Informing the Nation Jacksonian Style: The Ideological Impetus for, and Impediments to, the U.S. Government’s Informing Function During the Antebellum Period

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Introduction

By the third decade of the nineteenth century, new forms of political association began to democratize the political landscape. This period, known as the antebellum period, roughly from 1820-1860, spawned a fiercely competitive two party system that the Whigs and the Democrats dominated. Each party developed clearly defined rival ideologies, each spewed forth bitter political invective. According to one observer, this period ushered in "a particular kind of partisan golden age" [1].

To mobilize the faithful, convert the uncommitted, and bludgeon the rival, a partisan press emerged as an instrument essential to the party apparatus. In political battle, which parties waged with the ardor and language of military engagement, the faithful newspaper occupied the highest level of strategic significance. Political leaders hailed them as "fortresses of the party," their editors as "natural field marshals," who "received all the arrows of the enemy"[2].

Contemporaries ascribed warrior like qualities to the editors of party papers. In recollecting Amos Kendall, who had exercised his considerable editorial talents on behalf of the Democrats, congressman John Claiborne described him as a "savage, with his spear in his hand, and his bow and quiver at his back" [3]. With his partner Frank Blair,
John Rives rose to prominence among the partisan editorial corps. Rives likened Blair's pen to a "Toledo blade, which was rarely in the scabbard for seventeen years, and was so frequently thrust into some one, that the blood rarely dried on it" [4].

Antebellum America generated few, if any, impartial, independent newspapers. As early as 1810, a mere 359 newspapers in the United States had no party affiliation [5]. In an early work on the history of journalism in the U.S., Frederick Hudson asserted that "every newspaperman and every printer in the United States had been educated...in the belief that no journal of any respectability could be established without the consent of politicians and the pecuniary aid of party" [6]. “Every party will have its printer,” declared Alexander Martin of the Baltimore American, “as well as every sect its preacher” [7]. Parties considered editorial independence inimical to their interests. Editors, declared a partisan from New York, “should ever be subservient to the political opinions and views of the party” [8]. Few were quite so accommodating in their subservience as Jefferson’s chosen editor of the National Intelligencer, Samuel Smith, who “was so bound to follow the directions of others that he would march directly into a brick wall if ordered to do so by a superior” [9]. The standards of modern journalism seem high-minded compared with the methods of newspaper editors in Antebellum America. Faithful tool of the Jacksonian Democrats, The United States Magazine and Democratic Review offered the following disparaging account of journalistic practices, as if it transcended them:

Every journalist is a politician...He inquires, not what is right, just, and true...but by what petty shift will serve his present purpose...He condemns in the other party what he is ready to allow in his own. In short he considers his party as a set of men who are to be kept in office if they are already in, or placed
in office if they are not [10].

The editorial class even denounced occasional attempts of rogue colleagues who sought the middle ground. Those who pursued a tack independent of party invariably failed, as James Gordon Bennett discovered. Bennett, a journalist who had supported President Jackson, established a paper of his own, the New York Globe, for which he required a loan of $2,500 to sustain it through its infancy. He appealed to the Democratic Party of New York, which rebuffed him and which suggested that his recent writings revealed a departure from the Democratic creed. The Party informed him that it could spare no patronage on upstart papers of dubious loyalty. Even had he secured the loan, the independent-minded Bennett may not have been able to accommodate the high price that the Party exacted for its patronage. According to the Democratic Party of New York, its established, heavily patronized journals, the Courier and Enquirer, "ought to give up their columns to a political editor appointed by the [Party's] General Committee" [11].

The victorious party (often the Democrats in this period) sustained these organs of electoral warfare with government printing patronage. Members of the defeated party, as well as such renegades of the victorious party as Balie Peyton (Tennessee), complained of the tendentiousness of triumphant newspapers, in "suppressing, mutilating, and disfiguring the speeches, and occasional remarks of some members, while bringing out all that is said by others to the best possible advantage" [12].

Each legislative chamber, the House and the Senate, elected its own printer. Through the Department of State, which directed the printing of the public laws, the executive branch exerted its printing patronage prerogative. Invariably, the recipient of
the printing patronage, and the office of Public Printer that attached to it, went to the loyal editor of a prominent party organ. Thus, in the antebellum period, government avidly circulated much information about itself, but scarcely any that came directly from it. Most government information emanated from a privately owned, yet publicly subsidized and unabashedly biased, newspaper press.

Even while subverting the informing function to the higher aim of propagandizing voters and attacking opponents, antebellum political culture contributed to the development of U.S. government publication in one important way: it stimulated a large and enthusiastic audience for it. “Almost the only pleasure which an American knows,” observed the distinguished critic of American democracy Alexis de Tocqueville, “is to take part in the government, and to discuss its measures” [13]. Indeed, a national readership awaited “any half-educated boy who was willing to come out pens blazing” [14].

Quite unlike the Federalists, antebellum democrats invited political participation, imposed standards of accountability on public officials, and accommodated a substantial measure of popular sovereignty. They brought to bear the elective principle, where citizens regularly evaluate the performance, and accordingly determine the fate, of public officials.

