less importance was the country tradition. Its lexical components were there, of course, interspersed in political dialogue, but never with sufficient power to shape the course of public debate. Psychologically more autonomous than their New York neighbors, Pennsylvanians brought order to their provincial politics less through the exploitation of specific British political paradigms, than through the expansive influence of the Quaker Party and the broad appeal of the tenets of civil Quakerism. Both colonies distinguished themselves far less by their selective and frequently background mimicry of seventeenth-century English opposition thought and of country nostrums than by their creative amalgamation of different political experiences into vital political cultures.

The evidence that New York and Pennsylvania developed related, but unique, patterns of political behavior confirms what Benjamin Franklin observed in 1760, that no two of the mainland British colonies were much
alike. “Not only [were they] under different governors, but [they] have different forms of government, different laws, different interests, and some of them different religious persuasions and different manners.” Rather than repeatedly dispute this conclusion for the sake of some arresting, but simplifying, generalization and a tidy “American” history, we might give it more thought. There is every indication that, if not in the case of every colony, then at least in major regions, colonists developed distinctive provincial expressions of their varied political experiences.

Take the case of New England, or, more specifically, Massachusetts. In comparison with New York and Pennsylvania, several characteristics stand out in eastern society. One is the far more pronounced emphasis New Englanders gave to the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. The emphasis on magisterial authority basic to this concern, which was strongly rooted in seventeenth-century Puritanism, lived on with provincial vitality into the era. Rhetorically stressed in election sermons, and given ubiquitous acknowledgement in the intermixture and overlapping of legislative and judicial responsibilities, this tradition was deeply ingrained in the structure of Massachusetts society and in the social consciousness of its colonials. In the context of a society that put great emphasis on maintaining a Congregational religious establishment (historically having believed government to be “the coercive arm of the churches”), accorded great prominence to ministerial families, demanded the enforcement of strict standards of moral discipline, coerced youth into deferential niceties, and paid weighty respect to the aged, it suggests a very different political dialect from those further west and south. So, too, does New England’s well-known corporatism. What stands out about the eastern corporate experience from a vantage point outside the region is not the oft-played-out declension away from corporatism to individualism. Rather it is the transition “from an inclusive public communality to a series of exclusive functionally specific corporations which often mimicked aspects of the earlier structure.” The texture of a society in which the “social construction of . . . privatization was not [primarily] individualization,” but a variety of increasingly private, along with continuing public, corporatism, is markedly different from anything that distinguished the other colonial regions. And it increases the likelihood that Massachusetts residents—with their rich intellectual heritage and long-standing sense of public identity—expressed themselves in distinctive political dialects reflective of their sense of provincial integrity.

In comparison with New England, the South was less cohesive and is more problematic. In the plantation societies south of Pennsylvania, perhaps the racially based solidarity among whites, coupled with gentry dominance of vestries and county courts, gentry control over the dissemination of information, the established position of the Anglican church, the agrarian-
mindedness of the large planters, and the strong lines of connection and dependency that ran between these staple producing areas and England, focused the provincial imagination largely on mimicry of British political paradigms. Arguably, the southern colonial experience, grounded as it was in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English oppositional ideas, was an exceptionally unified one. Perhaps South Carolina's notable record of public anxieties was both shaped by and largely expressed through English country ideas; perhaps eighteenth-century Virginia is best perceived in terms of mainstream Whig thought, spiced with a dash of country sensitivity to such episodes as the well-known Robinson corruption scandal; perhaps Maryland's proprietary form of government is simply reducible to court/country dimensions. But they are all worth a closer look in the light of the New York and Pennsylvania experiences. Even if they prove to have been the most derivative in their public thought of any of the colonies, that may simply set them off in a differentiated yet familial relationship some distance from their northern counterparts.

The point is that the eighteenth-century provincial political cultures of British America were much too diverse to be depicted in terms of any one-dimensional mimetic process replicating particular strands of English thought. The colonies were, by and large, separate provincial societies, separate “countries” as it were, with their own sociopolitical dynamics. While creating structural similarities to old-world societies, the processes of social and economic maturation simultaneously facilitated the consolidation of regional differences. And the fact of being an overseas adjunct of Great Britain led as much to affirmation of separateness and to political creativity as it did to Anglophile homogeneity. That some colonies were prepared to accept the invitation their circumstances extended seems evident from the New York and Pennsylvania experiences.

