

GEORGIANA BANITA
SASCHA PÖHLMANN
Editors

Electoral Cultures

American Democracy
and Choice

VOLUME 16



PUBLICATIONS OF THE BAVARIAN AMERICAN ACADEMY

Universitätsverlag
WINTER
Heidelberg



PUBLIKATIONEN
DER BAYERISCHEN AMERIKA-AKADEMIE
Band 16

PUBLICATIONS
OF THE BAVARIAN AMERICAN ACADEMY
Volume 16

SERIES EDITORS

Board of Directors, Bavarian American Academy



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Edited by

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation
in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie;
detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Gedruckt mit Unterstützung
der Bayerischen Amerika-Akademie.

COVER ILLUSTRATION

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ISBN 978-3-8253-6457-1

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Imprimé en Allemagne · Printed in Germany

Gesamtherstellung: Memminger MedienCentrum, 87700 Memmingen

Gedruckt auf umweltfreundlichem, chlorfrei gebleichtem
und alterungsbeständigem Papier

Den Verlag erreichen Sie im Internet unter:
www.winter-verlag.de

Acknowledgements

We conceived this volume as a response to current events and as a broader project meant to stand the test of time and encourage further responses to the rhetorics and rituals of US electoral cultures. Our gratitude goes first of all to the marvelous team of contributors, who convened in Munich in early November 2012, just days before Barack Obama's re-election, and went on to submit excellent chapters for this collection, which emerged from that collective undertaking. Featuring speakers from Germany, the United States, and Australia, along with the lively and good-humored input of Munich Consul General Bill Moeller and comments on legal issues around access to the ballot by Dr. Katja Gelinsky, Legal Coordinator for the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in Berlin, the conference created a common space in which the humanities, social sciences, and political representatives could express and interrogate their own investments in the choices of US voters, their international repercussions, and the machinery of presidential elections.

In preparing their contributions to this volume, the authors have been invariably patient, gracious, and prompt in their reactions to revision requests. We are fortunate to have invited generous scholars who not only channeled years (sometimes decades) of expertise into their chapters, but did so in a spirit of objectivity, respect, and dedication to the topic as a choral, interdisciplinary effort. A community has now been forged around this project, and with *Electoral Cultures* we encourage others to partake in our insights and join our debates.

Without the financial support of several institutions, the conference and the publication of the volume would not have been possible. Our thanks go above all to the Bavarian American Academy (Dr. Meike Zwingenberger and Jasmin Falk) for their support of the conference and volume publication. Their endorsement of this project has been absolutely invaluable. Other sponsors include the US Consulate General Munich, Junior Year in Munich, the Council for Culture of the City of Munich, the Amerika-Institut at the LMU Munich, and the Department of Literature and Media at the University of Bamberg.

We would also like to thank the students and other audience members at the conference, especially those who travelled from other universities to participate in our talks and in the student seminar. We are grateful to Professor John Aldrich (Duke) for his keynote address in his capacity as President of the American Political Science Association and to Professor Sieglinde Lemke (Freiburg), who joined our panel discussion "US Electoral Cultures in Global Perspective" and engaged in discussions throughout. Our thanks also go to Professor Klaus Benesch, Director of the Bavarian American Academy, for kindly prefacing our event with remarks that stressed its significance and set the tone for an enjoyable four days of rich (some-

times unusually lively and animated conversation), as well as to Dr. Anna Flügge and Dr. Amy Mohr for chairing conference panels.

The conference organization and the preparation of the book manuscript would have been unthinkable without the support of the LMU student and research assistant team on the ground (Carina Leitz, Felix Buchner, and Lisa Marie Bayer) and the unstinting editorial support of Cara Koehler, an American graduate student at the University of Bamberg. Cara edited and proofread every single line of this book with commendable commitment and enthusiasm. Her sense of duty, promptness, and constant good cheer are a blessing for any editor, and we expect she will very soon switch camps to become an author/editor herself. As for the two-editor team at the helm of the project, we cannot imagine a more relaxed, dependable, and enjoyable collaboration than the one we have had over the past three years. We thank everyone for the effort they invested in *Electoral Cultures* and we look forward to other common ventures—as well as, of course, to the elections of the future that will test our theories and inspire us to keep the conversation alive.

Georgiana Banita and Sascha Pöhlmann

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Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of the Presidency: Elections and American Culture

Georgiana Banita and Sascha Pöhlmann

[A] presidential election in the United States may be looked upon as a time of national crisis. (Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* 152)

For me, election days have always embodied the great mystery of democracy. No matter how hard pollsters and pundits try to demystify it, the mystery remains. It is the one day when the ordinary citizen has as much power as the millionaire and the President. Some people use it and some don't. Those who do choose candidates for all kinds of reasons, some rational, some intuitive, some with certainty, others skeptically. Somehow, they usually pick the right leader for the times; that's why America is still around and doing well after more than 228 years. (Bill Clinton, *My Life* 443)

I recalled that during the early, more optimistic days of this republic it was assumed that each individual citizen could become (and should prepare to become) President. For democracy was considered not only a collectivity of individuals, as was defined by W.H. Auden, but a collectivity of politically astute citizens who, by virtue of our vaunted system of universal education and our freedom of opportunity, would be prepared to govern. As things turned out, it was an unlikely possibility—but not entirely, as is attested by the recent examples of the peanut farmer and the motion-picture actor. (Ralph Ellison, "Author's Introduction," *Invisible Man* xxxix)

Electoral Cultures: A New Discipline?

These assessments by Tocqueville, Clinton, and Ellison of the US electoral process and its democratic aspirations frame the scope of the present volume: from complex, occasionally undecipherable election rituals across a vast historical timeframe to the personalities in which America's leadership ideals are encrypted. Our volume argues that US presidential elections enthrall the American nation and the world because they fulfill and extravagantly exceed all expectations habitually attached to voting as a cornerstone of democratic politics. The presidential election not only stages a contest between specific parties and candidates, as any democratic election tends to do, more than that, it marks a fundamental *choice* (a term advisedly included in the volume's title), one that reflects tensions, anxieties, and decisions within individual voters and the community as a whole. In other words,

every election reignites the conflict between personal political preferences and collective interests, reshaping communities along (or against) class, race, and gender lines across the nation, while redefining or obscuring the eroded authority of the US in the international pecking order and the dwindling significance of its electoral choices for global politics.

Focusing attention on the cultural underpinnings of these choices requires new analytical arsenals. Oddly, these have not yet been mobilized in a coherent, programmatic fashion despite the longstanding global visibility of the US electoral extravaganza and the variety of fields investigating such elections with their specific methodologies.¹ Our volume seeks to help establish the hybrid discipline of what we call electoral cultures—a slippery subject whose challenge resides partly in its tendency to draw on a wide range of disparate disciplines. Our purpose is to survey the bigger picture, to recognize the sheer scale of the questions raised by elections as a cultural phenomenon, and to uncover the interconnectedness of these questions across various protocols of scholarly inquiry. Electoral cultures must remain tenuous and unstable; it is precisely from this precarious institutional location that the field—as we envision it here—derives its critical sharpness.

