

The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America
Richard R. Beeman

Introduction¹

Some fifteen years ago Edmund S. Morgan began his study of the origins of democracy in England and America with a quote from that remarkable Scottish sage, David Hume. “Nothing is more surprising . . . ,” marveled Hume in 1758, “than to see the easiness with which the many are governed by the few. . . . When we enquire by what means this wonder is brought about, we shall find, that as Force is always on the side of the governed, the governors have nothing to support them but opinion. ’Tis therefore on opinion only that government is founded; and this maxim extends to the most despotic and military governments, as well as the most free and most popular.”¹

I have been powerfully impressed by the wisdom in Hume’s observation ever since encountering it in Professor Morgan’s excellent study, and if his book was intended as a history of the evolution of ideas about democracy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this one is intended as a history of the political behavior that led to that democratic result. As my study of eighteenth-century American political behavior has progressed, it has become increasingly clear to me that the journey to a democratic America was neither inevitable nor did it unfold along a single, straight path. As the election commentaries in the epigraph suggest, there existed across eighteenth-century America an extraordinary diversity of belief and practice in respect to the relationship between political leaders and ordinary citizens. It is hardly surprising, given the variety of attitudes and expectations implicit in those commentaries, that historians of eighteenth-century America have used widely diverse descriptions of their own in their reconstruction of the political world of the eighteenth century—descriptions that run the gamut from authoritarian oligarchy to egalitarian democracy. And, indeed, even when

¹Richard R. Beeman, *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004, pp. 12-18 Google Books edition.

confronted with a single description—Robert Munford’s evocations of election-day behavior in *The Candidates* being perhaps the most widely cited example—historians have often constructed radically different interpretations of its meaning.

While some of our confusion about the character of eighteenth-century American political life may be the result of our failure as students of history to make sense of the evidence before us, it also may be that the eighteenth-century world that we are seeking to comprehend was an inherently confusing and contradictory one. In spite of some of the sources of unity among the residents of the colonies—a common language, a shared legal and constitutional tradition, and, perhaps most important, their common identity as subjects of the king of England—the American colonies were in fact extraordinarily disconnected from one another, displaying among themselves and within themselves significant varieties of political behavior. Throughout the hundreds of localities within America there existed an array of different—and often contradictory—expectations about what the political process was all about—about the very definition of politics itself.

While some still clung to an idealized conception of politics as “the art and science of government,” with “natural aristocrats” acting as stewards for the public good, many others were moving toward more modern conceptions in which the representation of “interests” would come to be the means by which political leaders would serve the “general welfare.” And closely tied to how one conceived of politics were different conceptions about the role of ordinary people in the political process—on the responsibilities and responsiveness of local officeholders and on the relationship between voters and candidates, between elected representatives and local constituents, and between legislatures as whole entities and the populations they served. Indeed, the fact of that diversity may be the only generalization that we can make about eighteenth-century American political culture. So varied were the expectations within America on all of these questions on the eve of the Revolution that it becomes impossible to talk about a single American political culture; rather, the essential fact of political life in the American colonies in the eighteenth century is that there existed numerous, diverse political cultures, diffuse and fragmented, often speaking altogether different political languages.

There was on the eve of the American Revolution no one universally accepted mode of “correct” political behavior. Certainly one of the challenges facing the American colonists as they confronted British officials on such crucial issues as the location of sovereignty, the meaning of “consent,” and the nature of representation was to forge some agreement among themselves about the meaning of those concepts. And even more certainly, as Americans began to discuss the feasibility of union once the Revolution was under way, those discussions could hardly go forward with much hope of success unless Americans began to work out some common understanding of the essential character of their multitudinous local polities.

However fragmented the American polity may have been, most colonies were moving, slowly and unevenly, in the same direction. In addition to portraying some of the varieties of the prerevolutionary American political experience, this book also seeks to trace at least the beginnings of one of the staple stories of American political history: the growth of “democracy.” Although most people living in America before the Revolution certainly would not have described political developments in their world with the term democracy, at least a few discerning observers would have acknowledged that important changes were under way which made it increasingly difficult for political leaders to ignore popular pressures. But popular pressure does not inevitably lead to democracy, and though our twenty-twenty hindsight helps us see the ways in which the Revolution against British rule and its aftermath helped shape a democratic future for America, we should not lose sight of the variety, contingency, and lack of clear political direction that characterized most political behavior before the Revolution. We may know that eighteenth-century Americans were on a path that would lead them toward a democratic republic, but they did not.