The Rise of Popular Sovereignty

In 1802 a Jeffersonian newspaper, the National Aegis, defined “Republican” as “one
who contends, not that an essential share, but that the entire control of their governmental concerns should, ultimately, rest with the citizens” [15]. Clearly, deferential politics yielded to democratic politics in the years during and surrounding the presidency of Andrew Jackson. This democratic movement provided enabling conditions that stimulated an informing function, first by advancing and shepherding through the ascendancy of the principle of popular sovereignty; under its weight collapsed Federalist aspersions toward common men and their putative incapacity for self-government.

The ideology of democracy rehabilitated the common man, extirpated Federalist notions of the distant and autonomous public official, and compelled government to exercise liberally the informing function. Democratic ideology, which dominated political life in antebellum America, placed a high premium on accountability. Its emphasis on accountability derived from a pejorative view of government, which envisioned political power generally, and government specifically, not as a force capable of engendering great good, but as an external and hostile enemy invariable in its tendency to produce great harm [16].

For antebellum democrats, Rush Welter has noted, government was a "problem to be overcome rather than a vehicle to be employed" [17]. Even a government that Democrats administered, asserted a leading purveyor of democratic ideology, required unrelenting scrutiny. “All government is evil, and the parent of evil,” proclaimed the U.S. Magazine and Democratic Review. “A strong and active democratic government,” it continued, “is an evil, differing only in degree and mode of operation, and not in nature, from a strong despotism” [18].

Thus, democrats agitated for, and in many cases achieved, a number of political
reforms, all of which aimed at inhibiting the exercise of government and reeling in public
officials, who during the Constitutional and Federalist periods had enjoyed a remarkable
degree of independence from a deferential electorate. Frequent elections, rotation in
office, and making elective many offices that had been appointive, represented bold
measures that, in the balance of political power, tipped the scales away from the public
official and toward the electorate. One Louisiana Democrat proclaimed common men, in
their majority capacity, "the source of all power," in whose trust he sought to commit
“the entire ship of State...let them appoint, without let of hindrance, the captain, engineer,
and the whole crew to man her" [19]. A particularly ardent Louisiana Democrat, Isaac
Preston, sought to propel the movement to democratize beyond the legislature to include
even the traditionally independent judiciary. “The executive officers, the members of the
legislature, and judges of our courts,” Preston declared, “are mere agents and servants of
the people” [20].

These stridently democratic proposals and initiatives subsumed an informing
function, not to enlighten and educate but rather to protect antebellum democrats from
what they feared and loathed most, aloof public officials and a too active government.

**Right of Instruction**

Of all democratic initiatives of the antebellum period, none demonstrated quite so
convincingly the resolve to impose accountability than the movement to instruct
representatives. A practice popular among colonial Americans, and one to which they
frequently resorted, the right of instruction bound legislators to the expressed wishes of
constituents, as formulated in such popular assemblies as town meetings [21]. Democrats revived this practice, which the Federalists had repressed.

In the parlance of democratic ideology, legislators were not representatives in the traditional sense, but mere agents constrained to execute faithfully the wishes of their constituents. A Louisiana Democrat defined “pure democratic doctrine” as citizens electing agents solely “to express and carry into force their will” [22]. For antebellum democrats, the ideal legislator had “no will of his own...independent of that of his constituents” [23]. George Bancroft, a champion of the movement to democratize, issued a clarion call to constituents of any legislator impervious to instruction, “let him be reproved by his masters…let him learn to obey his sovereign [24].

Jealously and fear, rather than high civic-mindedness, inspired most antebellum political reforms. Extending the franchise, increasing the number of elective offices, and resurrecting the practice of constituent instruction, all tended to reign in public officials and render them accountable. These provocative Democratic reforms were to serve, like the publication of congressional debates, as exercises in fidelity, where representatives were "brought to the scale," their "principles weighed" [25].

Jeremy Bentham

While the informing function drew strength from antebellum political initiatives, it was a British admirer who systematically related government information to political accountability. Jeremy Bentham had an affinity for the United States so powerful that he
told President Andrew Jackson that he was actually "more of United Statesman than an Englishman" [26]. A student and champion of democratic institutions, Bentham believed that the United States had become a paradigm of democracy, after which he hoped to fashion a democracy in Great Britain and elsewhere. Toward this end, he carved out a rather grand role for himself. Bentham fancied himself a framer of legal codes and constitutions for fledgling and established democracies worldwide. As codifier and constitutional architect, he even offered his services to the state of Louisiana. While Louisiana and other U.S. jurisdictions rebuffed him on this score, Bentham developed a small, yet influential, following that included Jackson's Secretary of State Edward Livingston, a self-avowed Benthamite [27]. Bentham also made his mark on William Leggett, a prominent Democratic journalist, who frequently invoked Bentham's maxims, one being the motto of his paper, The Plaindealer: "The immediate cause of all the mischief of misrule is, that the men acting as representatives of the people have a private and sinister interest, producing a constant sacrifice of the interest of the people" [28].