We began this process with an interdisciplinary conference at the Amerika-Haus Munich in early November 2012, with talks and discussions that sought to suspend or push the boundaries of their respective specializations. Inching toward a clear yet encompassing definition of electoral cultures, we spoke *from* our specific fields rather than back *to* them, sharing vocabularies (in fact sometimes openly arguing about their validity or transferability, such as narrative and narratology), and ultimately aiming for a broad intellectual methodology that promises to open rather

¹ It is impossible to compile an even remotely comprehensive bibliography of US elections studies in various disciplines, certainly not within the scope of this preface. We will restrict ourselves to some carefully selected, reputed references; cf. thus on the predicaments of the Electoral College, Edwards; for micro-changes across the timelines of presidential elections from early polls to the final debates, Erikson and Wlezien; on the early formative years of US electoral politics, Pasley; for broad surveys in political science, McCormick; Campbell; Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde; White; for generally accessible studies, Cornog; Troy; Popkin; on elections and material culture, Fischer; for discourse analysis, Geer; Taylor; Buell and Sigelman; Müller; for international perspectives, Oates, Kaid, and Berry; on close and contested elections, Kelly; on the nature of campaign politics for African American candidates, Glasrud and Wintz; for the impact of media formats on presidential campaigns, from the first televised debates to digital platforms, Kraus; Schroeder; Norris; Moorstedt, Davis and Owen; Oates, Owen, and Gibson; Parkin; for an interesting empirical analysis of the desires and cognitive capacities of American voters (usually seen as unsophisticated and easily manipulable) and their democratic agency, Nardulli; and of course, from the ‘it’s the economy, stupid’ viewpoint, Vavrek.

than foreclose discussion. This volume testifies that the potentials of an interdisciplinary approach to electoral cultures far exceed its risks and shortcomings.

In the pages of this book, scholars of political science, history, American studies, as well as literary and media studies address election themes that range from the foundational and familiar (race and voting rights, elections in the media and popular culture) to less well-mined issues such as political assassinations as a form of suffrage and the impact of energy crises on the rhetoric and outcome of presidential elections. Taken together, the chapters expose how social and political developments enfold cultural shifts, and how the moments of rupture triggered or reflected by US elections weave a complex web of narratives around democracy, social responsibility, personal choice, and public self-fashioning. Despite its emollient all-encompassing nomenclature, we do not propose electoral culture as a tame, reactionary compromise meant to dissolve and take the sting out of election conflicts and tensions, or defang justified critique. Rather, we claim it as an unwieldy site of debate, and the diverse angles taken by the chapters support the welcome associational hybridity of the field. Purposefully heterogeneous and tentative in its overall scope, precise and incisive in its individual analyses, the volume wants to offer an initial spur to future visions around US presidential elections with all the divisions of opinion and jargon clashes that might entail.

A brief conceptual etymology of 'electoral cultures' is necessary to clarify the usefulness of our coinage. On the surface, the concept simply links conventional readings of elections as political events with their fuzzier interpretation as cultural phenomena. Two fallacies loom in this seemingly harmless pairing: the romanticization of 'culture' writ large as capable of breaking existing paradigms; and the tendency in linking US elections inextricably to US culture to single them out as exceptionalist symptoms of a deeply American choice no other nation would make in quite the same way. Even though not every chapter sets out to flout these misconceptions, many of them indeed question the reliability of various US cultural narratives (around individual agency, self-fashioning, energo-ecological accountability, or even US exceptionalism itself) in making sense of how voters chose, what promises they are swayed by, and what motivations they repress. Rather than establish electoral cultures as a new research franchise, we propose it as a preliminary heuristic which, even as it sustains itself naturally with new material every four years, remains a profoundly and productively unstable platform for global interdisciplinary research. And although it may be a sonorous, charismatic phrase, we did not coerce our contributors to engage explicitly with the benefits and pitfalls of electoral cultures *per se*. Instead, we allowed the connotations of the term to take shape organically from the specific narratives and artifacts each chapter is engaging. Nor did we try to suppress any contexts in which electoral cultures are enmeshed, from democratic discourse and practice to media platforms, America's shifting demographic makeup, or climate change.

The chapters are organized around precise questions and problems rather than intra-disciplinary concerns, and they employ interlinked critical methodologies—historical, literary, media-based, etc.—that aim to be accessible to broader audiences by investing not only in the production but also in the effective communication of scholarship. Each chapter offers an entryway into an issue that is either essential in exploring electoral cultures or only takes shape if considered from this perspective. As a whole, the collection aims to be an elaborate manifesto, in the sense that it makes manifest patterns of action and thought that have been with us for centuries, but have not yet coalesced into a systematic configuration of scholarly reflection. This undertaking stresses seemingly familiar but too infrequently probed electoral actors and events (candidates, winners and losers, voters and non-voters, platforms and promises) while mapping such events at levels both above and beneath the nation, from global effects to electoral districts. Historical records, literary texts, and visual works are scrutinized as mimetic reflections of election campaigns and vice versa, as models that in turn shape the course of elections as well as their legacy for generations of candidates and voters across the political spectrum.

Such analyses demonstrate that the strategies and tools of cultural studies are best suited to untangle the conflicting stories and symbolic personalities around which electoral campaigns have revolved over time, from 1788 to the present, from local primaries and caucuses to the international echoes of US campaign slogans. A cultural arena invites our contributors to retool their disciplinary skills toward a more elastic and direct form of storytelling that clarifies the often over-elaborate and polished-to-death messages of electoral campaigns. In brief, *Electoral Cultures* is an archive and an app for continuously reordering the cacophony of electoral voices, an assemblage of topics and styles meant to engage the humanities and social sciences as both interpreters and creators of electoral cultures. Although it does not necessarily require sequential reading, our volume adopts a format that is partly chronological and partly structuralist regarding the participants in the electoral convent: voters and their agency, elections campaigns, mediation and the electability of specific candidates, and the narratives in which electoral stories have been couched and transmitted. In its own way, each chapter stages a conversation between election praxis and cultural meaning. And each regards the unpredictable and inexhaustible electoral enterprise from a unique perspective.

Tools and Methodologies: American Studies, Cultural Studies, Historicism

The volume applies the framework of American cultural studies to revisit the ideological myths, assumptions, and exclusions that habitually inform the narrative of

America and emerge with added force in electoral rhetoric, often fixing dominant meanings at the expense of difference and diversity.² This tension between constricting master narratives of the nation's exceptional destiny and the contingency of each American voter's multifarious interests and ideals animates every chapter of the volume, irrespective of the author's disciplinary expertise. Before all else, the anthology of voices we have compiled seeks to identify the objects of study for which apposite methodologies must be revised or devised. Certainly more angles than the ones we have picked are possible, and every project of this kind is inevitably hamstrung by the vagaries of coincidence and timing. As will become apparent in the chapters, no single approach can perfectly seal itself against infiltrations by the others. Historians for instance examine how electoral choices especially with regard to race are inextricable from their visualization in material media, from lithographs to photography, television, and the Internet. Political scientists juggle notions of media consumption, narrative, and symbolism not unlike seasoned literary scholars. Some chapters abandon disciplinary restrictions altogether, assuming instead a self-governing and yet porous electoral universe—with its own mythologies and rules—that has little patience for academic turf distinctions.

Two distinct methods have elucidated the manufacture of electoral meaning especially well. First, cultural narratology helps explain how electoral narratives borrow from literary fictionality, the hermeneutics of authenticity, and popular culture. Second, discussing elections and Hollywood side by side exposes the fluid boundaries between electoral reality and the cinematic imagination as well as the influence of a growing fictionalization of electoral processes on our understanding of politics.³ The challenge facing our contributors is to incorporate this skepticism of dis-

² The contours and remit of American cultural studies have been explored in a variety of ambitious works, among these Burgett and Hendler; Saldívar; Warren and Vavrus; and indirectly—through its approach and examples—Paul. Campbell and Kean in fact include presidential rhetoric as a seminal site for the negotiation and continuous renewal of American cultural studies.

