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# ANDREW JACKSON'S POPULISM

BY HARRY L. WATSON

The word “populism” aptly comes up often in contemporary discussions of Andrew Jackson’s legacy. Jackson built his political movement and his presidency on glorification of the popular will, pitted against those he regarded as entrenched or corrupted elites, and nearly all of his major public statements breathe rhetorical fire on the wicked designs of a privileged few against the peaceful happiness of the virtuous many. “Never for a moment believe that the great body of the citizens of any State or States can deliberately intend to do wrong,” he declared in his Farewell Address, roundly overturning the Framers’ deep-seated fears of ignorant or irresponsible majorities. Nor did Jackson harbor any doubts about where to locate the virtuous intentions of those he called “the great body of the people” and “the bone and sinew of the country.” His will stood for theirs, he proclaimed to a defiant Senate, because “the President is the direct representative of the American people.”<sup>1</sup> Not only is such Jackson-style majoritarianism rife in political movements today, both in

America and worldwide, but conflation of a single authority with the popular will also seems dangerously widespread. While some commentators still insist that the true meaning of populism is more benign and democratic than authoritarian, Jackson’s contribution to the phenomenon and the term’s applicability to popular movements on both the right and the left seems both undeniable and irresistible for contemporary commentators of all stripes.<sup>2</sup>

Definitions of populism tend to fall into two camps, stylistic and substantial. Stylistic definitions stress the rhetorical aspects of populism without fixing on any particular populist program or policy. Nearly a generation ago, for example, historian Michael Kazin defined populism as “a *language* whose speakers conceive of ordinary people as a noble assemblage not bounded by class, view their elite opponents as self-serving and undemocratic, and seek to mobilize the former against the latter [*italics added*].” Kazin explicitly refused to limit populism to programmatic demands, but saw it as a rhetorical style that he called “a flexible mode

Jackson posed as a presidential candidate in his military uniform, yet built his political movement on glorification of the popular will. (John Vanderlyn, artist, 1824, Charleston S.C. City Hall Collection)





of persuasion,” and “more an impulse than an ideology.”<sup>3</sup>

Scholars who prefer what I call more substantive definitions seek instead what they see as authentic populist *actions*, or at the very least, authentically populist methods of attracting support. Using the concept of “movement culture,” Lawrence Goodwyn pioneered this approach in 1976 in his *Democratic Promise: The Populist Movement in America*. More recently, Ronald P. Formisano likewise focuses on political practice rather than language or style, in order to distinguish what he calls genuine “movements mobilizing masses of ordinary people... and invoking the name of ‘the people’ against established corrupt elites.” He adopts this approach to exclude what he calls “pretenders and free riders” who “have used populist rhetoric or adopted a populist style as a political strategy.”<sup>4</sup>

Without attempting to make any final choice between the stylistic and substantive approach to populism, I will lean to the stylistic here, for Andrew Jackson’s specific programs have rightly lost favor today, but his style and slogans form a much more permanent legacy. For my purposes, in other words, it seems reasonable to sidestep the legitimate but separate question of whether the owner of 150 slaves or the head of a well-oiled and well-connected political machine could ever be a “genuine” populist, in order to focus instead on the origins and implications of his movement’s pervasive and obviously influential rhetoric. More specifically, I would like to examine the development of

three central values within mature Jacksonian ideology that seem particularly salient to modern political movements—majority rule, white male equality, and limited government. I will conclude with a brief discussion of how Jacksonians applied these principles to the business of party-building, and how their principles have changed over time.

By addressing Jacksonian ideology, I do not mean to malign Old Hickory as a closet intellectual or political philosopher, labels he would surely despise. The seventh president was never an original or rigorous thinker. At most, he repeated and reinforced the clichés of his era in ways that made them resonate more powerfully than ever. He was the most conspicuous of a whole generation of American political leaders and activists who transmitted a kind of vernacular republicanism from the revolutionary era to the rough-and-tumble politics of antebellum America, and from there to an enduring American political idiom. Because Jackson’s political opinions do not survive in treatises but in policy papers and a few private letters, it is also necessary to search out details and connective tissue in the writings of some of Jackson’s most important supporters, such as his nephew and adviser Andrew Jackson Donelson, and journalists William Leggett and John L. O’Sullivan. At least as much as the president himself, party ideologues drew on Jackson’s specific policy pronouncements to formulate larger theoretical principles.

Jacksonian political values emerged in a context of profound racial and gender discrimination. Scholars of populism have cor-

rectly observed that champions of “the great body of the people” have often seen them as exclusively white and male. The assumption is part of a larger tendency to contrast the “real” people with the undeserving rich and poor who bracket them on the social scale. Populists frequently denounce those at the top as corrupt exploiters; those below they condemn as weak dependents or dangerous freeloaders. In the American populist imagination, the latter group are frequently more than poor; they are often nonwhite. As Kazin puts it, “the rising of the ‘people’ was an avowedly white affair; the democratic vision rarely extended across the color line.”<sup>5</sup>

Andrew Jackson certainly fits this model. He was not only a major slaveholder but he despised abolitionism and explicitly condemned it.<sup>6</sup> Racial scapegoating likewise appeared in the relationship between white workers and slaves and freed people in the nineteenth century, and also in the conservative populism of more recent American history. As is well known, it was likewise central to Jacksonian Indian policy, which featured the seizure of Native American lands, ostensibly to benefit white yeomen.<sup>7</sup>

With obvious adjustments, the same was true for gender. The Jacksonians assumed that the “people” were male. Men did the fighting, voting, and governing, and claimed the rights that came with them. Jackson himself tendered elaborate gallantry to “ladies” he saw as victimized, ranging from the much-maligned Margaret Eaton to a variety of lesser-known women who sought his aid.<sup>8</sup> He likewise practiced