Bentham's utilitarian philosophy, for which he achieved fame, was in many ways consonant with antebellum political precepts. Democracy's majoritarian principle, for example, accorded with Bentham's principle, "the greatest good for the greatest number." On the issue of accountability, particularly as it related to public opinion, Bentham matched his American counterparts in vigilance and adamance, and surpassed them in systematic thinking.

In 1823, Bentham described in some detail the role of government information in a democratic society. On this subject, Bentham anticipated a theme central to antebellum political thought. The electorate, as Bentham envisioned them, formed a "public opinion
tribunal" that required government information "to constrain members of the assembly to perform their duty" [29].

Bentham described government information in terms that Jacksonian democrats could fully appreciate. It functioned, as Bentham conceived it and as antebellum American democrats might apply it, as a tool necessary for consummating democratic political reforms. For Bentham, democratic reforms had neither purpose nor potency in the absence of government information. More clearly than his American counterparts, Bentham recognized government information as the material that effectuated democratic practices. Government information fulfilled the promise of the franchise, enabling an expanded electorate "to act from knowledge." "From what purpose," Bentham inquired, "renew the assembly, if the people are always obliged to choose from among men of whom they know nothing" [30]. For Bentham, government information underpinned all democratic instruments of accountability, including the practice of constituent instruction. How could the electorate instruct public officials judiciously without knowledge of their proceedings [31]?

Bentham's discourse on government information demonstrated his affinity for, and served as his greatest contribution to, the political thought of antebellum American democrats. His thinking appealed to antebellum democrats who valued government information, not for its ability to enrich civic life or advance knowledge generally, but as an instrument of restraint. These were ideas that they clearly understood and heartily embraced. How sublimely Bentham captured the essence of antebellum American democracy and the importance of government information to it in the following aphorism: "The people is my caesar; I appeal from the present Caesar to Caesar better
Constituent letters

The frontier generated early and avid exercises of the informing function. In the South and West, strongholds first of Jeffersonian, then Jacksonian democracy, where citizens had no ready access to newspaper accounts of congressional proceedings, congressmen filled the government information vacuum. To these regions, representatives sent "circular letters," which apprised constituents of significant developments in Congress and which informed them more specifically of the author's activities. House members authored nearly this entire collection of letters, which dated from 1789-1829 and which historian Noble Cunningham compiled [33].

The paucity of letters from Senators (only three, in fact) implied that they clung tenaciously to an independence derived from their not being popularly elected, and that they bent not so amenably to the will of the people [34]. In sharp contrast, House members from southern and western states acknowledged the burgeoning political power of their constituents, and responded to the accountability imperative that democracy imposed on public officials. The informing function, by means of the circular letter, served as a vehicle through which these legislators fulfilled the demands of a surging democracy.

The inextricability of the relationship between government information and
accountability is a theme that pervades this collection of circular letters. Though stated not so forcefully as their democratic opponents, even the few conservatives represented in this collection expressed an obligation to inform, at least occasionally. His retirement impending, Indiana Whig Oliver Smith conceded that "duty seems to require, that I should at least at the close of my services in Congress, give you a brief statement of the situation of the government, and some account of my stewardship" [35].

Representatives from Kentucky distinguished themselves for their enthusiasm in accepting their diminished status while embracing the primacy of their constituents. More keenly and precociously, too, did Kentuckians perceive the informing function as an instrument central to accountability. As representative Benjamin Howard explained as early as 1808, government information enabled citizens to determine not so much the genius as the fidelity of representatives, and to "apply in due time, if necessary, the constitutional corrective" [36].

David Trimble, another Kentuckian, championed the informing function not only for its ability to exact some measure of accountability but also for its role in enriching and stabilizing the democratic process. Exceeding the power to appropriate and expend, surpassing even the power to wage war, the power of public opinion Trimble elevated as “the primary element of constitutional liberty and the great conservative principle of self-government” [37].

These circular letters represented manifestations of incipient democracy, in which the informing function served as the centerpiece.
George Bancroft

In 1796, Jefferson stated that “the accounts of the United States ought to be, and may be made as simple as those of a common farmer, and capable of being understood by common farmers” [38]. Borrowing from Jefferson, whose recipe for sound administration included nothing more than a measure of “common sense,” honest intentions,” and a citizenry predisposed to modest expectations, George Bancroft advanced the antebellum idea that governing required little or no training [39]. Bancroft suggested that God had rendered political truths universally intelligible, thus making essential concepts as discernible to the farmer and mechanic as to the most learned. “The gloriousness of immortal truth, that written in the sky and on the earth, address themselves to every mind, and claim attention to every human being [40]. Bancroft contended that common men, in their simplicity, and even small children, in their innocence, held a greater capacity than the erudite for receiving “the gift of feeling moral truth, of which political science is a branch.” The insights obtained upon receipt of this gift, Bancroft asserted, were “far more excellent than all the knowledge of the greatest philosophers and statesmen, and that “babes are as capable of knowing these things as the wise and prudent” [41].