³ On this matter see also the recent book by one of our contributors, Sebastian Herrmann's *Presidential Unrealities: Epistemic Panic, Cultural Work, and the US Presidency* (2014), which scrutinizes the increasingly simulacral nature of US political discourse and finds in it a symptom of American culture's struggle with popular postmodernism. His chapter in our volume makes a related point. Another seminal study of the cinematic underpinnings of the US presidency is Burton Peretti's *The Leading Man: Hollywood and the Presidential Image* (2012), which analyzes fourteen presidents of the cinematic era, from Herbert Hoover to Barack Obama, as performers and lead movie actors who use self-fashioning and communication techniques borrowed from heroes of the big screen. The resulting impression is that of inauthentic masquerade, a point made bluntly by Anthony Chase in his analysis of elections in American historical films: "Within the classical Hollywood drama of elections and parties, across the decades [...] an authentic politics appears genuinely impossible, nothing more than pipedream. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that a deep suspicion of politics and politicians

cursive boundaries into their own methodologies as a way of questioning the entrenched strategies and limits of their own disciplinary fields. The ensuing self-reflection and self-doubt are constitutive of electoral culture itself, which we regard as an archipelago of approaches held in place by the inability of each to fully account for election choices. We therefore recognize and respond to the necessity of talking about US presidential elections as a cultural praxis in which the very notion and performance of culture itself are at stake.

Collecting these chapters has also alerted us to the institutional environments in which electoral research takes place in the US, Germany, and Australia. This is why we also envisage *Electoral Cultures* as a challenge against compartmentalized learning in these countries and in the field of American studies. From our insights into specific campaigns, candidates, and hot-button issues readers can extract more general guidelines about the systems of knowledge endemic to US elections and the narratives with which they often seduce us. The task we assume in this book is neither to cover every single electoral event in US history nor to measure the exact crater-depth of electoral impact for the case studies our contributors have selected. Instead, we want to bring a community of scholars together that may not have convened otherwise, to carve out a space in-between the rationality of archives or statistics and the nuances of an electoral poetics. We seek to register as many channels as possible through which US elections address us, engage us, or sometimes shut us out. Global audiences tune in to the US electoral spectacle without sensing the same degree of interest on the part of American citizens or politicians, either in international elections or in how other nations react to US campaigns and choices. The purpose of our conversation is therefore diversification, variety, and innovation in a stimulating debate that should develop into a sustained line of inquiry to which this volume can hopefully be regarded as an ambitious if incomplete companion.

In her introduction to *Obama and the Paradigm Shift: Measuring Change* (2012), Greta Olson bemoans the current lack of definition for a global cultural politics. Through the interdisciplinary constitution of that book she suggests that what cultural politics might pivot on is the “conviction that the popular and the cultural are indivisible from the political and ideological” (25). Along similar lines, we maintain that electoral choices are in equal measure political and cultural, that in fact culture is nothing else but the material shaped by political actions and discourses, as well as the foundation of their influence and power. We thus advance a preoccupation with voting cultures that predate the emergence of cultural studies as a discipline and with election narratives that would be unthinkable outside this dis-

remains a profound sentiment in American film and, perhaps inescapably, American political history as well” (529).

cipline, from black suffrage to the imagination of nuclear holocaust in cold war campaign advertising, to anxieties about peak oil and gas prices in more recent pleas to US voters.

Obama's win at the polls in 2008 hinged overtly on race, gender, and subtle forms of historical reparation. The election of 2012 followed rather as an afterthought, never reaching the emotion and intensity of Obama's first victory. Yet so-called culture wars were vital to both elections. Our volume surveys the deeper history of democracy at the polls to uncover the sheer variety of cultural conflicts that elections mobilize (beyond the trinity of race, gender, and class) as well as to position culture as the medium in which elections are negotiated by spin doctors, media, candidates, and voters. As Stuart Hall writes, "culture is about shared meanings" (1). In his view, culture provides the common language in which communities are constituted and redrawn: "To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other" (2). Yet culture also comes into focus even when (perhaps especially when) meanings cease to be shared, when interpretations of the world engender division and partisanship—briefly, when they require a choice. The chapters collected here substantiate our argument that culture does not overlay US elections as a supplementary appendage as much as it forms the central arena in which values and meanings are democratically tested and contested.

In his essay "The Place of Theory in American Cultural Studies," Donald Pease stresses the influential role of poststructuralist theory in allowing a range of 1970s critiques (feminist, anti-racist, queer-pluralist, anti-war, and anti-imperialist) to infiltrate academia and demand recognition. "In authorizing these new fields of knowledge," Pease writes, "poststructuralist theory altered the conditions for the production of academic knowledge: it criticized the assumptions from which American Studies had formerly operated, revised the existing canon, and encouraged Americanist scholars to rethink the normative bases of their practice" (22). We see electoral theory similarly as mediating between academic fields and political movements to the extent that it subverts disciplinary boundaries and norms. Pease's 1970s milestone also coincides with dramatic and disorienting events: Carter's culturally fraught single-term presidency, Watergate, the Reagan revolution, etc., all of which exposed a crisis of confidence around campaign machinations, subterfuge, and downright mendacity framing voters as gullible simpletons with little grasp of electoral psychology. A typical contribution to the field of electoral cultures therefore does not merely describe or explain an electoral result, but actively intervenes in political relations and democratic empowerment. Between political idiom and academic jargon it finds a middle ground where critiques of disenfranchisement, minority marginalization, gender bias, and so on may be articulated. While electoral cultures may strike some as a somewhat opportunistic

addition to American studies, this volume shows that the deeper history of US electoral discourse justifies its centrality to the study of the United States, and that this new theoretical formation poses a radical challenge to the ironclad epistemologies of American studies, such as its democratic pretensions, the notion that everyone can become president if they so choose, growing gender and racial equality, and the (by now almost risible) symbolic function of America's leader as uncontested head of the nation (let alone leader of the free world).

To encourage Americanists to rethink familiar voting narratives in this new light, we propose a three-pronged approach. First, we subscribe to what Simon During calls the "culturalist" strand of cultural studies, one that emphasizes rituals, practices, and structures of feeling (During 5) not as decorative manicure to a material political culture but as its fundamental substrate. This is the perspective from below, from the viewpoint of personal life trajectories. Far from being besotted with abstract theorizing, this approach highlights the voter, or constructed images of the voter, as well as humanizing or deconstructing his or her counterpart, the political candidate. Second, we are attuned to a semiotic imperative in decoding campaign messages, media, constantly shifting formulas for success and failure, visual imagery, and subliminal interference with voters' tentative inclinations. And third, we give pride of place to temporality and historicity in contextualizing the electoral affect mobilized by political candidates depending on when they ran, against whom, and what military or culture wars were raging in the background.

Finally, as an added perk and pleasure of collecting these chapters, *Electoral Cultures* probes for alternatives to the formulaic and foreclosing language of electoral analysis in the social sciences and sometimes even in the humanities. Even the most hard-to-call presidential contest is often couched in the safest, most predictable style of scrupulous, staid analysis. But who people vote for and the methods by which candidates make their pleas are anything but safe, predictable, and staid. Oftentimes elections act out emotional tensions. They invoke shared humanity and ethical concerns, principles of faith, integrity, and patriotism. They conjure a subjective, fractious sensibility that is indispensable to the project of selecting a candidate—almost a mating decision in many ways—and envisioning a coexistence beyond Election Day, since any president saturates the daily lives of citizens through multiple media channels. In styles both accessible and lively, personal and stimulating, as well as parsimonious with both condemnation and celebration, the following chapters complicate the relationship between individual desire and collective duty; the intrinsic utopianism of the electoral process and its everyday disillusionments; the inadequacies of political systems in the face of unrealistic voter expectations; the recourse to trite tricks or swiftboating and the growing need of the electorate for a more empathetic and transparent debate about America's future in a post-American world, where the views and votes of American citizens are

likely to matter less even as US elections themselves become increasingly overexposed, lurid, and belligerent.⁴

The Sections

The volume pivots on four major cultural codes around US elections—"Suffrage and Disenfranchisement," "Voting, Campaigning, and Electability," "Mediating Choice: Visibility, Performance, Race," and "Symbolism and Narrative"—although of course examples and arguments occasionally overlap among sections. Rather than enforce this strict blueprint on the chapters, we allowed the authors to give free rein to their own interests until the allocation of each chapter to one section or another became effortlessly evident. Broadly speaking, the sections both conform to traditional disciplinary rubrics and consciously transgress them.