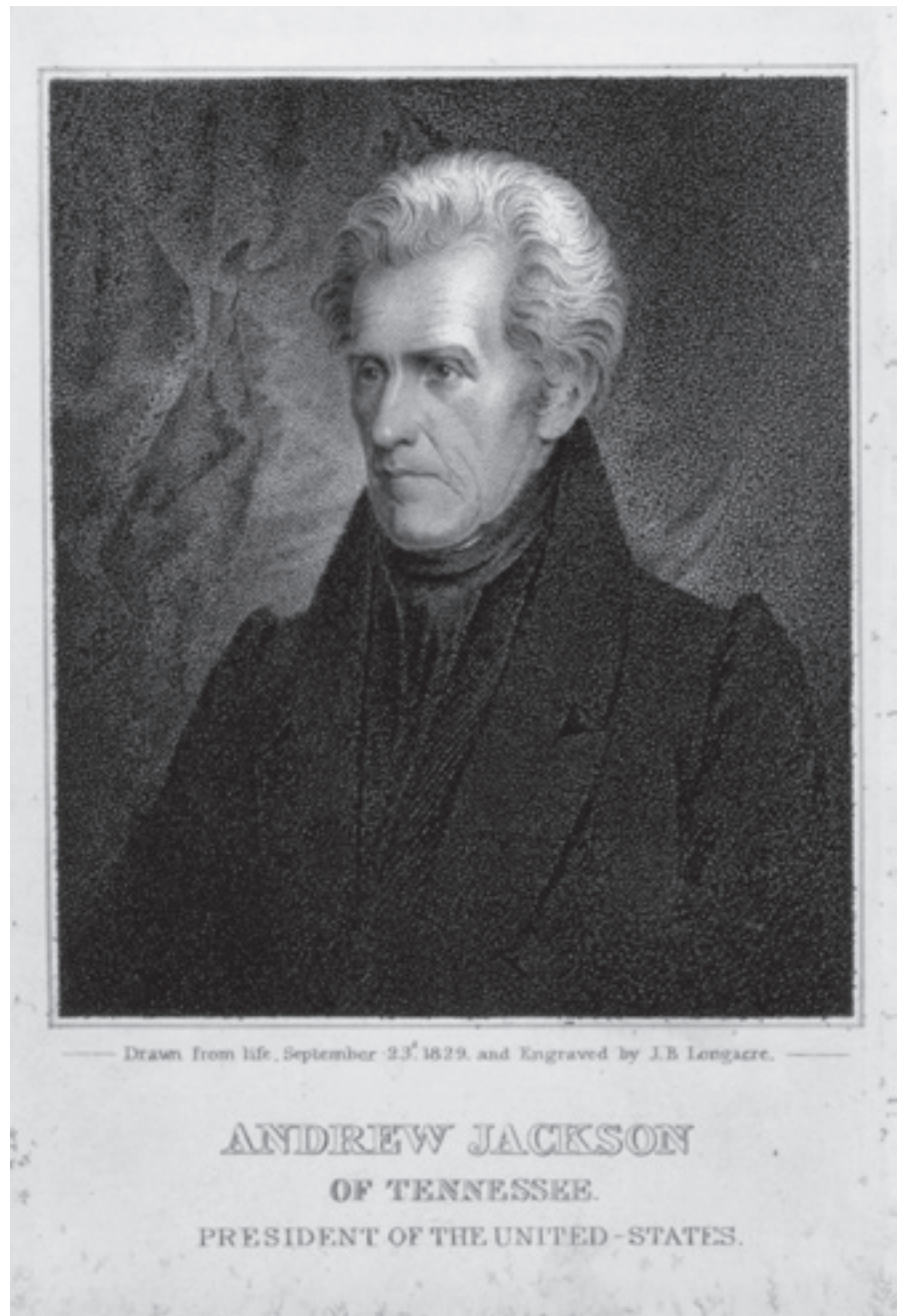
a grandiose machismo in his personal life and career and expected the same from other men. Perhaps it was no accident that his Whig opponents actively sought female support in their campaigns while Jacksonian Democrats belittled it.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the linkage between racial and gender discrimination and the glorification of the white male people in less obviously toxic ways may be a source of racism’s and sexism’s lethality in the contemporary world. To get to the root of Jackson’s legacy for the modern world, therefore, it may be useful to take note of his racial and gender policies and then look further, to qualities that link his “mode of persuasion” less obviously to others today.



In February 1829, General Jackson composed a draft reply to the committee who formally notified him of his election as President of the United States. In it, Jackson vented some of the bitterness engendered by a long, nasty campaign that began with the allegedly stolen election of 1824 and eventually saw the death of his wife and innumerable attacks on his integrity. The draft was far too pungent for release, so advisers apparently suppressed it in favor of an anodyne public substitute. For that very reason, the original text is a good place to begin examining the multiple meanings that Jackson placed upon his election:

The people of their own mere will brought my name before the nation for

In early 1829, President-Elect Jackson drafted a letter stating he would obey the “large majority of the virtuous yeomanry,” who “elected me to fill the presidential chair.” (Library of Congress)



the office of President of these U. States. They have sustained me against all the torrents of slander that corruption & wickedness could invent, circulated thro subsidized presses and every other way supported by the patronage of the government; and by a large majority of the virtuous yeomanry of the U. States have

elected me to fill the presidential chair. Such call, under such circumstances, I cannot hesitate to obey....<sup>10</sup>

Almost every assertion in this short statement was arguably false. “The people” did not nominate Jackson “of their own mere will;” they had lots of help from dedi-

cated party wireworkers. As Daniel Walker Howe has pointed out, “the torrents of slander” that Jackson endured, such as the tale of the six executed militiamen and the story of his ill-timed marriage to Rachel Donelson Robards, were at least factually accurate, while his own side’s counterblasts, like the charge that John Quincy Adams had pimped for the Russian czar, were preposterous lies.<sup>11</sup> Whether or not Jackson received the majority of votes from the “virtuous yeomanry” would depend on closer demographic study than Jackson could perform, not to mention the definition of “virtuous.”

But factual accuracy was not really the point. Jackson’s bitter riposte evoked many of the most important themes of his place in American culture: selfless patriotism, government abuses, corrupt elites, dishonest media, and the unfettered choice of “virtuous freeholders,” fused with the will of the Old Hero himself. These claims became foundational principles of Jackson’s movement and the populist crusades that followed.

Andrew Jackson led the United States in a forward-looking age, marked by steam engines, textile mills, urban growth, and western expansion. Hezekiah Niles, its most prominent editor, famously praised its “almost universal impulse to get forward.”<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Jackson himself looked backward. “My notions Sir are not those taught in modern Schools & in fashionable high life,” he growled to Brevet Major General Winfield Scott, twelve years before

his presidency, at the ripe old age of fifty. “They were imbibed in ancient days.”<sup>13</sup> Once in office, Jackson still focused on the past when he summarized his hopes for the presidency. “If I can restore to our institutions their primitive simplicity and purity,” he confided to an Indiana admirer, “I may then look back to the honors conferred on me with just pride.”<sup>14</sup>

For Jackson, primitive purity had graced the years of his youth and the republic’s foundation. Though we cannot be sure of the means of transmission, Jackson’s adult convictions are clear proof that the republican mindset articulated in the revolutionary journals and pamphlets of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia had penetrated the Carolina backwoods and made the value of liberty the foundation of his politics. In public and in private, for example, whenever Jackson listed the faults of the Bank of the United States, he endlessly called it unconstitutional and “dangerous to liberty.”<sup>15</sup> It was the worst thing he could say.