Bancroft held not only a pejorative but also a simplistic view of government, as did President Andrew Jackson, whose policy of rotating government offices demonstrated his belief that the machinery of government, when properly circumscribed, could be operated successfully by the commonest of men. Among the people, The Democratic Review affirmed, "there is ever intelligence enough to conduct a government
rightly framed; to appreciate public measures; to distinguish good and evil" [42].

Clearly, antebellum egalitarianism stimulated the informing function of government. Yet, it also tended to impair the quality of government publication as the unskilled but politically favored began to fill the ranks of the civil service. This effort to ascribe to common men a greater measure of political wisdom than the best and brightest, an idea which Bancroft articulated and which President Jackson institutionalized, had the effect of diminishing the quality of the civil service, and by extension, government documents. Tocqueville suggested just such a tendency to mediocrity, which he found particularly evident in the House of Representatives. Observing that generally the "race of American statesmen has strangely shrunk," a diminution that he attributed to the advancement of democracy, Tocqueville identified the lower chamber as particularly bereft of men of stature and distinction:

When one enters the House of Representatives at Washington, one is struck by the vulgar demeanor of that great assembly. One can often look in vain for a single famous man. Almost all the members are obscure people whose names form no picture in one's mind. They are mostly village lawyers, tradesmen, or even men of the lowest classes. In a country where education is spread almost universally, it is said that the people's representatives do not always know how to write correctly [43].

As Tocqueville assailed national representatives with rumors of illiteracy, a congressional committee discovered executive branch employees unable to spell. Owing exclusively to party loyalty and services faithfully rendered, Charles Clement held the position of Assistant Clerk in the Department of Navy. He conceded that he had “not much” knowledge of his bookkeeping duties. When challenged to spell a common three syllable word (crucifix), Clement failed [44].
The ascendancy of Charles Clement and other such “blockheads and ruffians,” and the extent to which they displaced “men of integrity, skill, and understanding,” mortified Alexander Addison, a Federalist of long-standing [45]. Yet, according to Bancroft, it was to just such unsophisticated men, devoid of intellectual pretension, that God revealed the true nature of political science. As Tocqueville lamented the absence of accomplished and talented public officials, Bancroft gushed with fulsome enthusiasm over the supremacy of the lowest common denominator, in which he believed all wisdom resided. In “taste, politics, and religion,” Bancroft asserted, “the common judgment” is “the highest authority on earth, and the nearest possible approach to an infallible decision.” [46].

Thus, a generous God had thoroughly democratized political intelligence, endowing the “common mind” with what the Democratic Review called "a practical sagacity, which sets the most subtle or far reaching intellect at naught" [47]. For Bancroft, “the public mind,” as he called it, this repository of the multitude's accumulated intelligence, approximated the "law of God, the voice of conscience, the oracle of universal reason" [48]. In such an ideological scheme, how could government possibly deprive the general public, this exalted political force, from information by and about itself? Indeed, "developing the moral and intellectual powers of the people," Bancroft declared, represented "the highest purpose of government" [49]. To this end, however, Bancroft faithfully invoked the cherished democratic maxim, "by means of the people themselves," thereby expressing the antebellum predilection for employing non-governmental sources of publication [50]. Antebellum democrats favored government information even as they rejected government publication.
“Your taste is judicious,” John Adams informed Thomas Jefferson, “in likeing [sic] better the dreams of the future, than the History of the Past” [51]. Like many prominent individuals of the Founding Period, antebellum democrats tended to diminish the accomplishments of the past and expressed little interest in preserving them. Jefferson, whom they revered, traced the origins of political science “to the principle of representative democracy, rendering useless almost everything written before on the structure of government; and, in a great measure, relieves our regret, if the political writings Aristotle, or of any other ancient, have been lost” [52]. “Society,” George Bancroft declared, "rests on immutable justice; and justice, like all moral truth, lives not in books, not in letters of black and white, not in archives or compacts, but in the souls of men" [53].

Unlike the Whigs, who revered political covenants and institutions, antebellum democrats accepted neither the sanctity of social compacts nor the integrity of governmental institutions. “The earth,” Jefferson wrote in 1813, “belongs to the living not the dead.” The creed of democracy invited each generation, in its majority capacity, to refashion, even to eradicate, antiquated laws and institutions. Its prevailing belief in the transience of all things governmental inspired a flurry of state constitutional conventions, which amended, sometimes overhauled, the statecraft of earlier generations.
According to this line of thinking, particularly as Bancroft expressed it, legislative enactments, including all the activity surrounding them, had a short shelf life.

“Democracy knows nothing, recognizes nothing, as a perpetuity,” Bancroft declared, “but the law of God.” “All the forms and enactments of legislation are the work of man's hand,” Bancroft continued, “and are perishable like man” [54]. Jefferson calculated this shelf life not to exceed “19 or 20 years,” at which point each succeeding generation had “a right to choose for itself the form of government it believes the most promotive of its own happiness” [55].