"Suffrage and Disenfranchisement" lays the foundation for any discussion of electoral praxis, namely the right to vote, the struggles of minorities to achieve this right, and the ongoing ways in which individuals impose radical choices through undemocratic means (such as violence against political figures) or refrain from acting on their political responsibilities—as in the case of voters' ignorance or dismissal of their duty to put a stop to US fossil fuel dependency by casting their ballot against reckless and shortsighted energy policies. The disciplinary expertise marshaled in this section ranges from history to visual culture, film studies, energy humanities, and literary analysis.

"Voting, Campaigning, and Electability" casts an even wider historical net to encompass specific voting demographics, individual candidates (in both victory and defeat, from Abraham Lincoln to Barry Goldwater), and campaign strategies. All of these studies help illuminate the mechanics of elections, the idealized portraits and pedestrian biographies of candidates themselves, and the role of electoral 'genres' (such as the campaign speech) in making or breaking a candidacy as well as in bringing the message home to voters.

With "Mediating Choice: Visibility, Performance, Race" we approach recent campaigns and move away from verbal to visual rhetoric. After a general, statistically informed and empirically researched overview of how old and new media influence US elections, we single out the 1960 presidential election as a threshold moment in the emergence of the televised debate as a highly influential albeit subjective litmus test for how candidates are likely to perform at the polls. We locate a second momentous shift in campaign design and voter seduction in the 2008 presi-

⁴ For discussions of the future of the United States at the end of the American century see Zakaria; Singh; Noble; Chafe; Hutchings.

dential race, which underlined several core electoral themes: race, gender, age, campaign funding, global appeal, and the overlap of political and celebrity cultures. Controversies around race in particular mark the elections of 2008 and 2012 as historically and culturally memorable, so detailed attention is devoted here to what Barack Obama's successful candidacy and re-election have uncovered about the persisting racial tensions in US society and the demographic changes (toward a 'browning' of America) that might set up Obama less as a historical fluke than the harbinger of new electoral maps and allegiances as yet fluid and contested.

The longest section of the volume, "Symbolism and Narrative," paradoxically also appears the least diverse in how it shuffles disciplines and perspectives. The red thread in all of these chapters is 'narrative,' but woe to any reader who surmises that an intense reliance on basic, self-evident 'narrative' renders these chapters uniform or monotonous. Studies on narrative in the political arena are legion, but in this section of our book the concept acquires a rewarding specificity, from its function in perpetuating the ideology of US exceptionalism and in keeping recent campaigns 'on message,' to sophisticated investigations into how elections encode new forms of popular, postmodern narratology, and finally to surprisingly rich archives of real and fictional candidates, campaigns, and voters in life writing, drama, and film.

Considering the breadth of these approaches, and the critical gusto of each individual piece, what other relevant readings have escaped our attention? Our goal has not been to both begin and close off debates about US electoral cultures. And due to the inevitably contingent conditions in which such volumes come together, some aspects receive only a cursory examination. Despite animated discussions of female candidates and voters in several chapters, the volume lacks a sustained focus on gender—although this shortcoming can partly be traced back to the generally dispiriting history of female presidential campaigns. Second, along with speeches, political memoirs, campaign ads, and other forms of electoral promotion, one seminal genre that makes only brief appearances throughout the book is that of campaign journalism. From Nathaniel Hawthorne's bizarre biography of Franklin Pierce, published in 1852—the year Pierce ran for president and won—to writings by Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Renata Adler, Hunter S. Thompson, and David Foster Wallace, a slew of outspoken and stylistically brazen writers have attempted to position election campaigns within the landscape of already well-charted US cultural tropes, such as sporting competitions, drug culture, riots and rebellions, counterculture, and the road narrative. And what about the seemingly peripheral figures of campaign staffers, both real and imagined? Or the all-too-human, intimate, even sexual lives of candidates often regarded as sexless, free of unseemly appetites, as puppets on the strings of national interest, fully committed to sacrificial self-abnegation? Or the exact opposite—the over-sexualization of electoral choices as murkily libidinal—a perspective that new media are especially apt to

take and disseminate? We leave these questions for other scholars to pick up and run with at the interface of disciplines similar to the ones corralled here, or in entirely different constellations, from representations in painting, animation, comics, and science fiction, to more striking methodologies drawing on psychoanalysis, neuroscience, and genetics.⁵

The Chapters

Manfred Berg's indispensable contribution "From White Supremacy to the White House: Racial Disfranchisement, Party Politics, and Black Political Integration" considers the complex ways in which race has factored in US elections among both voters and candidates. Berg situates the history of racial disenfranchisement and black empowerment at the confluence of cultural attitudes, racial politics, and institutional structures. The chapter details how white supremacists sought to prevent blacks from registering and voting, with methods ranging from the exclusion of slaves and free blacks in the antebellum era to crude violence—literally crippling black voters to keep them away from the polls—to more sophisticated schemes of minority vote dilution (literacy laws, poll tax, etc.) that continued even after the sweeping civil rights reforms of the mid-1960s. As Berg persuasively argues, for African Americans the right to vote was a symbolic form of agency that validated their acceptance as US citizens. In the aftermath of the seemingly triumphalist narrative of Obama's victory, irregularities in the 2000 election and recent efforts toward redistricting and reforming voter registration laws remind us that the African American vote is still being suppressed in contemporary US politics, though less due to race itself than to the political preferences of the black demographic.

Volker Depkat focuses on the postbellum era in his analysis of "African Americans Voting: Visual Narratives of the Reconstruction Period," anticipating the central role of electoral iconography throughout the volume. Like Berg, Depkat frames the question of African-American voting and office-holding rights within the cultural narrative of the Reconstruction Era, indeed as a decisive factor in how this period shaped race relations, US national identity, and the constitution of American democracy. The cultural artifacts on which Depkat's inquiry is based are three popular lithographs aimed at a white audience and presenting African Americans as questionably competent voters or office-holders. Depkat unearths fresh archival material and teases out visual details from the semiotic grammar of these images. He proposes that their ambiguity draws on racist stereotypes of the times

⁵ See for instance Hatemi et al. on the genetic foundations of political preferences and voting behavior.

while subtly advocating for black participation in American democracy. To that extent the lithographs serve as problematic visual interventions in the political, social, economic, and cultural debates of their day, especially around questions of black citizenship.

Sascha Pöhlmann addresses another way in which electoral choices reflect cultural tensions and conflicts. In “Vote With a Bullet: The Aesthetics of Assassination in Stephen King’s *The Dead Zone* and *11/22/63*” he invokes the vexed relationship between society and the individual to take a literary perspective on how suffrage may affect not only voter demographics but also personal, vehement choices made by individuals who take the laws of suffrage into their own (blood-stained) hands. The most iconic manifestation of such individual choices against a flawed political system is the political assassination, which Pöhlmann examines in the broader context of US cultural history and specifically in these two novels. Democratic suffrage presupposes that individual choices have political repercussions—a chain of influence that is often more imaginary than real. For all their ambiguities and subversion, the author argues, King’s novels nonetheless assert an ideology of individualism and agency that goes against the grain of the perceived loss of voter power in the mass phenomenon of democratic elections. Even more, the representation of political assassinations in these works provoke reflection on the literary text itself and its own potential for political intervention.