And what of the classical republican/liberal tensions so important in American culture? In order to address that issue most directly, it is best to look ahead a little, to the Revolutionary and Early National years on which the controversy has centered, and there consider it in the light of the colonial experiences of New York and Pennsylvania. From one perspective, of course, the existence in British North America of the kind of broad, provincial political pluralism suggested by the study of these two colonies reinforces what recent critics of the classical republican/liberal controversy have been saying: that there were other important discourses in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America that were important components of American political culture. What might be added to this, on the basis of the New York and Pennsylvania colonial past, is a greater recognition of the role regional diversity played in the formation, development, and intertwining of various “American” discursive paradigms. Rather than conflating
liberal and republican consciousness in the interest of a consensual past, or sharply limiting the range of political dialects that contemporaries understood, we might take more seriously the plural origins of American public thought. That will only enhance our comprehension of the intellectual synergisms and creativity, as well as the conflicts, parochialisms, misunderstandings, and failed dialogues that were so much a part of the precocious but "unstable" Republic's history through the Civil War. Such observations notwithstanding, however, the classical republican and liberal paradigms continue to be preeminent and are likely to remain so for some time. And the colonial experiences of New York and Pennsylvania do speak to them.

When we appraise America's revolutionary crisis, two observations seem indisputable: first, the leadership of colonial defiance came largely from New England and the South; second, classical republican thinking occupied an important place in the final estrangement from Great Britain. There were areas in New England and the South in which numerous colonials clearly found that important expressions of their regional and provincial cultures could simultaneously have meaning in the context of the classical republican paradigm. While different forms of communalism, different religious allegiances, different local government profiles, different styles of political leadership, and different socioeconomic structures, clearly attested to the uniqueness of northern and southern provincial or regional societies, at the same time, leading spokespersons for these societies could agree on the relevance of the classical republican critique of British behavior. From the Stamp Act crisis to the cessation of the Revolutionary War, New Englanders and Southerners were in the lead.

And what of New York and Pennsylvania? Despite their strong traditions of popular government and concern for rights and liberties, New York and Pennsylvania trailed in the rear. Some of the reasons for that were the obvious ones: the conservatism of colonial oligarchies trying to cling to power; New York Anglophilia; Quaker pacifism; the contentment that high-priced grain brought to Hudson and Delaware Valley farmers; and, of course, the way in which their respective behavioral and dialectic political integrity reduced the relevance of country thought. But there were also two additional, interrelated reasons: the north-central colonies' well-known cultural diversity and their predisposition to the legitimation of partisan politics.

The relationship between diversity and the provincial political cultures of New York and Pennsylvania was not a simple one. To begin with, it seems clear that although the political conflict that often accompanies ethnoreligious diversity was a more significant dimension of early colonial public life in New York than in Pennsylvania, it was no more than one of
several factors that encouraged New York factionalism. New York had to learn to accommodate the traumas of conquest and rebellion, the stresses of war, sparring between governors and assembly, and the centrifugal thrust of disparate economic and geographical interests as much as it did ethnoreligious diversity in order to develop its popular and provincial Whig traditions and bring some sense of order to its political affairs. In Pennsylvania, the most important consequence of ethnoreligious diversity was less the political conflict those differences generated than the efforts of the Quaker Party to accommodate enough of the province’s various peoples to enable the party to maintain its traditional dominance.

A second way in which ethnoreligious diversity became intertwined with New York and Pennsylvania politics was through religious affairs. In New York, religious diversity gained its chief relevance to provincial politics through the partial establishment of the Church of England. That unhappy compromise fed Anglican pretensions and determined others (most notably some Presbyterians) both to resist Anglican claims for greater privilege and to campaign for a broader measure of religious freedom. The conflict over the scope and meaning of religious liberty consequently became an important facet of the popular/provincial Whig dialogue that shaped provincial politics. By contrast, in Pennsylvania, the initial commitment to religious liberty owed nothing to diversity and everything to Quakerism. But in establishing his colony as a religious haven, William Penn created the conditions that fostered diversity; that is, the colony became attractive to those seeking religious liberty. Thereafter, the problem of diversity became the problem of how other religious groups could, or could not, accommodate themselves to Friends’ notions of religious freedom. This conflict had to be worked out, either within the dialect of civil Quakerism or in the form of strife between the Quaker and Proprietary parties.