If Jackson’s thinking began with liberty, “virtue,” or devotion to the common good, came next as its chief preservative. Throughout his career, Jackson readily compared himself to George Washington, pointed sincerely if self-servingly to his own patriotism, and condemned his enemies for greedy ambition. “In all my acts...,” he warned Secretary of War William H. Crawford in 1816, “I am swayed alone by disinterested motives—publick good.” He likewise assured James Monroe that “in all my recommendations I have the public

good in view.” And why did he submit to the demands of the presidency, being “daily assailed by the wicked & ambitious,” when he was old, sick, and grief-stricken? Because, he told his old friend John Overton, “*my country required it.*”<sup>16</sup>

By the same token, Jackson easily saw his rivals and opponents as possessed by corruption instead of virtue, or the pursuit, in one of his favorite expressions, of “self-aggrandizement.” In 1817 he compared uncooperative Indian leaders to “some of our bawling politicians, who loudly exclaim we are friends of the people,” but actually pursue “the same base purpose, *self aggrandizement.*” When Henry Clay challenged his conduct in the Seminole War, Jackson likewise predicted that “the insidious Mr Clay will sink into that insignificance, that all those who abandon principle & Justice & would sacrifice their country for self aggrandizement ought & will experience.” Seventeen years later, President Jackson viewed the nullification crisis through the same lens, dismissing John C. Calhoun as “the ambitious Demagogue... [who] would sacrifice friends & country, & move heaven & earth... to gratify his unholy ambition.”<sup>17</sup>

The binary oppositions of virtue and corruption, selfless patriotism and selfish ambition, were fully consistent with earlier republican thinking. Jackson departed from his eighteenth century predecessors, however, when he located the virtue that might save the republic if applied in time. Where many older republicans had turned to an educated and independent elite, Jackson repeat-

edly cited the first key tenet of his populist creed—faith in the popular majority, usually as channeled and embodied by himself. His reasoning was simple: self-interest might erode the virtue of the elite, but the interests of the white male majority, whom he called “the great body of the people,” were simply the common good itself, the essence of political virtue. “If [the people] have no higher or better motives to govern them,” he argued, “they will at least perceive that their own interest requires them to be just to others, as they hope to receive justice at their hands.” Knowing they cannot get special favors and can only prosper by hard work, “the planter, the farmer, the mechanic, and the laborer,” he concluded, will always resist corruption, for they only “love liberty and desire nothing but equal rights and equal laws.”<sup>18</sup>

Jackson’s majoritarianism predated the election of 1824, when he won a plurality of electoral and popular votes, but lost the presidency to an allegedly “corrupt bargain” between Henry Clay and John Quincy Adams. When the aggrieved general traveled to Washington to defend his conduct in the Seminole War, for example, he assured his wife that “the voice of the people begins to [*move & have*] its eff[ect] here—I am told there will be a great majority in my favor,” and told his friend John Coffee that “the good sense of the people will frustrate... the designs” of his enemies. And long before his war on the Bank of the United States, he denounced a proposed Tennessee state loan office as “corrupt, base, wicked, and unconstitutional,” but assured himself



“that the majority of the people will arise in their strength & put [it] down.” Jackson’s faith in majority rule naturally grew after 1824, until he called his eventual victory in 1828 “a struggle between the virtue of the American people & the corrupting influence of executive patronage.”<sup>19</sup>

Taking office, Jackson echoed Jefferson by citing the centrality of majority rule. “[It is] the first principle of our system,” he lectured Congress, “that the majority is to govern.” Going further, he posited, “In all... matters of public concern, as few impediments as possible should exist to the free operation of the public will.”<sup>20</sup> To put this precept into action, Jackson demanded the abolition of the Electoral College and called the principles of direct democracy and simple majority rule fundamental to free government. The Twentieth Congress (and all its successors) ignored his specific request and left the Electoral College intact, but the veneration of *vox populi* became democratic dogma.

Jacksonian editor John L. O’Sullivan later spelled out the principle of strict majoritarianism more specifically in his “Introduction” to *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, a famed Jacksonian journal of politics and the arts that began publication in 1837. “We are opposed to all self-styled ‘wholesome restraints’ on the free action of the popular opinion and will,” O’Sullivan declared. He admitted that execution of the people’s will might be delayed a bit by institutions like bicameral legislatures, but their only justifi-

cation was the danger of hasty action. “All [government bodies] should be dependent with equal directness and promptness on the influence of public opinion,” he insisted.

The popular will should be equally the animating and moving spirit of them all, and ought never to find in any of its own creatures a self-imposed power, capable, when misused either by corrupt ambition or honest error, of resisting itself and defeating its own determined object. We cannot, therefore, look with an eye of favor on any such forms of representation as, by length of tenure of delegated power, tend to weaken that universal and unrelaxing responsibility to the vigilance of public opinion which is the true conservative principle of our institutions.<sup>21</sup>

Reducing this thought to an anxious motto, Jackson’s first party newspaper, the *United States Telegraph*, warned on its masthead that “Power is always stealing from the many to the few,” and pledged Jackson’s presidency to an endless struggle against this nefarious tendency.<sup>22</sup>

Uncritical submission to the will of majorities has not gone unchallenged in subsequent American history. Andrew Jackson had not left office before the brilliant French observer Alexis de Tocqueville had identified the “tyranny of the majority” as the besetting sin of American democracy. Well aware of Tocqueville’s criticism, even stalwart Jacksonian ideologues like William

Leggett of the *New York Evening Post* and O'Sullivan of *The Democratic Review* could deplore what Leggett called "majority despotism."<sup>23</sup> Today's democrats profess more sensitivity to the needs of minorities, but Jackson's frame of reference remained the supposedly stolen election of 1824. The only alternative to majority rule was minority rule, or as he would put it, the rule of the many by the few. For him and many of his contemporaries, that was the essence of aristocracy and it was fundamentally hostile to free government and free society.

How did Jackson's populist republicanism inform such conspicuous Jacksonian policies as resistance to federally-funded internal improvements or the Bank War? When Andrew Jackson took office, the United States was in the midst of a dramatic economic transformation, epitomized by the rapid growth of the banking industry and the widespread use of the paper notes that banks issued to their borrowers in lieu of coin. New methods of transportation like steamboats and canals had burst nature's limits on economic transactions, making it much cheaper to produce commodities in one place and sell them in another. One result was a boom in commercial farming, as cultivators found new markets for their crops, and in manufacturing, as investors harnessed new technology to produce inexpensive goods like shoes and machine-made textiles for sale to distant customers. In the process, previously isolated farmers met the hazards of the business cycle and local artisans faced the threat of obsolescence.

Contrary to prevailing myths about the lone entrepreneur and his private enterprise, most of these new businesses and institutions depended on some form of government subsidy—whether it was a direct purchase of stock in the case of a bank or canal company, a protective tariff for manufacturers, or government surveys and military protection in the case of land speculation. The businessmen who launched the new companies had won support by arguing that economic progress would benefit everyone in the end, but in a new and capital-starved country, they could never get started without some form of government assistance. Many Americans accepted this argument because they welcomed the changes that progress entailed. Others resented the cost, and especially the loss of independence and security that development inflicted on the less successful. Such voters would become prime targets for Jacksonian political recruiters.

