

Introduction

OVER THE PAST SEVERAL YEARS many historians and students of politics alike have lamented the supposed death of political history, or at least the kind of political history that considered the character, conduct, and consequence of campaigns as singularly important markers of American identity. They have attributed that “death” to historians’ preoccupation with political culture and political scientists’ preoccupation with survey research about the American voter. But any canvas of books and articles appealing to a broad public suggests that reports of political history’s demise are premature. Major works on the rise and activities of political parties and their role in shaping American democracy have never really disappeared, as witnessed by the best-selling work of David McCullough, Joseph Ellis, and William W. Freehling, among others. Most recently, Sean Wilentz has raised the flag for old-fashioned political narrative in his magisterial *The Rise of American Democracy* (2005).

Political biography, enduringly popular, is basking in a golden age. Biographies of presidents have resurrected some reputations (John Adams, Dwight Eisenhower), complicated those of others (Thomas Jefferson, Woodrow Wilson, Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard M. Nixon), and confirmed (in remarkably fresh detail) the greatness of those inhabiting political Valhalla: the two Roosevelts, Andrew Jackson, George Washington, and Abraham Lincoln. This outpouring of books has, if anything, whetted our appetite for more. The best of them have brought the importance of personality back into full view in coming to terms with American political behavior.

Nor is this the only sign that political history is alive and well, albeit running along tracks informed by the “history from the bottom up” revolution of the 1960s and 1970s that still reverberates today. Recent investigations into the ways Americans expressed themselves politically—whether in print, in the streets, or in the voting booth—have illuminated civic engagement and political mobilization. We will never return to the days when history was equated with “past politics.” But there is a new

appreciation for a political history that overlaps social history and embraces the most fundamental questions about identity and Americanism.

The history of politics at the state level seems less auspicious. This is surprising, for state and local political history was once a staple in the profession. Then, too, studying state history, especially, promised to be essential to any understanding of the peculiarities and varieties of the American experiment in self-government. States were and are, after all, what Lord Bryce famously termed, the "laboratories of democracy." To be sure, studies of people participating in campaigns and engaging public policy issues in states and localities continue to tumble out through masters' theses and doctoral dissertations. Many of these works become articles or monographs, especially for the colonial era through the mid-nineteenth century, at least through the Civil War era. But much of that literature has skewed toward southern and western states and places. Except for the Progressive Era and the New Deal, too little of it considers twentieth-century developments. Pennsylvania, the keystone state in many ways for over half a century in the formative period of the nation's history, and a "battleground state" in recent elections, has suffered from the lack of attention for the modern period. For a state with so many interesting stories that need to be told, this lack of attention is mystifying.

This special issue devoted to politics in/and Pennsylvania offers a sampling of what scholars can do when they ask questions that run beyond the basics of candidate selection, campaign rhetoric, voter mobilization, and negative advertising. It invites readers to consider the character, conduct, and consequence of political actions, especially during the twentieth century. David Goodman's essay does this by magnifying a charged political moment that illuminates connections between national and local political interests and identities. For their part, David Schuyler and John F. Bauman remind us that leaders in both Philadelphia and Lancaster saw modernism in institutions and urban design as a political statement in its own right. Their take on urban renewal, then, offers something fresh and distinct from the older focus on what politicians and urban special interests expected to get from the federal government as it turned the urban-renewal funding spigot. Like Schuyler and Bauman, Kenneth Heineman throws light on Pennsylvania's political culture by comparing developments in two leading cities. Whereas Schuyler and Bauman consider how urban reforms can flourish in one urban environment but not in another,

Heineman explores urban politics in the context of national political developments and, in particular, the national fortunes of the major parties.

In addition to these several case studies, this special issue features essays that paint in broader strokes. William Shade probes the patterns of writing political history since the 1960s, focusing on the decline of “consensus” history and the surprising revival of a “progressive” historiography in Pennsylvania. For his part, Matthew Pinsker romps through Pennsylvania political autobiography, drawing insights from the greatest of all of them, Ben Franklin’s. In Pinsker’s survey of this genre, every writer stakes out a not-so-surprising claim: “I was right; my adversaries got it wrong.” Even James Buchanan, who most historians would say got a few matters seriously wrong, remembered his presidency as a glorious success! If only those pesky “black Republicans” and Douglas Democrats had shut up and played ball, Buchanan reasoned, the country would not have had to face a fiery trial. Buchanan’s book was not a best seller in 1864 (he needed more than a creative marketing campaign); but it remains on library shelves today to amuse if not enlighten students and scholars seeking insights from “the horse’s mouth” for their specialized studies.

Buchanan may remain a whipping boy for scholars, but we must remember that he did at least climb the greasy pole all the way to the top—inhabiting for a full term the great office that eluded the likes of Webster, Clay, Calhoun, and other political luminaries. Just why Pennsylvania—a critical state in any political calculation during a presidential election year—has consistently failed to produce viable presidential candidates, is the focus of Terry Madonna and Michael Young’s informative and beguiling essay. Madonna and Young show that it is not something in the water; there were structural reasons that help explain Pennsylvania’s disappointing showing so far as growing presidential timber.

In this election year and beyond, we trust readers will find something of value in each of the essays we have selected for this special issue. They make distinctive contributions. More generally, we believe several of these essays suggest new lines of inquiry into the commonwealth’s political history. Those lines might lead to an even richer Pennsylvania history and, in the bargain, a renewed interest in making political history.

Gettysburg College
Saint Joseph’s University

MICHAEL J. BIRKNER
RANDALL M. MILLER