Such thinking raised the following question: was anything so fleeting really worth preserving? To this question, Tocqueville believed that democrats responded with a resounding no, thus depriving citizens, and foreign observers like himself, of a solid historical record:

"After one brief moment of power, officials are lost again amid the ever-changing crowd, and as a result, the proceedings of American society often leave fewer traces than do events in a private family. There is a sense in which public administration is oral and traditional. Nothing is written, or if it is, the slightest gust of wind carries it off...Newspapers are the only historical records in the United States. If one number is missing, it is as if the link of time was broken: present and past cannot be joined together again [56]."

Tocqueville discerned danger in the democratic attitude. Unlike the democrats, who considered public administration an activity that required neither special skills nor prior training, Tocqueville considered it a science that constituted the accumulated knowledge of each preceding administration. Yet democracy's disregard for the past, as he had observed it, inhibited the development of an institutional memory:

"Administrative instability has begun to become a"
habit...Nobody bothers about what was done before his time. No method is adopted; no archives are formed; no documents are brought together, even when it would be easy to do so. When by chance someone has them, he is casual about preserving them...American society seems to live from day to day, like an army on active service...It is very difficult for American administrators to learn anything from each other [57].

The practice of rotating offices, which Representative James Buchanon hailed as “that salutary principle...which purifies the political atmosphere,” also had the unwelcome effect of adding to the instability that Tocqueville described [58]. Replacing one cadre of political opportunists for another, inserting “perfect strangers to the duties and details of their offices...with which they never become familiar until in their turn they have to give place to others equally ignorant,” undoubtedly also contributed to the incoherence of political administration that would plague U.S. government publication in subsequent decades [59].

In sharp contrast with Tocqueville's observations, yet in no way controverting them, two important projects of the antebellum period sought to preserve the historical record. In 1831, Congress funded the proposal of Joseph Gales and William Seaton to compile and publish what would become the American State Papers, a compilation of the executive documents and legislative records of the first thirteen congresses. Yet, this project can scarcely be associated with the antebellum democrats. Indeed, Gales and Seaton had supported the administration of John Quincy Adams, Jackson's opponent in the presidential election of 1828. Under Adams, they enjoyed the printing patronage. In the ensuing Jackson administration, they found themselves out of favor and largely out of work. Gales and Seaton initiated the American State Papers project as a measure to keep their presses running [60].
Two years later, Congress funded Peter Force's proposal to document the history of the revolutionary period, in what became the American Archives series. Like Gales and Seaton, Force had aligned himself with Jackson's political opponents. Congressional support for Force's project came not from a Democrat but from a prominent Whig, Edward Everett of Massachusetts [61]. Under the direction of the Office of Secretary of State, which sustained the project through 1852, Force published nine volumes. He planned to publish several more. In 1853, Secretary of State William Marcy, an ardent Democrat who originated the slogan and heartily approved of the practice, "to the victor belong the spoils," thwarted Force's efforts to publish additional volumes [62]. Marcy refused further funding, effectively cutting short the life of this series. Having risen from the ranks of New York's Albany Regency, which tended to produce democrats of a particularly virulent kind, Marcy, true to his democratic faith, denounced Force's project as "worthless, utterly worthless" [63].

Thus, these antebellum efforts to preserve the historical record of the federal government derived largely from men who opposed democratic ideology and who embraced a creed favorable to activities of this kind.

**Parsimony**

The federal government added few activities and responsibilities during the Antebellum period, rejecting the grand visions that John Quincy Adams held for the federal government. Government’s inactivity derived not solely from constraints that Jefferson and other Democrats perceived in the Constitution. It languished also from a popular theory pertaining to the history of nations. The cyclical theory of history
purported that nations, like individual organisms, experienced periods of infancy, youth, maturity, all the failings of advanced age, and a certain death. Bolingbroke, who exercised considerable influence on eighteenth century Americans, contended that the only way to extend the life of a good government “was to draw it back, on every favorable occasion, to the first good principles on which it was founded” [64]. For the Revolutionary generation and their offspring, frugality and republican simplicity constituted two of the soundest founding principles. When exercised publicly and privately, these virtues ensured the continued good health of the republic, just as extravagance and splendor engendered disease and impending collapse [65].

Antebellum democrats perceived Great Britain and other European countries, owing to their purported prodigality, as having reached this moribund stage of development. To forestall, if not to preclude, the U.S. from experiencing a similar decline, a prevailing public opinion sought to keep government simple and austere [66]. Benjamin Franklin warned against “vain, expensive Projects” [67]. “So long as a republic continues simple,” pronounced Representative James Mitchell—TN—in 1828, “its government cheap, and its people virtuous, it will perpetuate their happiness; but as soon as the government becomes splendid…it will surely be of short continuance” [68]. "Splendid governments," the Democratic Review flatly declared, "at best are but the disguises of tyranny" [69].