The new American economy relied on credit, and a banking industry grew rapidly to supply the demand. With no banks at all in the colonial period, the number of American banks had risen to 369 by the time Jackson took office, and nearly doubled by the time he left. Protected from individual liability by a corporate charter granted as a special favor by a state legislature, investors created a bank by pooling their funds and making loans in the form of paper bank notes, supposedly redeemable in gold or silver on demand. These notes then passed from buyers to sell-

ers and became the country's circulating medium of exchange.

Unfortunately, poorly regulated banks lent out far more paper notes than their meager capital reserves could redeem. This meant that a million gold or silver dollars deposited in a bank could multiply into millions more dollars of interest-bearing loans in paper money. To a traditionalist like Andrew Jackson, this fact made the whole idea of banking a reckless fraud. As he saw it, bankers first enriched themselves by printing and lending worthless notes, then cooked up panics by exposing these notes as worthless, thus driving down commodity prices and forcing their borrowers into bankruptcy. The bankers then enriched themselves further by seizing the insolvents' devalued property to discharge their loans. "I do not dislike your Bank any more than all banks," he told Nicholas Biddle, president of the Bank of the United States. "But ever since I read the history of the South Sea Bubble [an eighteenth century financial crash], I have been afraid of banks."<sup>24</sup> When Biddle's bank requested a new charter, Jackson vowed to destroy the "monster" and return the country to an older, simpler, and to him, purer state of society and government.

Led by Jackson himself, many Democrats came to believe that the fundamental problem lay not with a single "Monster Bank," but with the banking business itself, its privately issued paper money, and the complex of greedy, wealthy interests that profited from the system. Denouncing

banks as the "Money Power," Jackson and his successor Martin Van Buren tried unsuccessfully to create a government-issued, all-metallic currency that was immune to private manipulation and protected ordinary Americans from the machinations of those he excoriated as "the great moneyed corporations," "the selfish, interested classes," and even "the predatory portion of the community."<sup>25</sup>

Why were Democrats hostile to banks and to many of the other institutions of the so-called Market Revolution? Among themselves, Jackson and his closest advisers often worried that commercial and industrial development could undermine a society of independent farmers, the only reliable basis for majority rule and republican government generally, though they usually muted their concerns in public. As early as 1829, for example, a draft of Jackson's first annual message prepared by trusted adviser Amos Kendall warned against protective tariffs in starkly agrarian language. "Who could wish to see multitudes of his fellow beings penned in villages and confined in manufactories unless they can produce some essential good to the farming interest which constitutes the bone and sinew of our Republic?" he demanded.<sup>26</sup> Three years later, the president's nephew, Andrew Jackson Donelson, proposed a virtual paraphrase of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*: "Independent farmers are every where the basis of society and truest friends of liberty," he wrote in a sentence that later appeared in Jackson's fourth annual message. In starker language

that was later cut, Donelson elaborated and then insisted that the public lands be used to perpetuate the nation's yeoman population.

In our country as in others it may happen that masses of people may become dependent on rich landholders, or privileged corporations, for daily employment and daily bread. It may happen that to save their leases or their employments, they consent to be carted to the polls, by their landlords and employers, to give an unwilling vote, and rivet the chains that bind them. It is true policy to postpone this state of society if it cannot be forever prevented.

Donelson's notes likewise criticized the stimulation of industry by the protective tariff, warning that "the impression is gaining ground that the concentration of immense wealth in a few hands and the necessary dependence of masses of people on a few capitalists is injurious to the farming and mechanic interests, and portends no good to our republican institutions."<sup>27</sup>

It is impossible to be sure if Donelson was articulating the president's own thoughts here or trying to put his own words in his uncle's mouth, but Jackson did routinely link the problems of concentrated wealth with

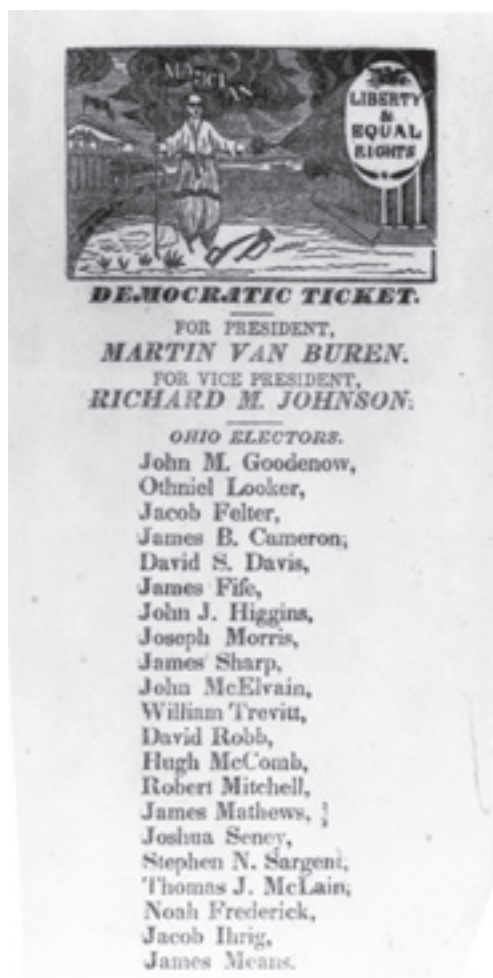
violations of majority rule and popular liberty. As early as 1829, long before the public phase of the Bank War, he complained to his confidant John Overton about "the injurious effects of the interference of the directors of the Bank in our late elections which if not *crushed* must destroy the purity of the right of Suffrage." Months later, he called Bank supporters "the sordid & self-interested, who prized self interest more than the perpetuity of our liberty, & and the blessings of a free republican government" and worried about "the powerful effect produced by the monied aristocracy, upon the purity of elections, and of... Legislation," calling Bank recharter "the death blow to our liberty." The president therefore listened very carefully when Francis Blair intimated that the Lexington branch of the BUS had provided funds to rig the Kentucky elections of 1830 "by the foulest bribery & fraud." In his view, "the Bank was converted into a permanent electioneering engine," and must be destroyed "to preserve the morals of the people, the freedom of the press, and the purity of the elective franchise."<sup>28</sup>

Jackson spoke in similar terms about publicly-aided corporations for internal improvements. While admiring the technology of improved roads and canals and professing a desire to see them spread, he saw "very strong objections to connecting

Jackson told banker Nelson Biddle he did "not dislike your Bank any more than all banks" but due to crashed financial bubbles, Jackson was "afraid of banks." (Biddle, Thomas Sully, artist, 1828, Library of Congress)