Once irresoluble conflict with Great Britain loomed on the horizon, however, the ethnoreligious dimension of political life began to assume greater importance. Although ethnoreligious diversity had been only one of the contributing factors to the legitimation of political contention and party activity in New York and Pennsylvania, the factions and parties in existence were, in varying degrees, composed of and associated with, members of specific religious and ethnic groups. And once public events began to divide the two provincial political communities in ways that threatened to alter long-standing power relationships among the ethnoreligious components of traditional factional and party associations, increased religious and ethnic consciousness promoted sociopolitical fragmentation. Simultaneously, the key ethnoreligious groups (the Anglicans and Dutch Reformed in New York, and the Quakers in Pennsylvania) that had heretofore been most successful in establishing factions and parties that cut across ethnoreligious
lines were incapacitated by the character of the imperial crisis from playing their historic roles.\(^\text{19}\)

Combined with the legitimation of partisan politics, the political consequences of these developments were substantial. Ethnoreligious fragmentation tended to exacerbate divisions occasioned by the Revolution and to inhibit provincial unification on "patriot" grounds; at the same time, the predisposition of many provincials to the acceptance of factional or party activities encouraged habits of mind that disinclined them to embrace Revolutionary zeal. But classical republicanism was unequivocal in its Revolutionary prerequisites; it required both an adequate sociopolitical base for its communal ethic and a simultaneous embrace of extremism in the name of liberty. While New York and Pennsylvania each contained groups that could meet one of these demands, neither possessed provincial associations that fulfilled both. The result, by Revolutionary standards, was political paralysis.

Of course, waves of classical republican consciousness swept over both New York and Pennsylvania during the war years, and certainly that discursive paradigm came to influence Revolutionary political cultures in both states. But to assign major emphasis to this is to miss the long-term regional coherence of these two mid-Atlantic societies and their relevance to the liberal experience in America.

However we choose to describe the foundations of liberalism, one point is incontrovertible: liberal politics rest on the acknowledgement of multiple interests in a society, as well as of the legitimacy of the conflict and the accommodation such recognition entails. And it is to the processes of developing those characteristics that New York and Pennsylvania clearly speak. The very complexity of these societies, with their rapid development, growing socioeconomic differentiation, wide geographic range, varied local traditions, and ethnoreligious diversity, rights consciousness, and powerful popular political traditions, meant that New Yorkers and Pennsylvanians had to confront the problems a plurality of interests posed. While they might refuse to contemplate the implications for their private lives, those who concerned themselves with public affairs could not so easily choose avoidance. Their taste for popular political power required that they come to terms with the broader, interest-riven provincial community, an adjustment that resulted in the initiation and exploration of informal discourses of politics in both New York and Pennsylvania. In the former case, that discourse emphasized the legitimate role played by competition and contention in the articulation of New York's distinctive political culture. In Pennsylvania, a related, and perhaps slightly stronger, discourse placed more emphasis on the accommodative processes necessary to bring a variety of interests together to form a successful popular political party. Both of these
provincial dialects were, to be sure, place-specific rather than broadly theoretical, for they were rooted in the actual conditions of colonial politics. But at the same time, and perhaps because of their deep grounding in provincial practice, they occupied new intellectual ground with enough authority to disregard the ways in which they contradicted some of the important tenets of formal English Whig discourses. In doing so, they generated a sufficient sense of their own integrity and worth to guarantee great vitality.

The vigor of that tradition immediately became apparent in the new nation. As New Yorkers restructured their state politics around new contentious issues, they fleshed out their informal language of political discourse, thus giving it greater persuasiveness and coherence. And, at the same time, as they continued to emphasize the legitimate role of contention in political affairs, they began to clarify the distinction between factional and party activities. In Pennsylvania, different changes took place. The organization of Constitutionalist and Republican parties was, among other things, an attempt by Pennsylvanians to reduce the political fragmentation independence had brought and to restore the kind of order they had associated with the politics of party during the colonial years. Revolutionaries reaffirmed what their colonial experiences had told them—that men of integrity could be directly involved in party pursuits. Although rancor frequently characterized relationships among partisans, there was also evidence of civility, which in the course of its expression suggested new dimensions of political accommodation within the framework of party politics. Dialogue over the merits of “your republicans” as opposed to “my Constitutionals” indicated a growing mutual acceptance of party activities and a simultaneous broadening of the informal dimensions of American political culture.