John Randolph, a formidable opponent of internal improvements, decried what he perceived as the congressional predilection to expend funds at the first sign of public distress. “We look from their own or our own improvidence,” he declared, “for some canal or some road, or some woolen manufactory, to anything for relief—but industry
and self denial—and to ascribe the disease to anything but the true cause, unwise legislation and prodigality” [70]. In sharp contrast with Randolph’s charges of extravagance, Representative John Sergeant estimated that in 1826 the federal government expended less than two dollars per citizen [71]. For Representative Thomas Chilton, public documents constituted an egregious example of prodigality in government. “200 tables piled high with printed documents” assaulted Chilton’s senses each day as he entered the House, and these were “interesting, perhaps, only to one solitary individual in the whole union.” Chilton sensed Congress “gliding imperceptibly down the smooth and deceptive current of extravagance and prodigality, and steering without a change of course directly to the port of national bankruptcy and ruin” [72].

John Randolph shared Chilton’s unfavorable view of public documents, not so much for reasons of economy as for their inability to faithfully and accurately record his remarks. “Nobody reads the documents,” Randolph flatly declared, “for this plain reason, that no man can read them—and if he could, he could hardly be worse employed…with a few exceptions, the documents are printed that they may be printed, not that they may be read” [73].

The Anti-statism of Democratic Ideology

"In Democratic eyes," Tocqueville, observed, "government is not a blessing but a necessary evil" (74). Antebellum political thought enshrined the negative state. It contained a large measure of the anti-statist, anti-institutionalist elements of Thomas Jefferson’s thought. “Were it made a question,” Jefferson asserted, “whether no law, as
among the savage Americans, or too much law, as among the civilized Europeans, submits man to the greatest evil, one who has seen both conditions of existence would pronounce it to the last” [75]. “Our general government,” Jefferson asserted in 1795, “may be reduced to a very simple organization, and very inexpensive one; a few plain duties to be performed by a few servants”[76]. Such was the Jefferson that appealed to the antebellum democrats who succeeded him; and not so much the one who consented to the purchase of Louisiana; nor the one who, as President, showed a keen interest in expending public funds on internal improvements, and would likely have acted upon it had Congress removed what he perceived as a Constitutional constraint. By contrast, Antebellum Democrats revered the kind of government that Thomas Carlyle derisively described as “anarchy plus a street constable” [77].

According to prevailing political doctrine, an inactive government, which by virtue of its inactivity demonstrated impartiality, supported the antebellum desideratum of equal political rights. Thus, antebellum political thought extolled government that governed least. “The path we have to pursue is so quiet that we have nothing scarcely to propose to our legislature,” President Jefferson wrote in 1802. “A noiseless course, not meddling with the affairs of others, unattractive of notice,” Jefferson continued, “is a mark that society is going on in happiness” [78]. In accord with these Jeffersonian tenets, the U.S. government governed very little for much of the nineteenth century. Citizens generally demonstrated a corresponding indifference to politics. In accounting for the apathy surrounding the national election of 1884, Isaac Macveagh asserted “that the average American citizen cares very little about politics...because the government under which he lives touches his life very rarely, and only at points of very little importance to
Antebellum democrats asserted that citizens required government information, not as a means of participating in grand government enterprises designed to advance the general good (for, indeed, they considered government enterprise diametrical to the general good), but to defend themselves against the encroachments of public officials.

It seems perfectly fitting that the Congressional Globe bore the motto “the world is governed too much,” for it not only captured the prevailing political thinking of the day but also reflected the undeveloped state of U.S. government publication. Making the Globe’s motto even more felicitously expressed was that the Globe, which accounted for the bulk of governmental literature at that time, was not even governmentally but privately published.

The tactical need to sustain loyal party newspapers combined with a disdain for public enterprise to effectively remove government from its publishing activities. From the core of democratic ideology emanated an ardent desire to emasculate government, to render it inactive and harmless. Thus, it advocated limiting the functions of government to protecting the natural rights of person, property and reputation” [80]. Protecting these rights, the Democratic Review asserted, "is the highest, almost the only duty of government," beyond which, this paper elsewhere asserted, "it [government] should not meddle with the affairs of men" [81]

Democratic initiatives to extend popular sovereignty--frequent elections, the referendum, the right of instruction--all aimed to inhibit government from exercising authority and to achieve a negative state [82]. The notion of the people's sovereignty, Daniel Rodgers rightfully observed, was not active but possessive. "Its spokesmen meant
not to elaborate the authority of the state but to make clear whose state it was: that it belonged to the many not the few” [83].

In the democratic creed, as the Democratic Review enunciated it in 1838, government had scarcely any purpose, particularly whenever laws were few, simply constructed, and impartially applied. In such an enlightened polity, asserted the Democratic Review, “other operations of government may almost stand still, without much private wrong of public suffering.” “Let justice be faithfully administered,” it continued, and the entire apparatus of Presidents, Secretaries, Generals, Post-captains, Foreign Ministers, Members of Congress, and other functionaries, with armies, navies, fortifications, appropriations, etc. may almost be dispensed with” [84].

In attacking government, antebellum democrats frequently struck an accusatory chord, "unhappy with the world, looking for an evil to attack, always pointing to a malefactor...the collective cry of men who felt the world was not treating them fairly” [85]. Simply by exerting itself, government became one such malefactor that democrats unrelentingly targeted and demonized.