While Pöhlmann profiles overly assertive, lone-wolf, gun-toting vigilantes who aim to impose their electoral choices on the larger voting public, in her chapter “Voting for American Energy: Elections, Oil, and US Culture” Georgiana Banita diagnoses among a majority of US voters the opposite tendency—to refrain from making vital decisions likely to affect both national leadership and the vaster threats of climate change, environmental disaster, and energy security. Her chapter takes energy as an original prism for reconsidering the ethical values that inflect electoral choices and that link these choices with US exceptionalist narratives of endless growth and fuel availability. In five stages (fracking in the 2012 election, Obama’s energy policies in expanding offshore drilling, the close ties of the Bush presidencies with Big Oil, Carter’s widely reviled electoral message of energy frugality, and the 1924 Teapot Dome oil lease scandal), Banita references campaign media, films, life writing, and literature to make two interrelated points: forward-looking and prudent energy plans do not go down well with American voters; and this complacency has to do with the yet rudimentary cultural discourse about the centrality of energy politics for national survival in a world that increasingly distributes natural resources to the disadvantage of the United States and its economic interests.

The image and motivations of the American voter also guide the first chapter of the book’s second section, where voting groups are organized around religious persuasion—a key cultural dimension of every election both in the US and elsewhere.

Michael Hochgeschwender in "The Rise and Decline of the American Catholic Vote" offers a detailed history of the constitution of the US Catholic vote and explains how the political allegiances of American Catholics resulted from internal socio-cultural frictions within the Catholic milieu. Hochgeschwender first appraises how it was even possible for a solid and consistent Catholic vote to coalesce in the antebellum era, given the almost insurmountable tensions between different Catholic ethnic groups. He then recounts how and why Catholics switched their party affiliation from Democrat to Republican without changing their ideological allegiance at the turn of the twentieth century. He also accounts for the relative decline of the Catholic vote since the 1970s, partly as a byproduct of Hispanic migration and its impact on the electoral leanings of an already ethnically diverse but now even more heterogeneous US Catholic community.

Georg Schild's chapter is the first in the volume to devote its attention to the presidential campaign itself, and it does so from a historical viewpoint that attests to the broad scope of electoral cultures and how far back we seek to trace its roots. In "Lincoln the Campaigner: The Issue of Slavery in Election Campaigns of the 1850s" Schild adds another layer of significance to race as a key cultural site onto which various elections can be mapped. The chapter scrutinizes the arguments that Lincoln developed on the slavery issue over the course of three elections—the senatorial campaigns of 1854 and 1858 as well as the presidential campaign of 1860. While Lincoln the campaigner clearly laid out the territorial limitations of slavery, he failed to present his audiences with a coherent plan for the end of slavery and the future of free blacks. At the heart of this discrepancy lie significant inconsistencies in Lincoln's 1854 and 1860 statements compared to his 1858 remarks, which Schild attributes to the different formats of campaign appearances, debates, and addresses to voters. While free to be more candid in the earlier campaigns, when confronted with a conservative opponent Lincoln felt obliged to soften his stance on abolition and thus emerged as one of the earliest politicians to cannily craft his message according to audience and circumstance.

Not only successful campaigns but failed ones as well can change the cultural history of US elections, as Andrew Gross argues in "Goldwater's Phoenix: Emerging from the Ashes of an Unsuccessful Presidential Campaign." Gross reads the election of 1964 through the prism of Goldwater's loss and explores how this loss mobilized a new era of Republican enthusiasm. Goldwater's candidacy is generally seen as the moment that would propel one of his supporters, Ronald Reagan, into the White House. Goldwater's example thus shows how elections can have a bearing on political life long after the votes have been counted. Lyndon Johnson's landslide victory over Goldwater in 1964 seemed to mark the ascendancy of liberal politics over conservatism. The liberal consensus proved to be short-lived, but Johnson's election did vindicate the use of an aggressive kind of advertising, such as the infamous "Daisy Girl" ad. Gross traces the resonance of its imagery in popu-

lar culture through an analysis of Harlan Ellison's novella *A Boy and his Dog* (1969) and L.Q. Jones' film adaptation (1975), holding them up against Goldwater's rather unclear political legacy and especially against the cultural impact of his Western, libertarian, individualistic vision.

Both Schild and Gross dissect typical campaign communication media (speeches and advertisements) to expose their entwinement with more sweeping cultural issues such as race relations or individualism. Gerd Hurm's chapter "A Crisis of Rhetoric? 2012 Campaign Speeches and the Dilemma of American Exceptionalism" assumes a similar task by aligning political rhetoric with the fundamental premises and tensions of US exceptionalism. In the bitterly fought and divisive electoral contest of 2012, exceptionalist rhetoric percolated through campaign speeches on both sides. Hurm postulates the primacy of the campaign speech as a benchmark narrative later processed in more derivative forms of media (YouTube, Twitter, etc.). In the absence of other common ground narratives, and because the exceptionalist genre of the jeremiad easily allocates blame to political opponents, it was a generic, vague form of US exceptionalism that held sway over both Mitt Romney's and Obama's 2012 campaigns. Hurm dissects stump speeches and campaign communications to prove that Romney and Obama often clashed over the correct definition of American exceptionalism, which Obama sought to relativize in his international appearances. Campaign debates, Hurm argues, revolved not only around accurate definitions but also the growing chasm between the promise of exceptionalism and the reality of American life at the end of the American century. With this crisis raging in the background, exceptionalist rhetoric was instrumentalized by both camps merely as a tool to criticize their opponent for betraying the ideals of the American project.

Diana Owen's chapter "The Political Culture of American Presidential Elections: A Media Perspective" prefaces the media-oriented section of the volume with a sweeping historical overview of US electoral media. Owen is concerned with the reliability and legitimacy of the electoral process in the hyper media age. Although it documents a series of social media revolutions, Owen's chapter raises one fundamental cultural question: How can voters continue to negotiate the tsunami of information unleashed by electoral campaigns? And how does this information overload repress voter turnout and political engagement? Technological advances have shaped the content and tone of campaign rhetoric since the rise of the penny press, newspapers, radio, television, and the World Wide Web. In recent campaigns, soft news has taken precedence over hard facts, and consumer loyalty has been destabilized by increasingly hybrid information platforms. To make her point, Owen digs into the 2012 contest, perhaps the best example of presidential elections as reality TV, to highlight the role of social media and of young voters in dissolving hierarchies between voters and elites. Owen's key point, however, is that even though grassroots media participation in the electoral process has suc-

cessfully supplemented voting itself, this kind of armchair engagement has not necessarily made elections more democratic.

Despite the proliferation of new media, Owen insists that traditional channels still form of backbone of campaign communication. Andreas Etges's study "'A Great Box-Office Actor': John F. Kennedy, Television, and the 1960 Presidential Election" shows why that is the case. Etges questions the conventional narrative that Kennedy won the election because he outperformed Richard Nixon in the first US presidential debate ever televised, arguing instead that winning a debate does not necessarily translate into additional votes, then and now. Etges compiles a comprehensive archive of press responses in the first week following the debate and considers Kennedy's groundbreaking use of television throughout his campaign. Through this snapshot of 1960s visual culture and gender dynamics in both candidates' and voters' households, Etges taps into Kennedy's uncanny cultural charisma, which certainly charmed many voters. But he also disentangles the personal appeal of a candidate from other factors that ensure success at the polls.