In the 1830s, Jacksonian populists turned to “Equal Rights.” They saw the artificial persons created by incorporation as a violation of equal rights. “Liberty and Equal Rights” for white men were watchwords in the 1836 election. (1836 Democratic Ticket, Library of Congress)

the government with private companies.” Martin Van Buren’s draft of Jackson’s Maysville Road veto declared that public investments simply propped up failed private ventures. Jackson himself deplored “the log-rolling principles” involved in appro-

priations for internal improvements, which Van Buren explained as “the debauchery & deleterious influence of combinations to carry through concert measures which considered by themselves would meet with but little countenance.” In 1831, Kendall’s proposed language for the third annual message professed shock that “the people may be induced to elect Representatives to Congress” on grounds that later generations applauded: that is, “by... their adroitness and skill in... [arranging that] the largest share of the public treasure should be spent in their several districts.”<sup>29</sup> It is not hard to see in these early warnings a nascent populist vocabulary for contemporary outrage over “budget-busting” earmarks, boondoggling, and “bridges to nowhere.”

Americans who are accustomed to hear their presidents praising business are likely to be startled by the vehemence of Jackson’s anti-corporate rhetoric, and even more so by the remedy that the Jacksonians proposed to resist the evil. From the Populists of the 1890s to the present, modern anti-corporate crusaders are likely to call for strong government regulations to prevent the abuse of private power. Jacksonians offered no such measures.

Instead, they turned to what they called “Equal Rights,” after majoritarianism, a second key tenet of Jacksonian populism. Jacksonian equality did not apply to race or gender, but to special legal privileges such as corporate charters that granted advantages to some white Americans but not all. For Jacksonians, the artificial persons created by

incorporation were not beneficial tools of economic progress, but violations of equal rights, and the charter of the Bank of the United States was the greatest violation of all. This is what Jackson meant in his veto message when he complained “that the rich and powerful too often bend the acts of government to their selfish purposes.” Continuing, Jackson had acknowledged that perfect human equality was impossible because some men would always be more gifted or industrious than others.

But when the laws undertake to add to these natural and just advantages artificial distinctions, to grant titles, gratuities, and exclusive privileges, to make the rich richer and the potent more powerful, the humble members of society—the farmers, mechanics, and laborers—who have neither the time nor the means of securing like favors to themselves, have a right to complain of the injustice of their government.<sup>30</sup>

In other words, any bank charter—and by extension, any special privilege like a protective tariff or transportation subsidy or a corporate charter of any kind—violated the principle of “equal rights” and created what Jackson called a “monopoly” or “aristocracy.” The president hated them all, and dedicated his presidency to their extirpation, determined to return the republic to that primitive purity he imagined it possessed in his youth. To Indiana’s Tilghman Howard, he reflected,

If I can restore to our institutions their primitive simplicity and purity, [and] can only succeed in banishing those extraneous corrupting influences which tend to fasten monopoly and aristocracy on the constitution and to make the Government an engine of oppression to the people instead of the agent of their will, I may then look back to the honors conferred upon me, with feelings of just pride....<sup>31</sup>

What exactly were these “extraneous corrupting influences?” And who were the “aristocrats” who wielded them? As Jackson further explained to Howard, the people’s enemies were precisely the men who were transforming the American economy, specifically those who “can identify themselves with privileged joint stock Companies, with the Stockholders in a national Bank or the log rolling system of Internal Improvements, Squandering the taxes raised on the whole people, in benefiting particular classes and maintaining a personal influence by partial legislation in congress.” These men were not inherently dangerous, Jackson maintained, but they attacked public liberty when they obtained legal privileges like corporate charters. In his words,

Whenever political machinery is successfully employed to destroy the great radical principle of freedom—equality among the people in the rights conferred by government—then aspiring

individuals can avail themselves of the selfish interested classes to aid in promoting an ambition which is naturally prone to multiply the advantages and increase the strength of the predatory portion of the community.<sup>32</sup>

The most ardent Jacksonians agreed. “Governments have no right to interfere with the pursuits of individuals... by offering encouragements and granting privileges to any particular class of industry or any select bodies of men,” echoed William Leggett of the *New York Evening Post*. “We [maintain] that all grants of monopolies, or exclusive or partial privileges to any man, or body of men, [impair] the equal rights of the people,” he added, “and [are] in direct violation of the principle of free government.”<sup>33</sup> For Leggett, moreover, virtually every economic regulation gave burdens or advantages to some men but not all, conferred “monopoly,” and violated the principle of equal rights. To preserve equality without imposing new laws or regulations, Jacksonians proposed to limit strictly the power of government, especially over the economy, to deny anyone a legal advantage denied to everyone else. In other words, the Jacksonians believed they could protect equality by a doctrinaire enforcement of *laissez-faire*, the principle that government should restrain individuals as little as possible, especially in their business affairs. To borrow a modern phrase, Jacksonians wanted to “starve the beast” of unwanted social and economic change—or at least to slow

its growth—by denying state funding and protection to its institutions.<sup>34</sup>

Historians have sometimes interpreted the combination of Jacksonian *laissez-faire* and anti-corporate rhetoric as hypocrisy or *naïveté*. Much like colonial Americans, however, the Jacksonians could not imagine the accumulation of vast wealth or private power without the assistance of the state. In Europe, royal governments bestowed titles and privileges on the favored few, who used these advantages to gather huge fortunes and create a vast disparity between rich and poor. Colonial governments had done much the same, issuing land grants and monopolies to favored insiders. Unfamiliar with advanced industrial economies, Jackson and his contemporaries never dreamed that the ordinary operations of business could generate trusts or monopolies to dwarf the aristocratic fortunes of the eighteenth century. Instead, they assumed that the normal ebb and flow of business, plus the regular division of estates in every generation, would always spread money around and continuously equalize fortunes, unless state power gave someone an unnatural advantage. If government intervention was the only cause of serious inequality, then the simple secret for a just and balanced economy was for government to keep its distance. Jackson expressed the idea most eloquently in his veto of the Bank’s recharter: “There are no necessary evils in government. Its evils exist only in its abuses. If it would confine itself to equal protection, and, as



Heaven does its rains, shower its favors alike on the high and the low, the rich and the poor, it would be an unqualified blessing.”<sup>35</sup> Ironically, though Jackson often gets credit for strengthening the office of president, praise of government weakness was at least as significant in his message.