While much of my own research over the course of my career has focused on eighteenth-century American politics, this book is primarily an effort at synthesizing the work of others. My effort at synthesis comes at a time when the existing paradigm for the study of colonial American politics—what some have termed the republican synthesis—is under sustained attack from cultural historians who view much of that earlier work as both excessively reliant on elitist sources and too detached from the day-to-day practice of politics to be a serviceable

explanation of the forces shaping political behavior for the great mass of Americans.

My thinking about eighteenth-century American politics has been shaped significantly by the work of those historians who have reconstructed the intellectual origins of classical republican and radical Whig political thought in early modern England and traced the evolution of that thought into more popular and, eventually, liberal, democratic forms in America in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Bernard Bailyn and J. G. A. Pocock in particular have been the historians who gave initial shape to the republican paradigm, but the list of historians who have refined and elaborated the paradigm, often disagreeing with one another but in the end interested in similar questions, is a long one—Pauline Maier, Gordon Wood, Michael Kammen, Joseph Ellis, Jack P. Greene, Jack Rakove, Lance Banning, Joyce Appleby, Richard Bushman, John Murrin, and many, many more.²

While we may be reaching a point of diminishing returns with respect to sketching out the character of the eighteenth-century intellectual tradition, nevertheless much of the most interesting recent work on late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century American politics—including that from historians such as Saul Cornell, Edward Countryman, Sean Wilentz, and David Waldstreicher, who explicitly dissent from particular aspects of the eighteenth-century republican synthesis—is shaped powerfully by that interpretive paradigm, for the language of eighteenth-century politics persisted even while social, economic, and political behavior were departing dramatically from that ideal.³

Recent criticism of the body of scholarship on republican ideology as elitist and overly abstracted notwithstanding, I remain impressed by the vitality of that scholarship and believe that it continues to serve as a useful point of departure for any study of eighteenth-century American politics. Having spent much of my professional career reading the primary literature of eighteenth-century American politics, I am convinced that the persistence and ubiquity of the language of republicanism—with its emphasis on virtue, disinterestedness, and the public good and their antitheses, self-interest and corruption—is simply too powerful to ignore. But that language, whatever its power and persistence, is only a starting point, and the analysis of eighteenth-century American politics that follows is intended to test,

not endorse, the power and efficacy of republican rhetoric in shaping the reality of eighteenth-century American political behavior.

The words “politics” and “political behavior” carry with them multiple meanings. The conventional definition of politics as the “art and science of government” is probably too restrictive to be serviceable even for the traditional societies of eighteenth-century England and America, for such a definition would confine us to the formal, institutional realm in which public policies are formulated and implemented. At the other extreme, some would include in their definition of politics any contest or negotiation over power, whether in the public or private realm and whether between men of roughly equal social standing or in relationships that move across lines of gender, race, and class. The conception of politics that guides this study is that which seeks to comprehend those public activities involving collective conflict or contestation and the efforts at resolving those contests.⁴ In particular, I am concerned with the question that so fascinated David Hume—the means by which “the many are governed by the few”—and therefore I will focus primarily on the relationship between citizens and political leaders in the realm of electoral politics, as well as that relationship as those political leaders went about the business of carrying out the responsibilities of governance.

I have, wherever the historical record permits, attempted to tell this story as much from the point of view of ordinary residents of the colonies as from those political leaders who were supposed to serve them. One strategy for uncovering the behavior of the many as well as the few is to leave the halls of government and to observe those other public venues in which the business of politics was contested and negotiated—in taverns and at militia musters, county fairs, and other such civic gatherings. We have much scantier evidence about these comings together in prerevolutionary America than we do for the era of the early Republic, but I have attempted to use what evidence is available to help answer David Hume’s question.⁵

I have sought in my organization and placement of the chapters in this book not only to illustrate what I think are the most important typologies of political culture existing in eighteenth-century America, but also to give a sense of the direction in which all of the prerevolutionary American polities, whatever their differences, were moving. The opening chapter on “The Traditional Order of Politics in England

and America” seeks to identify those English intellectual and institutional traditions on which political life in America was, at least in theory, supposed to be founded. In chapters 2 and 3 we will get a glimpse of the way in which those traditions were both embraced and transformed in Virginia and Massachusetts, the two oldest British colonies in North America. However different the social and intellectual foundations of those two colonies may have been from each other, by the eighteenth century the political leaders of both the Old Dominion and the Bay Colony shared in common an unusually tenacious commitment to maintaining and nurturing their version of traditional English notions about the construction of a proper social and political order. Although they fell far short of emulating idealized classical republican notions of virtue, deference, and the disinterested pursuit of the public good, the societies over which they ruled did, more than any others in colonial America (or, indeed, perhaps England itself), approach that ideal.