It is hardly surprising, in the face of such developments, that what one observer has labeled “one of the crucial moments—[maybe the crucial moment]—in the history of American politics” took place in Pennsylvania. In a debate in the Pennsylvania legislature in 1786 over the rechartering of the Bank of North America, Representative William Finley stated what had become obvious to those well versed in the traditions of Pennsylvania politics: that interests were ubiquitous, and that the essence of political life was the promotion of those interests. For any confirmation he needed that Pennsylvania was normative, Finley need only have looked around. As the states adjusted to the extreme dislocation of the war, to the new circumstances that exclusion from the British empire occasioned, and to the social upheaval Revolutionary ideals and institutional changes entailed, conflict among different interests appeared to proliferate. And the first experiment with national confederation drew attention to the diversity
of the states, their multiple interests, their individual wants, and their various behavioral and dialectic political traditions.

Given these circumstances—ones with which New York and Pennsylvania had long been familiar—and given the particularly intense intermingling of state and national politics in those two states during the Revolutionary and Early National years, it is understandable why the New York and Pennsylvania experiences had such an important effect on the structuring of federal politics. The "First Party System" was largely an extension of many of the features of the political cultures of New York and Pennsylvania to a few other states and their elevation to the more visible stage of national politics. 26 Those who try to reduce the highly variegated and developing American political culture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to a stereotypical era of "Antiparty, elite-factional" politics, or who dismiss the Republicans and Federalists as "not modern political parties," or not constituting a "party system," miss the point. 27 Of course, this was not the period of highly institutionalized, national party politics that followed. 28 In order to find out what it was, however, we need to pay less attention to such laggard states as Massachusetts and make less of an effort to prolong classical republican assumptions until the Bucktails of New York could dramatically challenge them. 29 Rather, we should try to comprehend more about the subtle changes that characterized political consciousness prior to the celebrated days of Jacksonian democracy and the more structured era of Whig/Democratic party rivalries.

In the process we may find a far stronger informal elaboration of the assumptions of party politics than we have thought existed. Take William Bingham, for example, a Philadelphian whose lifestyle and public utterances allegedly demonstrated the pervasiveness of the "classical republican atmosphere." 30 Yet here was a man who, even when given the license of diplomatic office to indulge in the rhetoric of public service and disinterestedness, would talk abstractly about party politics. Here was a man who could hypothesize about the conditions under which "a party" could lose its "reputation," and who could diagnose the ills of "our Party" in terms "of [the] Energy & . . . System" it needed to remain strong. 31 Or take the ample public discourse that began to emerge about the relationship of party to government. "It is chiefly by the collusion of parties," wrote one Pennsylvanian, "that public business is pushed forward, with a tendency perhaps different from the views of either party." 32 At the same time, we will find instances of strong aversion to public use of the term "party" and a concerned search for alternatives to describe activities that in themselves contributed to the acceptance of a partisan political tradition. 33 The point is that the nuances of Early National political culture appear in the tensions be-
between informal discourse, public discourse, and the particulars of behavior. Such tensions are complicated matters, and changes during these years were not unidirectional. But one thing they will certainly demonstrate is the strength of an expansive liberal political culture, clearly articulated even during the heyday of classical republican rhetoric, and rooted in long-standing colonial traditions rather than solely dependent on the explosion of social and cultural forces occasioned by the Revolution.

Just as political life in eighteenth-century New York and Pennsylvania illuminates important aspects of the liberal political experience in early America, it reveals something of the origins and character of party politics. During the recent Cold War era of American self-congratulation, historians and political scientists focused a great deal of attention on the "two-party systems" that apparently distinguished American democracy, which some Americans felt were potentially exportable to a "less developed" world. That preoccupation has had consequences for study of the origins of American parties as important as the pervasiveness of the classical republican paradigm for the interpretation of early American political culture. By "party systems" standards, the First Party System was not, in fact, the rivalry between Federalists and Republicans, but the so-called "Second Party System" of the later Jacksonian era. And because of the prominence of the Van Buren Democrats in publicizing the rationale for party competition, whatever attention writers have paid to the roots of American party politics has largely gone to public life in New York.