Etges's attention to photogenic aspects in electoral campaigns and to other superficial criteria for assessing a candidate's electability sets the stage for "Culture and Charisma: The 2008 Presidential Election," an interdisciplinary and intercultural chapter by literary scholar Reingard M. Nischik and political scientist Gabriele Metzler. Written in 2009 and updated for this volume, the chapter assembles a variety of political and cultural phenomena that distinguish the 2008 election as a milestone in US and global culture, including the ways in which it highlights differences between US and German election practices. After a useful introduction to the US system of government, the office of president, and the electoral system that determine the course of American elections, Nischik and Metzler trace the cultural ramifications of US electoral politics along six overlapping categories: media spin, celebrity culture, campaign finance, ethnicity/race, gender, and race. Taken together, these categories provide a comprehensive account of an election that remains memorable not only as a pop event and game changer for electoral politics, but also as an exemplary case study for a cultural approach to American democracy and leadership post-George W. Bush.

When Obama mounted his re-election campaign in 2012, the race issue had already taken center stage at the expense of other cultural contention points. Sabine Sielke's "The Blackening of Barack Obama and the Browning of America, or: How Race and Ethnicity Mattered in the 2012 Presidential Race" takes into account the cultural effects of Obama's first term in office as the first African American president. In fact Sielke raises the pertinent point of why bi-racial Obama was projected (and projected himself)—as an African American in the first place and links this effort with the parallel development of the 'browning' of America. The chapter is driven by three central questions: Why has the Obama presidency managed to hamper rather than facilitate discussions of race in the US? Why was

America's history as an immigrant nation such a contentious issue in the 2012 election? And how did Romney's ostensibly color-blind candidacy re-introduce white normativity in US electoral politics? Sielke is sceptical of the notion that Obama's success ushered in a post-racial society (or made any inroads in tackling inequality or improving social mobility in the US), yet she is also reluctant to accept that little only progress has been made in race relations since the mid-twentieth century. Rather, she depolarizes such debates by stressing the blurring of traditional color lines and the 'browning' of America as a result of minority demographic changes.

If reactions to Obama's promises of hope and change have been so subdued domestically, how has his presidency been perceived on the global stage? Brendon O'Connor's chapter "Buying into American Dreams: US Presidential Elections, Exceptionalism, and Global Power" sounds a similarly doubtful note. Does the US benefit from the immense attention that American elections attract around the world? It certainly does. Yet the pop appeal of these elections exceeds any concrete global influence the US might be seen to possess, as both American and international observers attest to the declining influence of the US in a world of multiple power centers and asymmetrical conflicts. On the one hand the fascination with the symbolic, thin-on-policy, and salacious quality of US elections sparks greater sympathy and familiarity with American interests, policies, and politicians. On the other hand it heightens anti-Americanism worldwide, and it is especially Republican candidates with their often over-emphatic exceptionalist jingoism that provoke negative reactions. O'Connor dwells on the importance of exceptionalism as a foundational American ideology that profoundly affects the perception of US elections abroad. International infatuation with these elections is, O'Connor concludes, ultimately unrequited, as the world's interest in American politics is rarely reciprocated by US public figures and voters.

Implied ideas of narrative in O'Connor's piece and other chapters become more explicit in Karsten Fitz's "Crafting the Presidential Story: The Electoral Narrative in Recent Presidential Campaigns." His interest lies with the American tradition of narrative self-fashioning in political culture, and more specifically with the recent history of storying the electoral narrative in presidential campaigns, especially through stock characters embodied by political figures from John Washington and Lincoln to Kennedy and Reagan. Seen as an assemblage of worldviews and values, 'story' suitably reflects the overall investment of our collection in the cultural emplotment of election campaigns. Fitz tests out the dictum that a good story trumps a true story almost any day, and he looks at how that theory played out in the 2012 electoral campaign, in which Obama and Romney performed different versions of the American Dream. The core ingredients and character repertoire of election scripts, Fitz concludes, have remained the same, although new media and modes of storytelling have changed the outward presentation of campaign narratives.

In his chapter “‘To Tell a Story to the American People’: Elections, Postmodernism, and Popular Narratology,” Sebastian M. Herrmann takes a more theoretical approach. Narrative has become increasingly central to how the American public makes sense of politics and campaign reporting. Accordingly, a wide array of journalistic writings testifies to the intense press focus on a politician’s ability to communicate her/his own narrative or to damage the opponent’s. Herrmann argues that this recent surge of interest in the narrative dimension of politics is not merely a fad or clichéd buzzword but part of a more sweeping cultural turn to narration. Campaign narratives constitute a form of popular theorizing, a vernacular narratology, and thus mark the contested arena in which the American citizenry comes to terms with the relationship between language, politics, and reality. The booming popularity of narrative, Herrmann avers, ultimately goes hand in hand with the popularization of postmodernism. Political discourse is currently consumed as a product of popular culture by a savvy audience eager and able to engage it from a meta-narrative perspective.

Greta Olson’s chapter “Confessing Self, Confessing Nation: Life Narratives in the 2012 Presidential Election” continues the discussion of narrative at both a theoretical and textual level. Policies, records, and candidates’ handling of thorny political issues helped determined the outcome of the 2012 election; but Romney’s and Obama’s personal narratives, Olson contends, were at least as relevant as economic, organizational, and demographic factors. Olson looks into the candidates’ careful self-fashioning in campaign memoirs and social media, and into how these efforts aligned the personal life story of each candidate with the national narrative. Olson traces campaign autobiographies back to Puritan life writings with their trinity of self, nation, and universal prophecy. In contrast to Romney’s reluctance to confess and atone for weakness, Obama’s memoirs stress his evolution from confusion and excess to epiphany, overcoming obstacles, and finally to post-partisan reconciliation in ways that mirror voters’ expectations from a leader able to overcome national challenges. The flipside of favorable forms of autobiographical self-fashioning in 2008 and 2012 was the barrage of attack ads, which presented scathing counter-narratives to the candidates’ more controlled self-portraits, and which Olson subjects to a visually detailed and insightful taxonomy.

Sabrina Hüttner inquires further into the theatricality of electoral politics in “‘Stay in Control of Your Narrative, If You Let the Other Guys Define You’: Hockey Moms, Hawks, and Heroes on the (Political) Stage.” US politics, Hüttner argues, is rife with easily ridiculed archetypes from the hockey mom, the hero, and the taboo breaker to the hawk, the maverick, and the wonk. Hüttner pleads for the validity of performance theories in analyzing increasingly dramatic election campaigns and explains the popularity and malleability of stock characters as theatrical figures in making complex life narratives more accessible to the voting public. Yet she also looks behind the scenes of such performative concoctions, using two fic-

tional political characters in Wendy Wasserstein's *An American Daughter* (1998) and Christopher Shinn's *Now or Later* (2008) to expose the strategies through which stock characters are selected and to question the value of such cardboard stereotypes, which can only make a mockery of politicians' personal complexity and of the political process itself. As Hüttner shows, both plays stage the tension between personal agency and the sacrifice exacted by being in the public limelight.

Antje Dallmann moves the discussion from stage to screen in "Absences and Presences: Campaigns, Candidates, and Voters in American Film." Campaign films are judged by the degree of authenticity and coherence they impose on impenetrable political processes. Within the genre of the political film they remain peripheral and contested. Yet Dallmann's wide-ranging analysis proves that even when they fail to cast doubt on real-life politics, campaign films still manage to destabilize familiar electoral narratives—diegetically, for instance, by questioning their ethical guidelines, and stylistically in manipulating documentary styles and in revealing the interplay of film aesthetics and campaign politics. With scores of examples from *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), and *The Best Man* (1964) to the TV series *The West Wing* (1999-2006), the chapter enlists multiple ways in which each campaign plot paints a different—approving or subversive—picture of the electoral process with its entrenched tropes of whiteness, masculinity, media saturation, anxiety about female involvement, and voter gullibility. Overall, Dallmann concludes, the campaign plot celebrates individual politicians and their rise to power at the expense of a more complex scrutiny of voter psychology and democratic choices.