Drawing on the history he knew, editor William Leggett carried the Jacksonian version of “equal rights” to its logical conclusion and denied that government could ever take positive action for the many against the few. “Experience will show,” he insisted, “that [government] power has always been exercised under the influence and for the exclusive benefit of wealth. It was never wielded on behalf of the community.... Whenever an exception is made to the general law of the land, founded on the principle of equal rights, it will always be found in favor of wealth. These immunities are never bestowed on the poor.”<sup>36</sup>

Like Leggett, Jackson moved easily from majority rule and equality to a third populist principle, the ideal of limited government. Historians have long argued that the nineteenth century American state was fundamentally weak and did not begin to grow its modern sinews until the Civil War at the earliest. More recent scholars have pointed to clear strengths of the early American state in such areas as war-making, land distribution, and Indian affairs, and Jackson certainly relished the use of government power against Native Americans, nullifiers, abolitionists, and others he saw as public enemies.<sup>37</sup>

In his view, however, “the great body of the people” deserved better. If government actions only fostered aristocracy, Jacksonians would protect “the planter, the farmer, the mechanic, and the laborer” by curtailing government aid to their adversaries. Strict ideologues like Leggett thus insisted that government should repeal all corporate charters, protective tariffs, transportation subsidies, and even regulations on the weight and quality of bread. They did not favor these measures to unleash big business but to diminish it. Protected by equal rights and limited government, a natural economy would flourish, until, in the words of labor reformer Orestes Brownson, “no class of our fellow men [are] doomed to toil through life as mere workmen at wages.” Wage labor would only be temporary, until every man “shall have accumulated enough to be an independent laborer on his own capital, on his own farm or in his own shop.” For rural Americans, generous distribution of the public lands would likewise “afford to every American citizen of enterprize the opportunity of securing an independent free hold.”<sup>38</sup>

Limiting government authority over white men had another benefit. Bending back to the principle of majority rule, government restraint was the only safe solution for the tyranny of the majority. “It is under the word government that the subtle danger lurks,” explained John L. O’Sullivan in his famed “Introduction” to *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review*. “A strong and active democratic government... is an evil, differing in degree and mode of opera-

tion, and not in nature, from a strong despotism....” Instead of taking direct actions to help the poor or hinder the rich, government should limit itself to administering justice, and otherwise “should have as little as possible to do with the general business and interests of the people.” Since powerless government could not be oppressive, O’Sullivan called it “a satisfactory and perfect solution of the great problem, otherwise unsolved, of the relative rights of majorities and minorities.” Ignoring the state’s power over *racial* minorities, O’Sullivan coined the classic maxim of *laissez-faire*: “the best government is that which governs least.”<sup>39</sup>

But it was not enough to simply unfurl this slogan. How could the Jacksonians be sure it would always be followed? If power was always slipping from the many to the few, what could prevent “the predatory portion of the community” from regaining their privileged positions, especially when Old Hickory himself was no longer around to prevent them? In the end, freedom would depend on public virtue. “It is to yourselves,” Jackson explained, “that you must look for safety and the means of guarding and perpetuating your free institutions.” Coining another memorable slogan, Jackson solemnly warned that “eternal vigilance by the people is the price of liberty.”<sup>40</sup>

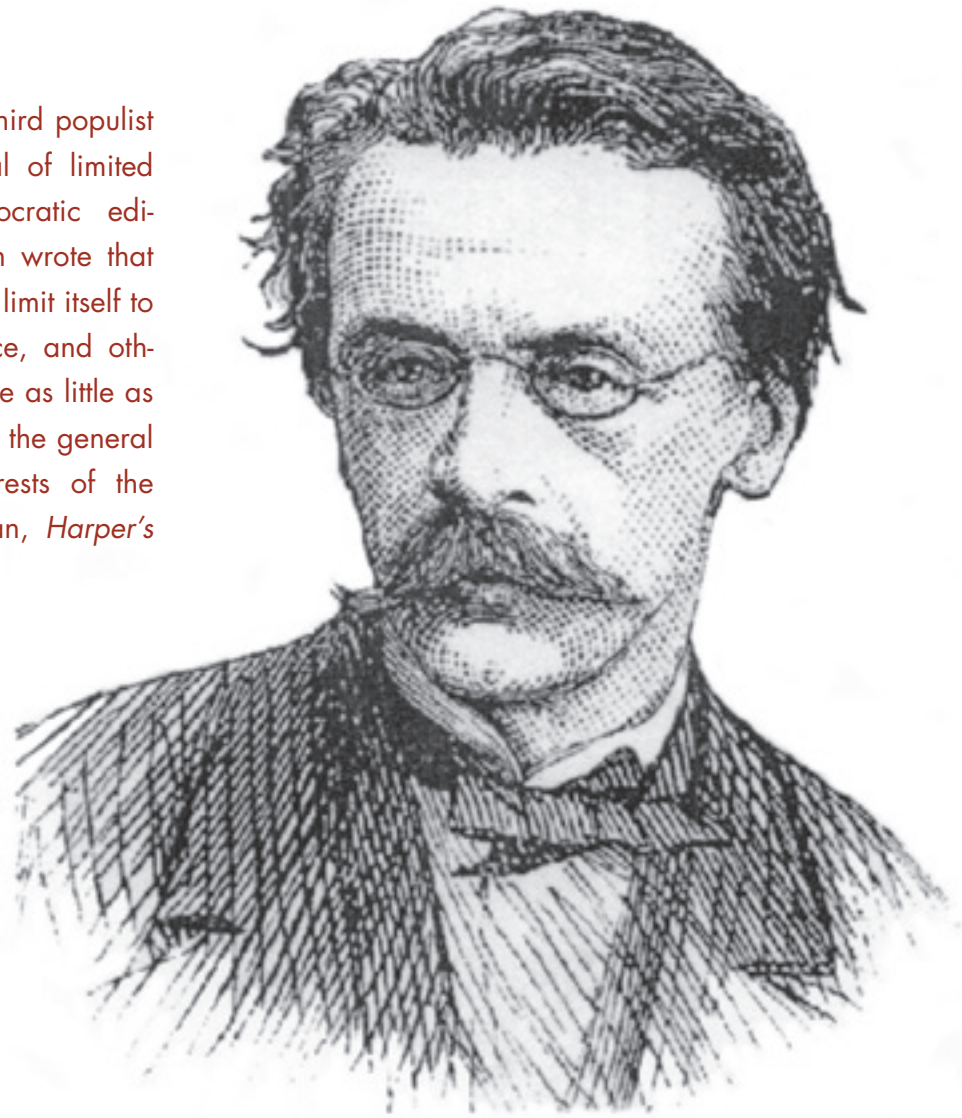
But the Jacksonians were also practical operators who did not expect eternal vigilance from everybody. Individually, the many were weak and the few were powerful, but if the majority combined their strength, the few could not prevail. Easy to say, but

how could popular unity be sustained, especially in the face of endless and divisive election campaigns, when ambitious individuals would inevitably seek to advance themselves with all the deceits and blandishments which corrupted humanity could devise? Left to themselves, the people could be divided, especially by distracting popularity contests like the four-way presidential contest of 1824. Jackson saw the problem clearly. “Creating divisions among the people as to men, is one of the artifices, essential to the successes of the few over the many. It is therefore of the utmost importance, that the majority should adopt some means to prevent such divisions.”<sup>41</sup>

Here Jacksonians applied their guiding principles to the creation of the Democratic Party, and pioneered in spelling out the ideas and institutions of party rule. First of all, parties were essential to governance. “No one can carry on this Govt. without support,” Jackson explained to a Tennessee activist, “and the Head of it must rely for support on the party by whose suffrages he is elected.” More fundamentally, a strong and united party could protect the interests of the majority, while “the opponents of popular rights” would piously deplore the rigors of party discipline and seek “to ‘destroy the landmarks of party.’” Jackson thus saw his efforts to restore the party lines of the Jeffersonian era as a central part of his historical legacy.