**Equal Political Rights and the Public Printing**

Democrats firmly attached their disdain for active government to another of their cherished principles: an absolute insistence on equal political rights. These two principles, each contingent on the other, pervaded the thinking of journalist and democratic ideologue William Leggett, who pronounced them the twin sisters of democracy [86].
Whenever government legislated or regulated, Leggett reasoned, it invariably did so to promote the interests of one group at the expense of all others. Democrats, therefore, denounced nearly all legislation as partial. Thus, the need for government to remain passive, exerting itself only in defense of natural rights. To achieve and maintain this essential condition of equality, Leggett deemed it imperative “to confine government within the narrowest limits of necessary duties; to disconnect bank and state; to give freedom to trade, and leave enterprise, competition, and a just public sense of right to accomplish their natural energies, what the artificial system of legislative checks and balances has so signally failed in accomplishing” [87].

While Leggett exhorted government to divorce itself from the banking industry, and most other spheres of economic activity, democrats were strangely silent on government's marriage to the newspaper press, remarkably dumb concerning the quite special legislation that, in effect, elevated the editorial class to the detriment of the practical printer. In 1835, when finally addressing this anomaly, democrats compromised their avowed belief in equal political rights.

From 1819-1860, excepting the five year span of 1846-1851, Congress elected a public printer drawn invariably from the class of partisan newspaper editors devoted to the party in power [88]. These unabashed loyalists drew sustenance and sometimes profited handsomely from printing patronage. This practice of electing a public printer from one particular group to the exclusion of all others, a practice sustained throughout the antebellum period, provided rich irony, if not, perhaps, a substantial measure of hypocrisy. First, democrats sustained a public office, that of printer, which seemed decidedly incompatible with their professed zeal for reducing the girth of government.
Moreover, the favoring of one group, especially one comprised exclusively of party loyalists, represented a particularly egregious example of legislation applied partially. Was not the discriminating manner in which government dispensed with its printing a striking example of practices antithetical to democratic principles, as the Democratic Review enunciated them. “When government institutes partial laws,” the Democratic Review asserted in 1839, “when it creates a superior class, when it erects artificial distinctions, when it grants monopoly, when it lays restraints upon free intercourse and trade, in short when it establishes any law or custom of unequal operation, it departs from its true functions” [89].

It was not as if Democrats had been constrained politically from effecting a change. From 1828-1860, the Democratic Party exercised superior political clout, having obtained majorities in 11 of 16 Congresses, and having captured the presidency six of nine times [90].

In the Jackson administration, loyal editors received not only the printing patronage and the office of public printer that accompanied it, but also numerous other governmental plums. By the 1830s, only lawyers superseded newspaper editors as the predominant occupational group in politics. Editors even held a number of congressional seats [91]. The at least 75 editors appointed to the Jackson administration occupied such government posts as appointees to state supreme courts, Indian agents, auditors, naval officers, customs collectors, and officials in public land offices [92]. Jackson rewarded John S. Meehan, editor of the Telegraph, with the post of Librarian of Congress, thereby punishing Meehan's predecessor, George Watterston, for having supported Jackson's opponents [93]. Few democrats protested the privileged status of the editorial corps. In
an 1829 letter to then Secretary of State Martin Van Buren, Thomas Ritchie, himself an editor serving the Democratic Party, perceived in the Jackson administration "a systematic attempt to reward editorial partisans, which will have the effect of bringing the vaunted liberty of the press into a sort of contempt" [94]. Rather than address the unprecedented degree to which he favored the editorial corp, Jackson, in responding to this charge, expounded on the evils of proscribing a class or occupation from government office [95].

This theme Congress repeated, particularly the Democratic portion of it, to repudiate the occasional initiative to extricate government from the newspaper press. In reporting on an 1835 resolution aimed at effecting such a separation, the House Judiciary Committee attacked this proposal for attempting to single-out and deprive unfairly the editorial class of holding the Office of Public Printer.

The Committee portrayed editors not as a privileged class, as indeed they were becoming in relation to this office, but as a profession dedicated to, and largely responsible for, the advancement of culture and political liberties [96]. In promoting the editorial class, this Committee broke faith with the cardinal democratic principle of equal political rights. It allowed for distinctions, where its creed permitted none, elevating party newspaper proprietors to the lofty status of "statesmen and philosophers" [97]. Having risen high above the station of lowly printer, these "statesmen and philosophers," the Committee asserted, "deserved to be doubly honored by mankind; and, in selecting public servants, the people will never forget them, or overlook their claims" [98].

In concluding its report, the Committee identified more precisely the rightful recipients of the public printing patronage, the statesmen and philosophers of the editorial
class: "such editors as have distinguished themselves by the advocacy of liberal principles and popular rights" [99]. In effect, editors who served the Democratic party. "If anybody must be specially benefited, "Representative John Gurley (R-Ohio) declared in sharp contrast 25 years later, in debates which led to the establishment of a national government printing office and which finally divested newspaper proprietors of this public plunder, "I say let it be the men who do the work" [100].