Individually and collectively, the chapters establish that election dynamics and cultural studies are eminently compatible projects. Our contributors are committed to interdisciplinary dialogue even when they speak from within their specific fields: They seek to make themselves understood while contemplating and questioning the relevance of that field for the common project of election culture. To some extent this comprehensive, programmatic project may be perceived to mask a decline in the visibility and significance of US presidential elections. Domestically they come under cynical scrutiny; internationally they might remain popular, but seldom in a politically meaningful sense. To speak of electoral cultures might be seen as a pointed bid to rescue the importance of election rituals and transfer their value from the political arena to a murkier cultural precinct where everything is worthy of analysis, despite or even thanks to its ostensible marginality. We are not sounding a clarion call to rally around US presidential elections because we suspect they might soon be a defunct institution. But we do query the material and discursive basis that has sustained them so far. American studies in the twenty-first century have become an exercise in resignation, diminishment, and melancholia. We want to guard against reading electoral cultures in the same spirit of attrition and propose instead a dynamic paradigm for their study, not least because it is precisely

such moments of reflection, conflict, and choice that hold the potential to reorient the future, self-perception, and self-confidence of this nation.

Our volume merges the cloistered concerns of individual fields and scholars, modeling new academic and scalar practices, from readings of individual texts to sweeping surveys of how a single issue has modified election practices over centuries. At the risk of sounding grandiose, considering the wealth of material in these pages, we cannot quite foresee a definitive wrap-up to the conversation around the cultural construction of US elections. Some electoral years turn out to be more predictable and soporific than others, but the enthusiasm of the public, often spurred by economic crisis, usually bounces back. Meanwhile new disciplines emerge with their own intellectual capital (such as energy humanities) to excavate hitherto buried cultural implications of election races. Only a handful of our contributors are eligible to vote in an American presidential campaign, which is why most of our attention is directed at conflicting narratives of the past and an uncertain future rather than lived, material experiences at the polls.

Electoral decisions are now being made—both by candidates and by voters—in the course of what may be called slow voting. The number of election narratives has increased exponentially over the past few decades, as has media coverage of elections on both traditional and digital platforms. Despite the rapid news cycle, however, voting decisions taken and revised during long primary and national campaigns have become more painstaking and consequently more amenable to scrutiny, informed as they are by the textures of daily life and popular culture. The question, ultimately, is not how many books can be generated around electoral culture and how quickly, but how analyses of elections, candidates, voter response, and aesthetic renditions of such events can help us understand the unhurried, elaborate mechanics of election choices. We wish nothing more (and nothing less) than to conjure what Stanley Fish called an “interpretive community” around the nexus of American power and/or decline, election praxis, and cultural codes for reading the American past and gradually reimagining its democratic future.

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Suffrage and Disenfranchisement

From White Supremacy to the White House: Racial Disfranchisement, Party Politics, and Black Political Integration

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In his classic study *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, first published in 1949, political scientist V.O. Key observed that “when applied to politics white supremacy in its most extreme formulation simply means that no Negro should vote” (646). To achieve this end, beginning in the 1890s the white South established an elaborate system of racial disfranchisement predicated on legal chicanery and intimidation. In the mid-twentieth century, however, the Southern political system of white supremacy began to crumble. Between 1940 and 1952, black voter registration in the eleven former Confederate states swelled from roughly 150,000 to 1.2 million, representing an increase from 5% to 25% of the black voting-age population (Berg, “*Ticket*” 140-41). Still, while African Americans in the urban and peripheral South faced fewer barriers to registration and voting than during the first half of the twentieth century, the idea of African Americans holding public office remained anathema to most white Southerners. When Congress passed the federal Voting Rights Act of 1965, designed to protect black voting rights in the South, blacks, who made up 20% of the region’s population, held merely 72 elected offices throughout the entire South—out of a total of 79,000 (Minchin and Salmond 29). And although African Americans outside Dixie could register and vote freely, black candidates, as a rule, needed voting districts with substantial black majorities in order to win. In the early 1960s, Massachusetts attorney general Edward Brooke was the only African American holding a statewide elective office in the entire United States. In 1966, Massachusetts voters elected Brooke, a Republican, to the US Senate, making him the first black US senator of the twentieth century and the first ever to be elected by popular vote. Brooke remained an exception, however. By 1985 there were no more than three black officials in America who had been elected in statewide races (Sonenshein 219). Although civil rights leader Jesse Jackson garnered a respectable share of the vote when he launched his bids for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1984 and 1988, respectively, the notion that a person of African ancestry could win the presidency of the United States in the foreseeable future did not seem realistic before the turn of the twenty-first century.

And yet, in 2008, it happened all the same. Barack H. Obama, the son of a white mother from Kansas and a black father from Kenya, won the Democratic nomination against former First Lady Hilary Rodham Clinton and subsequently de-

feated his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain, by a comfortable margin of 10 million popular votes and a massive landslide in the Electoral College. Four years later, Americans re-elected Obama, albeit with a smaller lead, over GOP candidate Mitt Romney. Obama was not only the first US president since Franklin Delano Roosevelt to win re-election despite a nagging economic recession; he was also the first Democratic candidate since FDR to win a second term with more than 50% of the popular vote (Teixeira and Halpin 1). What do we make of this remarkable achievement? Does Obama's two-time triumph signal that American politics has moved beyond racial prejudice, or did it occur in extraordinary circumstances that must not obscure the continuities of racism in American political culture? To be sure, only a minority of white voters supported Obama, and his election sparked vociferous resentment among those segments of white voters who simply could not accept a black man in the White House (Minchin and Salmond 302-03). Moreover, the recent efforts of many states to "reform" their voting laws and procedures, supposedly to prevent electoral fraud, have aroused suspicion that racial disfranchisement is back in place.

Discussions of race in American politics and society tend to oscillate between triumphalist narratives of historical progress and pessimistic accounts of hard-won yet limited gains for minorities that are constantly threatened by racist backlashes. In this chapter I do not retell the story of the long and arduous struggle for black voting rights, nor is it my intention to once more expose racism as a key factor in American politics throughout US history (cf. O'Reilly). Instead, I aim to demonstrate that the history of racial disfranchisement as well as of black political integration and empowerment can only be adequately understood by focusing on the interplay of cultural, structural, and institutional factors, that is, of racial attitudes, party politics, and the political system at large. I conclude with some observations on recent developments in American electoral culture pertaining to race and party interest.

It is necessary to begin with an important yet easily overlooked institutional fact. Because the Constitutional Convention of 1787 could not agree on national standards for the right to vote, the US Constitution left suffrage qualifications for the individual states to decide (Keyssar 21-24). Indeed, universal suffrage has never been enshrined in the Constitution. The four constitutional amendments that explicitly address the right to vote—the Fifteenth, Nineteenth, Twenty-Fourth, and Twenty-Sixth Amendments—only prohibit the federal government and the states from denying citizens the vote for specific reasons, namely race, sex, the failure to pay a poll tax, and age. Moreover, the Fourteenth Amendment, which bars the states from denying any person within their jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws, protects voters against discrimination. Although these amendments, in combination with the 1965 Voting Rights Act and numerous Supreme Court rulings (cf. Berg, "U.S. Supreme Court"), have worked toward a nationalization of the suffrage,

the states still enjoy broad discretion over registration and voting procedures. Unless state electoral rules are openly discriminatory, courts will uphold them as long as the states can demonstrate that they are using reasonable means to achieve a legitimate state interest (Bott 2-3). As a consequence, the diversity and fragmentation of American election laws and practices are mind-boggling even for experts. Historically, the wide leeway of the states to make their own laws has opened up countless loopholes to disfranchise voters and manipulate the electoral process. Not surprisingly, African American voting rights activists have consistently demanded federal intervention to rein in the arbitrariness of the states (cf. Berg, *"Ticket"*).