I have long believed, that is was only by preserving the identity of the

Jackson moved a third populist principle, the ideal of limited government. Democratic editor John O'Sullivan wrote that government should limit itself to administering justice, and otherwise "should have as little as possible to do with the general business and interests of the people." (O'Sullivan, *Harper's Weekly*, 1874)



Republican party as embodied and characterized by the principles introduced by Mr. Jefferson that the original rights of the states and the people could be maintained as contemplated by the Constitution. I have labored to reconstruct this great Party and bring the popular power to bear with full influence upon the Government, by securing its permanent ascendancy.<sup>42</sup>

Let us underscore the words "*permanent ascendancy*." It never occurred to Jackson that it might be healthy for opponents in a two-party system to trade places in power from time to time. If the people were on one side and the aristocracy on the other, the people should triumph every time. To do so, they must adopt some means to identify the genuinely democratic candidates for every public office and insist that all true

Democrats put aside their personal preferences and rally to their support. Early in his career, Jackson had used the anti-party rhetoric of the early republic, but he eventually endorsed the idea of party conventions at the state and even the national level. “It strikes me that this is the only mode by which the people,” he concluded, “will be able long to retain in their own hands, the election of President and Vice President.”<sup>43</sup> Other Democrats implied that party loyalty could restore America’s flagging civic virtue by substituting party principles for the selfishness of personal factions.<sup>44</sup>

Warming to the task of party building, the Jacksonians also perfected the machinery of party patronage, with their famous declaration that “to the victors go the spoils,” the institution of the party newspaper to communicate party views from the center to the periphery, and the party central committee as source of information and propaganda for local races. Although tweets, blogs, broadcasts, and websites have now largely replaced the party newspaper, the other party institutions have been with us ever since, and constitute an enduring legacy of the Jacksonian era.

The intertwined formulas of majority rule, equality, and limited government do not exhaust the political philosophy of Andrew Jackson and his party, but they summarize a very substantial part of it. These principles clearly resonate with modern liberals and conservatives alike, to say nothing of the generations of Americans who lived between Jackson’s day and our

own, but no contemporary political camp retains a pure strain of Jacksonian thinking. Defending “the great body of the people” against the powerful few was a leading goal of twentieth century liberals, though few pursued it with the tool of limited government. Instead, corporate interests long ago embraced the *laissez-faire* doctrines that Jacksonians advanced unsuccessfully to cripple their predecessors. “Equality” is a watchword for Americans of all persuasions, moreover, but liberals have pursued equality for minorities that Jacksonians oppressed, while conservatives have protested the inequalities of affirmative action in the name of “the great silent majority.” In sum, Americans still defend their ideas of freedom with Jacksonian vocabulary, but they have redefined and reapplied the old slogans in ways that Old Hickory would never have recognized. How did this happen?

Jacksonian ideas of freedom have never lost their allure for Americans. The populist appeal of majority rule, equal rights, and limited government (or to put it another way, unlimited personal liberty) has never died and is not likely to. At the same time, these policies never worked as planned, for we live today in a world they were crafted to prevent. Slogans and bank vetoes did nothing to halt the Industrial Revolution, the rise of corporate America, or the replacement of self-employment in small workshops by huge firms run by waged workers and salaried bureaucrats. Instead, the growth of trusts and railroad monopolies persuaded reformers that a weak majority



needed more active government, not less. That insight propelled the economic side of the Progressive and liberal movements of the last century and a quarter, and the strong central state they called for. Conversely, the success of industrialization convinced many business leaders that they had more to fear from government intervention than they had to gain from government subsidy, and the idea of limited government reversed fields, if you will.<sup>45</sup>

Second, the Jacksonians' unwillingness to reconcile their notions of freedom with the reality of slavery eventually led to the Civil War, emancipation, and voting by African American men, which eventually transformed all previous understandings of the rights and obligations of majorities and minorities and made the Jacksonians' racialized understanding of civic rights inadmissible in theory if not in practice. The transformed status of women has had a parallel set of consequences.

Like the Jacksonians, Americans and their counterparts in other nations once again feel battered by dizzying economic change and technological displacement. Without the clarifying polarity of the Cold War, moreover, millions now feel gripped by nefarious, poorly understood, and uncontrolled forces such as terrorism, globalism, alien cultures, religious challenge, and ecological damage. In these circumstances, the power and virtue of "the great body of the people" carries reassurance that unreliable elites do not provide. We should not be surprised that rhetoric composed for

very different conditions now has power to move a global audience. Nearly two centuries of experience have disconnected Jacksonian ends from Jacksonian means, without purging either of them from our collective aspirations. In consequence, the populist ideals of the seventh president have remained unusually powerful but often misunderstood.

1. Andrew Jackson, "Farewell Address," in James D. Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (20 vols.; New York: Bureau of National Literature, Inc., 1897), IV, 1515, 1524; "Protest," *ibid.*, IV, 1309. Hereinafter cited as *Messages and Papers*.

2. See, for example, Louis Jacobson and Sarah Waychoff, "What's up with Donald Trump and Andrew Jackson?" *Politifact*, May 2, 2017, at <http://www.politifact.com/truth-o-meter/article/2017/may/02/whats-up-with-donald-trump-andrew-jackson/>. Consulted July 13, 2017. See also Michael Lind, "Donald Trump, the Perfect Populist," *Politico*, March 9, 2016, at <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/03/donald-trump-the-perfect-populist-213697>. Cf. Uri Friedman, "What Is a Populist? And is Donald Trump One?" *The Atlantic*, February 27, 2017, at <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/02/what-is-populist-trump/516525/>. Michael Sherer, "2016 Person of the Year: Donald Trump," *Time*, December 8, 2016, at <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2016-donald-trump/?iid=buttonrecirc> and Simon Shuster, "The Populists," *Time*, *ibid.*, at <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-populism/>. For other representative examples, see Deidre McPhillips, "What is Populism?" *US News and World Report*, March 31, 2017, at <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-countries/articles/2017-03-31/populisms-resurgent-rise-around-the-world> and Ronald F. Inglehart and Pippa Norris, "Trump, Brexit, and the Rise

of Populism: Economic Have-Nots and Cultural Backlash,” Harvard Kennedy School Faculty Research Working Paper Series, august 2016, at <https://research.hks.harvard.edu/publications/workingpapers/Index.aspx>. All consulted July 14, 2017.

3. Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 3.

4. Lawrence Goodwyn, *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Ronald P. Formisano, *For the People: American Populist Movements from the Revolution to the 1890s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 3. See also Lawrence Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

5. Kazin, *Populist Persuasion*, 14. Cf. Formisano, *For the People*, 86–87.

6. *Messages and Papers*, IV, 1514, 1516.

7. Sam B. Smith and Harriet Chappell Owsley, et al., eds., *The Papers of Andrew Jackson* (10 vols. to date; Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980– ), X, 644–46. Hereinafter cited as *Jackson Papers*.

8. John F. Marszalek, *The Petticoat Affair: Manners, Mutiny, and Sex in Andrew Jackson’s White House* (New York: The Free Press, 1997); see also Andrew Jackson to Anthony Butler, December 4, 1832, *Jackson Papers*, X, 657.

9. Elizabeth R. Varon, *We Mean to Be Counted: White Women and Politics in Antebellum Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

10. *Jackson Papers*, VII, 42.

11. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 278–79.

12. *Niles Weekly Register*, 9 (1815), 238.

13. Jackson to Winfield Scott, December 3, 1817, *Jackson Papers* IV, 157.

14. Jackson to Tilghman A. Howard, August 20, 1833, John Spencer Bassett, ed., *The Correspondence of Andrew Jackson* (7 vols: Washington, DC:

Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1926–1935), V, 165. Hereinafter cited as *Correspondence*.

15. See *Jackson Papers* VII, 642; VIII, 602; X, 364–69; “Veto Message,” July 10, 1832, *Messages and Papers*, III, 1139–1154.

16. Jackson to William Harris Crawford, June 4, 1816; Jackson to James Monroe, November 12, 1816, Jackson to John Overton, June 8, 1829, *Jackson Papers*, IV, 36, 74; VII, 272.

17. Jackson to Robert Burton, June 21, 1817; Jackson to Rachel Jackson, January 6, 1819; Jackson to William Berkeley Lewis, August 25, 1830, *Jackson Papers*, IV, 119, 357; VIII, 500.

18. Andrew Jackson, “Farewell Address,” Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers*, IV, 1515, 1524.

19. Jackson to Rachel Jackson, February 6, 1819; Jackson to John Coffee, April 3, 1819; Jackson to William Berkeley Lewis, July 19, 1820; Jackson to Thomas Miller, May 13, 1829, *Jackson Papers*, IV, 271, 280, 378–79; VII; 217.

20. Andrew Jackson, “First Annual Message,” in *Messages and Papers*, II, 448. Italics in original. In his First Inaugural, Jefferson had declared that “the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail” and insisted on “absolute acquiescence in the decisions of the majority, the vital principle of republics,” Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, I, 310–11.

21. [John L. O’Sullivan], “Introduction,” *The United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (1837), I, 2.

22. *United States Telegraph* I, 1 (February 6, 1826), 1.

23. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (2 vols.; New York: Library of America, 2004); William Leggett, “The Despotism of the Majority,” Lawrence H. White, ed., *Democratick Editorials: Essays in Jacksonian Political Economy by William Leggett* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1984), 48–52; [O’Sullivan], “Introduction,” *Democratic Review* I, 2.

24. Quoted in Ralph C. H. Catterall, *The Second Bank of the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1903), 184.

25. Jackson to Tilghman A. Howard, August 20, 1833, *Correspondence*, V, 165.

26. Draft by Amos Kendall for the annual message of 1829, *Jackson Papers*, VII, 617.

27. "Draft by Andrew J. Donelson on public lands, the tariff, and nullification," for annual message of 1832, *Jackson Papers*, X, 644–45. Cf. "Fourth Annual Message," Richardson, *Messages and Papers*, III, 1153, and Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, William Peden, ed., (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 164–65.

28. Jackson to John Overton, June 8, 1829, *Jackson Papers*, VII, 271; Jackson to James Alexander Hamilton, December 19, 1829, *Jackson Papers*, VII, 642; Francis Blair to Jackson, August 17, 1830 *Jackson Papers*, VIII, 486. James Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*; III, 1249, 1238. See also "Memorandum book draft," undated fragment from 1832, *Jackson Papers*, X, 368.

29. Jackson to John Overton, May 13, 1830; Van Buren draft of May 1830, *Jackson Papers*, VIII, 291, 293; Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers*, III, 1165; Kendall draft of December 1831, *Jackson Papers* X, 743.

30. Jackson, "Veto Message," Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers*, III, 590.

31. Jackson to Howard, August 20, 1833, *Correspondence*, V, 165–66.

32. Jackson to Howard, *ibid*.

33. Leggett, *Democratick Editorials*, 3, 12.

34. For the uses of "starve the beast" in modern politics, see Bruce Bartlett, "'Starve the Beast': Origins and Development of a Budgetary Metaphor," *The Independent*, XII, 1 (Summer 2007), 5–26, at [http://www.independent.org/pdf/tir/tir\\_12\\_01\\_01\\_bartlett.pdf](http://www.independent.org/pdf/tir/tir_12_01_01_bartlett.pdf). Consulted July 17, 2017.

35. Jackson, "Veto Message," *Messages and Papers*, 590.

36. Leggett, *Democratick Editorials*, 6.

37. Richard Franklin Bensel, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859–1877* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Gary Gerstle, *Liberty and Coercion: The Paradox of American Government from the*

*Founding to the Present* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Brian Balogh, *A Government Out of Sight: The Mystery of National Authority in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*.

38. Orestes Brownson, "The Laboring Classes," *The Boston Quarterly Review*, July, 1840, reprinted in Joseph L. Blau, ed., *Social Theories of Jacksonian Democracy* (New York: Hafner Publishing. Co., 1947), 310; "Draft by Andrew J. Donelson on public lands, the tariff, and nullification," *Jackson Papers*, X, 646.

39. [O'Sullivan], "Introduction," *Democratic Review* I, 6–8.

40. Andrew Jackson, "Farewell Address," Richardson, ed., *Messages and Papers*, IV, 1523.

41. Jackson to Howard, August 20, 1833, *Correspondence*, V, 166.

42. Andrew Jackson to Joseph Conn Guild, April 24, 1835, *Correspondence*, V, 338–39.

43. Jackson to Howard, August 20, 1833, *Correspondence*, V, 166.

44. Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780–1840* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 223–252.

45. For classic early statements of the new formulations, see William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1883) and Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1909).