Gurley had in mind the scores of practical printers who could perform the congressional printing at least as skillfully as the favored editorial corp, but who disqualified themselves from the Office of Public Printer simply because they failed to issue newspapers of service to the major political parties. In the 1840s, as congressional dissidents grew wary of the monopoly that newspaper editors exercised over the Office of Public Printer, a committee argued that “practical men” be allowed what the democratic creed demanded: “a free competition with politicians: a privilege which is denied them now” [101].

For a brief interlude (1846-1851), Congress established a method of dispensing its printing that finally and faithfully reflected the Democratic creed. It abolished the Office of Public Printer and awarded its printing to the lowest bidder. Representative Charles Benton (New York-D) expressed what probably should always have been the democratic position on the public printing. Addressing his Democratic colleagues, Benton asked "if they had not uniformly professed hostility to all unnecessary offices," then affirmed his belief that "every office in the government that was not strictly a governmental function, and every office that was not necessary to an efficient administration, ought to be dispensed with" [102]. He proposed abolishing the Office of Public Printer, which
"prevented competition" and "savored of monopoly," in favor of contracting out to the lowest bidder [103].

Benton's arguments did not prevail for long. By 1851, Congress concluded that the contract method of printing had produced a quality too poor and provided a delivery too dilatory. In 1852, Congress reverted to the practice of electing a public printer from the pool of partisan party newspaper editors.

Conclusion

The informing function of government, for which the U.S. Constitution weakly provided and which the Federalists inhibited, received a considerable stimulus during the antebellum period of American history. By ascribing to common men superior political wisdom and intelligence, democrats sought to demonstrate their worthiness not only to receive government information, which the early American political culture had challenged, but also their capacity for self-government [104].

Antebellum democracy firmly established the principle of political accountability. As they empowered the common man, democrats both diminished the importance and circumscribed the freedom of elected officials, who were no longer indifferent to, but abjectly dependent on, the wishes of constituents. Democrats appreciated and applied the informing function as an instrument of accountability, however much they may have subverted this function to partisan political purposes.

Antebellum democracy stimulated the informing function but retarded the development of government publication. In democratic ideology, government documents, like the political institutions that issued them, had no permanent value. They
often served only the party and its press in meeting the exigencies of some immediate political struggle. Such thinking, as Tocqueville noted, disinclined democrats from preserving the historical record of the federal government. Democrats advocated subjecting government to continuous re-invention, to liberate succeeding generations from, not bind them to, the accumulated knowledge of previous congresses and administrations.

Antebellum democracy demonstrated as much indifference to the complexities of government as to its historical integrity, filling public offices with men of limited training and education. The ascendancy in government of the "common man" over the learned paradoxically diminished the quality of governmental literature.

The method of conducting the public printing in this age of democracy provided a mixture of irony and hypocrisy. In maintaining the office of public printer, democrats failed to reduce the functions of government; in awarding this office to a particular group of men, they elevated one class above all others. In a fiercely competitive two party system, democrats sacrificed deeply held political beliefs, and in the process sullied the informing function, all for the sake of achieving political advantage.
Notes


44. U.S. Congress, House, House Report No. 648, 36th Cong., 1st sess., June 16, 1860, page 403. In response to a comment concerning Andrew Jackson’s purported inability to write, John Randolph said, “pray, sir, can you tell me of any one that can write: for, I protest, I know nobody that can.” *Register of Debates*, 20th Cong.,
1st sess., 1326.

45. Alexander Addison, *Reports of Cases in the County Courts of the Fifth Circuit and in the High Court of Errors and Appeals of the State of Pennsylvania; and Charges to Grand Juries of Those County Courts*, (Philadelphia: Kay and Brother, 1883), 202-203.


50. Bancroft, “The Office of the People,” 422


57. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 192. It seems likely that the institutional memory of the U.S. government is no more developed than it was in Tocqueville’s day. In bemoaning government’s reliance on the expertise of contractors and interest groups, Arthur Miller, in 1966, observed the following: “It is perhaps a revealing insight into the poverty of thought in official circles that a Senate Committee has to request a private organization to tell it what the basic aims of American policy are—that being the very subject-matter with which the Committee is charged with responsibility.” Arthur S. Miller, “Administration By Contract: A New Concern for the Administrative Lawyer,” *New York University Law Review* 36 (May 1961), 975.


74. Tocqueville, Democracy in America, 187.
76. Jefferson to D’Ivernois, 1795, in Democracy: By Thomas Jefferson, 47.
80. “Political Portraits with Pen and Pencil, Amos Kendall,” United States Magazine and Democratic Review (March 1838), 410.
82. Welter, The Mind of America, 168.
84. Democratic Review, 1838; in Welter, p. 188.


91. Pasley, Tyranny of Printers, 349.


94. Thomas Ritchie to Martin Van Buren, March 27, 1829, Correspondence of Andrew Jackson Vol. 4, 17.

95. Andrew Jackson to T.L. Miller, May 13, 1829, Correspondence of Andrew Jackson, Vol. 4, 31-32.


103. Charles Benton, Congressional Globe Appendix (22 July 1846), 823.