The model of political behavior eighteenth-century New York offered was unquestionably of considerable significance in the emergence of America's liberal politics. New Yorkers led the way in accepting contention as a fundamental feature of popular politics, and in demonstrating that conflict was a normative feature of any vital new-world political system that embraced a plurality of interests. Of course, the strands of individualism that wound through colonial New York politics inevitably meant that in the expanded context of Revolutionary and Early National political life, coalition politics would play some part. But the factional and party arguments that almost always accompanied such alliances, and the continuing importance of individual county strongmen within factional and party organizations, meant that the accommodative aspects of New York politics were always upstaged by their competitive dimensions. Explosive as the forces of political contention were, however, they did not fragment into random patterns. New York's politics frequently showed how conflict could be channeled into bipolarity, predisposing toward the kind of oppositional politics essential for two-party systems. The New York experience thus presaged, as it were, the two-party future.
There is, however, another component in the development of party politics that often goes unacknowledged, and that the Pennsylvania experience clearly illuminates. Pennsylvanians were the first Americans to distinguish party from faction, and they did so in circumstances far less notable for interparty competition than for one-party dominance. While opposition did exist (and over time it took a variety of forms), a more important feature of colonial Pennsylvania politics was the moral dimension that underlay Quaker Party policies and activities. It was possible for those who sought to serve the public good, and who preferred to conciliate various interests to that end, to do so through the medium of an appropriate political party. (One of the reasons the conflict between the Constitutionalists and Republicans was so bitter was that they both laid claim to that heritage.) But the Pennsylvania experience had implications that went beyond state boundaries. Such a view of party resonated with the powerful conformist impulses in American society, thereby facilitating the entry of that view into the communal worlds of New England and the reviverist South and, to a more limited extent, into the hegemonic planter world of the southern tidewater. The acceptance of party in areas of one-party dominance, the subsequent existence of one-party dominance in numerous areas for sustained periods of time, and the curious ways in which that tradition intersected with the better-known “system” of two-party polarization are at the center of the unfolding of America’s liberal democratic politics. And that saga began in colonial Pennsylvania.

Finally, there is the issue of what the early New York and Pennsylvania experiences tell us about power relationships in American politics. Not long after the Revolution, the contentious, bipolar factionalism of New York and the party politics of Pennsylvania began to intermingle, forming the underpinnings of national party politics as they evolved from the self-conscious radicalism of Democratic-Republican societies to the full-throated ebullience of the Jacksonian Democrats. Partisan politics, eventually understood as party politics—but never without factional dimensions—became indissolubly connected with liberal democracy. The processes of change by which this development took place have long been celebrated as a fundamental part of the general transformation of American society from its small-scale dependent past to its epic independent future.

Yet the most revealing features of early American society do not consist simply of the laudations of contemporaries or of subsequent observers, but in the tensions that existed among the languages of public celebration and informal discourse, and the many patterns of public and private behavior. We know, for example, that the public rhetoric of equality notwithstanding, informal languages of discrimination flourished. While showering effusions
of public praise on their new democracy, Americans were simultaneously sanctioning the spread of slavery, disenfranchising former freemen, and forming barriers to prevent the participation of women in public affairs.

Within the preserve of politics, there was an appositive tension with long-run implications for American political culture. From one point of view, party politics seems so closely associated with liberal democratic ways that it appears to epitomize popular political values. Yet in its first expressions, party politics was an integral part of the respective sets of oligarchic political relationships dominant in provincial New York and Pennsylvania. The tendencies toward oligarchy were obvious, not only in the colonies’ restrictive patterns of representation, in the assemblies’ corporate sensibilities, and in the legislatures’ claims to speak for all rights, but also in the organization of factions and parties and in the tendency of particular ethnoreligious groups to dominate high office, manage elections, and control the informal processes of politics. Of course, the Revolution swept away many distinctive features of the established oligarchic regimes. New standards of equitable representation, modest expansion of the franchise, a heightened commitment to democratic politics, and the discrediting of prominent colonials with Tory inclinations bequeathed an even broader base for popular politics in the new republic. It was one thing, however, to rid New York and Pennsylvania of their old colonial oligarchies, but quite another to eradicate the oligarchic temper that existed within the very texture of popular politics. While the Revolution ushered in a new era of liberal democracy, it simultaneously welcomed the intermingling of new and old elites and their fusion into local, regional, and national establishments. And high on the practical political agendas of many of these groups was the modulation of democratic demands and the exercise of control over the various processes of partisan politics, much in the way the old oligarchies had done.  

What the colonial regimes bequeathed to the new nation, then, was an immensely durable tradition of close linkage between the popular and the oligarchic. This was a tension that was to persist in the new nation just as sharply as it had in the colonial past—a central feature of the distinctively inclusive, yet simultaneously exclusionary, politics of the coming modern America.