Hudson River valley manor lords and low-country South Carolina planters and merchants were no less committed to replicating English social and political norms than their counterparts in Virginia and Massachusetts, but, as I attempt to demonstrate in chapters 4 and 5, their efforts, occurring as they did within societies that were at once both highly stratified and institutionally unsettled, led to a structure and style of politics that was more oligarchical than anywhere else in America. In the next two chapters I seek to characterize the structure and culture of politics in the backcountry societies of the South and northern New England. The social and political structures of those societies were, particularly by the mid-eighteenth century, moving in two, sometimes opposing, directions: they were not only in the process of assimilating the values and structures of their parent cultures, but they were also, by the very differences that they exhibited from the parent cultures, reshaping the cultures of the colonies of which they were a part. And of course it was in those societies as well that the tragic conflict of interests and cultures between Europeans and Native Americans would be played out, often with important consequences for the political relationships between earlier and more recently settled regions. Chapter 6, which deals with the southern backcountry, is itself a comparative analysis, for in spite of important similarities in the physical landscape of the western region of Virginia and that of North and South Carolina, the political cultures that evolved in those two regions displayed important points of

difference.⁶ As we will see in chapter 7 , the powerful forces of climate and geography would operate to shape distinctly American attitudes toward self-reliance and personal independence in that part of Massachusetts that would eventually become the state of Maine. At the same time, however, an equally powerful political culture emanating from Boston and eastern Massachusetts would operate to mitigate potential sources of division between the periphery and the center of the Bay Colony.

Chapter 8 seeks to comprehend the complicated interplay of cultural values and political interests at work in the colony of Pennsylvania. Founded upon a set of religious and political beliefs that pointed toward a modern, liberal democratic American future, Penn's colony in the eighteenth century was, perhaps more than any other, one where popular and oligarchic political forces operated simultaneously. In Pennsylvania, as in the Carolinas, the conflicts of interest and attitude between eastern and frontier residents would prove to be sources of instability. Indeed, as the issues of white-Indian relations and of political representation provoked ever greater conflict between east and west in Pennsylvania during the 1750s and 1760s, its political culture would become, on the eve of the Revolution, among the most unstable anywhere in America.

If the backcountry and frontier regions of the American colonies represented one aspect of the nation's democratic and egalitarian future, then the longest settled and most populous commercial centers of the Northeast represented the other. It would be in those urban centers that America would begin its journey toward independence and nationhood. That journey was filled with conflict among men and women of differing social and economic standings, ethnicities, and religious beliefs, but out of that conflict would emerge the world's first pluralist democracies. In chapter 9 we will get at least a glimpse of the way in which the residents of Boston, New York City, and Philadelphia mobilized themselves in response to the changes in British imperial policy during the 1760s. Although that chapter is emphatically not intended as a full-scale account of the events leading to the Revolution in those cities, I hope that it will at least suggest the ways in which the mixture of urban and imperial politics proved to be potentially combustible. Finally, chapter 10 , "The Unfinished Revolution in American Political Culture," seeks in tentative fashion to explore some of the connections between the political cultures

of prerevolutionary America and those emerging in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution.

There are a few things that the reader should not expect from this analysis of prerevolutionary American politics. I have not attempted to give a comprehensive account of the substantive policy issues that provoked conflict between royal officials and provincial leaders or of those issues that caused division among provincial leaders and their constituents. There were indeed a myriad of political issues that arose within individual colonies—those concerning taxation, currency, land distribution, defense, and British trade policy among them—and the story of the discussion and resolution of those issues within and among the colonies is an important one. But that is not the story that this book seeks to tell, and thus I will touch on those issues only when they become important as a context for understanding the main themes of the book. I also do not provide an analysis of the political cultures of every one of the thirteen North American mainland colonies. I have tried to make intelligent decisions about focusing on those colonies that I think are most helpful in illustrating some of the most important typologies of political behavior existing in eighteenth-century America, but certainly the political cultures of some of the individual colonies not discussed in this book—New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Georgia—may display some distinctive features that are not found in the colonies that I have discussed.⁷

Perhaps the single most important decision that I have made was to depart in significant instances from an organizational structure that revolved around each colony as a political unit. I have concluded that the political cultures of the various regions of the American backcountry and frontier and of the northeastern cities were sufficiently distinct from the individual colonies of which they were a part to warrant separate treatment, but I am also well aware that my strategy occasionally runs the risk of obscuring important connections—both cultural and political—among settled, urban, and frontier areas within the colonies of which they were a part. I hope that my strategy sheds more light on the varieties of political experience in eighteenth-century America than it obscures. It not only highlights important differences within individual colonies but also helps us to understand better the direction in which American politics were moving as the American Revolution

approached. Although the chapter organization of the book is regional rather than chronological, those colonies and regions covered in the latter part of the book display more visibly some of the features that would eventually come to characterize politics everywhere in America. None of the American colonies had embraced democracy before the Revolution, and, indeed, most of the independent American states would stop far short of incorporating democratic ideals into their new constitutions in the aftermath of the Revolution. But even though the story that this book seeks to tell is an incomplete one, I do hope that it will give the reader some better sense of the process—unwitting, confused, and conflicted as it may have been—by which Americans came to create for themselves a political identity founded upon democratic principles.

Notes

1. David Hume, “Of the First Principles of Government,” *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, 1758 edition, quoted in Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York, 1988), p. 13.

2. The works of those historians who have been most influential in shaping the republican paradigm will be cited extensively in the pages that follow. For overviews of that work see Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism: Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth Century England and America* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1990); Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); see also Richard R. Beeman, “Deference, Republicanism, and the Emergence of Popular Politics in Eighteenth Century America,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (hereafter WMQ), 3d ser., 49 (1992): 401–30; and Robert Shalhope, “Republicanism,” in Jack P. Green and J. R. Pole, eds., *A Companion to the American Revolution* (Oxford England, 2000), 668–73. Another useful glimpse into the overwhelming importance of Bernard Bailyn in shaping conceptions of politics and ideology in eighteenth-century America can be gained from perusing James A. Henretta, Michael Kammen, and Stanley N. Katz,

The Transformation of Early American History: Society, Authority, and Ideology (New York, 1991), a book of essays written by Bailyn's former students in his honor.

3. See, for example, David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1997); Saul Cornell, *The Other Founders: Anti-federalism and the Dissenting Tradition in America, 1788–1828* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999); Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class* (New York, 1984); and Edward Countryman, *The American Revolution* (New York, 1985).

4. Two useful guides to the range of definitions given to politics and political behavior are Iain McLeon, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics* (Oxford, 1990), p. 309, and Frank Bealy, *The Blackwell Dictionary of Political Science* (Oxford, 1999), p. 261.

5. There has been a recent outpouring of work using public celebrations and civic rituals as a means of understanding social relations among groups within America. Among the most impressive of these are Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes*; Simon Neumann, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia, 1997); David Conroy, *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1995); and Peter Thompson, *Rum Punch and Revolution: Tavern-Going and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1999), esp. pp. 111–44. Waldstreicher and Neumann are most effective in gleaning from public rituals something of the character of the relationship between leaders and ordinary citizens, but their work focuses on urban areas within postrevolutionary America and on a political context that was national rather than provincial and local. Thompson's and Conroy's studies of Philadelphia and Massachusetts tavern life focus more directly on prerevolutionary behaviors; of the two, Thompson is more successful in establishing the importance of taverns as important sites of public, political discourse.

6. The two words most often used to denote those regions of North America more recently settled by Europeans—frontier and backcountry—carry with them some very heavy historical and ideological baggage. From the time of Frederick

Jackson Turner forward, the concept of the frontier has often been associated with a Eurocentric view of settlement in which democracy and individualism were inevitable results. And, as Daniel Richter has observed, what may have seemed like backcountry to European settlers was in fact a long-occupied front country to Indian inhabitants. Whatever their drawbacks, however, the words were part of the eighteenth-century vocabulary, often used interchangeably. In the chapters that follow, I will use backcountry when discussing those more recently settled regions of the colonies that were not engaged in consistent conflict with Native Americans and will use the word frontier when discussing those regions where the contest between Europeans and Indians was a more active feature of daily life. The original, Turnerian statement of the “frontier thesis” was presented in “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” delivered as the Presidential Address at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association in 1893, but subsequently published in Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York, 1920), pp. 1–38. Richter’s formulation is in *Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), pp. 1–10.

7. I have also decided against including a discussion of the evolving political cultures of the British West Indian colonies. Although the economic connections between England’s West Indian colonies and those on the mainland of North America were important, the political cultures of the mainland colonies and the islands of the West Indies were, in my opinion, different not only in degree but also in kind. For an excellent effort at incorporating the West Indian colonies within the larger context of England’s Atlantic empire see Andrew J. O’Shaughnessy, *An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean* (Philadelphia, 2000).

FAIR USE NOTICE: This excerpt is copyrighted material the use of which has not been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. We are making such material available in our efforts to advance understanding of contemporary democratic institutions. We believe this constitutes a fair use of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, the material on this site is distributed without profit to those who have expressed a prior interest in receiving the included information for research and educational purposes. If you wish to use copyrighted material from this site for purposes of your own that go beyond fair use, you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.