It is also important to point out that electoral laws tend to reflect the political interests of those who make them. Historians and political scientists have long considered party competition as a key determinant in expanding and limiting voting rights (Keyssar xxi). Needless to say, parties and candidates have an interest in maximizing the size and turnout of their own potential constituencies and, vice versa, in keeping the base of their opponents as small as possible. In a textbook democracy, parties compete with each other for the votes of all adult citizens by trying to mobilize their rank-and-file followers and to win over voters from other parties. In reality, however, for those who control the legislature the temptation to rig the rules in their own favor has often proven irresistible. Racial disfranchisement in American history has been motivated not only by an unswerving ideological commitment to white supremacy but also by volatile party interests. It is no coincidence that the expansion and restriction of black suffrage occurred in the context of major transformations of the American party system, such as the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Populist revolt, and the rise and fall of the New Deal coalition. Thus for African Americans the challenge of political integration went beyond securing the right to register and cast their ballots in free and fair elections. The struggle for the ballot also meant inclusion in a political culture that accepted them as full citizens and in a political system in which parties and candidates would compete for their votes and represent their interests.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the United States was the first country in the world to develop an egalitarian democracy with a competitive two-party system. The presidencies of Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, encompassing the years from 1829 to 1841, marked the advent of mass participation. The abolition of property qualifications by nearly all states ensured that by the early 1840s practically all white male Americans twenty-one years of age and older had the right to vote (cf. Williamson; Keyssar). Democrats and Whigs fiercely competed for voters, holding wild political rallies and herding their followers to the polls. Jacksonian Democracy became notorious for introducing the "spoils system" of rewarding supporters with lucrative public offices. The emerging urban party machines helped their voters, often recent immigrants, find jobs and housing. Al-

though brazenly corrupt by modern standards and often very violent, antebellum politics offered white men unprecedented degrees of participation and inclusion (cf. Bensel; Campbell 14-30).

African Americans, however, were not included in the American republic. Nine-tenths of the black population was slaves who obviously could not vote. Ironically, because the US Constitution, in Article 1, Section 2, counted them as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of apportioning representatives among the states, the slaves increased the political power of their masters in the US Congress (Finkelman, *Slavery and the Founders*, 3-7). Both the slaveholding states and most of the free states treated the small minority of free blacks as a pariah class excluded from the trappings of citizenship, such as voting, jury duty, and militia service. On the eve of the Civil War, only five New England states admitted free blacks to the franchise on an equal footing with whites; in New York they had to meet a \$250 property qualification not applicable to white citizens. In the notorious *Dred Scott* case of 1857, the Supreme Court ruled that free blacks could not be citizens of the United States, because at the time that the Constitution was drafted they had been “regarded as beings of an inferior order [...], so far inferior, that they had no rights the white man was bound to respect” (qtd. in Finkelman, *Dred Scott*, 61). While the decision’s author, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney, ostensibly referred to the original intent of the framers, his infamous statement arguably reflected the views of most white Americans before the Civil War.

Neither the Whigs nor the Democrats had any political incentive to call for the enfranchisement of free blacks outside the South. As long as the two major parties still competed in both sections of the United States, they could not afford to offend their Southern pro-slavery wings. In the North the small number of free blacks was not worth the risk of alienating white voters opposed to racial egalitarianism. On the contrary, Northern Democrats built their base among urban immigrant voters on the message that they too were superior to blacks and entitled to the privileges of whiteness (cf. Roediger). The Republican Party, which emerged after the collapse of the second party system in the early 1850s, sought to unite Northern anti-slavery whites yet balked at advocating black citizenship. “I will say then,” future president Abraham Lincoln famously declared in his 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas, “that I am not, nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in anyway the social and political equality of the white and black races – that I am not nor ever have been in favor of making voters or jurors of negroes, nor of qualifying them to hold office, nor to intermarry with white people” (Basler 145).

The Civil War and Reconstruction changed the legal and political situation of African Americans dramatically. In 1865, the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, and in 1868 the Fourteenth Amendment made the former slaves US citizens entitled to equal protection by law. The Fifteenth Amendment of 1870 prohibited the federal government and the states from denying citizens the vote “on ac-

count of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” The introduction of equal manhood suffrage for blacks, however, did not result from an antiracist turn in American political culture. Even after the Civil War, in which roughly 200,000 African-American soldiers had fought for the Union, Northern voters rejected black enfranchisement in most state referenda that put the issue on the ballot. Eventually, though, they endorsed black voters as a political bulwark against the resurgence of rebellion in the South. Moreover, the Republican Party needed black votes to build a viable electoral base in the former Confederate states (cf. Gillette; Foner 222-27, 446-47; Maltz). It is important to emphasize that the Fifteenth Amendment was not a revolutionary measure, as many of its opponents claimed. The Amendment represented a compromise between the “radical” Republicans, who were committed to racial equality, and the party’s “moderates,” who wanted voting qualifications to remain a state prerogative. The states should only be required to administer their voting laws in an impartial and race-neutral manner. The language of the Amendment also did not explicitly protect the right to hold office. In the decades following the end of Reconstruction, a narrow construction of the Fifteenth Amendment became dominant which held that the states could not use race as a suffrage restriction but were free to enact all kinds of other qualifications as long as these were ostensibly “color-blind.” As late as 1921, even black civil rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois conceded that under the Fifteenth Amendment “a state might legally disfranchise a person for having red hair” (Du Bois 149).

The Southern states had ratified the Reconstruction Amendments as a condition for the restoration of their constitutional status but never accepted their legitimacy. Soon after the end of the Civil War, white Southern elites waged a violent counter-revolution to “redeem” the South from “Yankee rule” and “Negro domination” and to restore “white supremacy” (cf. Rable; Perman). Race, class, and party politics became inextricably linked in this process. Northern Republicans, seeking sectional reconciliation, conceded the South to the Democrats and abandoned their Southern black constituents because their expanding voter base in the Western states ensured the Republicans’ national predominance. When the lower classes of the white South challenged the planter elite in the agrarian Populist revolt of the 1890s and began forging interracial alliances with poor blacks, conservative Democrats, accustomed to manipulating the black vote in their own favor, played the race card. They blamed blacks for the violence and corruption of Southern politics and made them “the scapegoat in the reconciliation of the estranged white classes and the reunion of the Solid South,” as C. Vann Woodward put it in his classic *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (82; cf. Postel, *Populist Vision* 173-203). The white elites insisted that in order to restore order and white supremacy, blacks had to be socially segregated and excluded from politics.

Starting in Mississippi in 1890, the Southern state legislatures began passing new laws to keep African Americans from voting. By 1910 black disfranchisement

was nearly complete. Again, it needs to be noted that Northern Republicans coluded in this process. Until 1911, the US Congress repealed almost all federal election statutes it had passed during Reconstruction (cf. Valelly 1, 121-48; Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics*). As a consequence of black disfranchisement and Republican retreat, the South became, for all practical purposes, a one-party region where the Democratic Party held a de facto monopoly on political power. The Southern one-party system must not be confused with communist or fascist dictatorships, however. The Democratic Party provided a roof for all kinds of candidates and factions vying for power and patronage (cf. Key 298-311). Because the battle cry of white supremacy served as the ideological glue for Southern Democrats, racist demagogues played a key role in electoral campaigns.

To be sure, Southern politics was not entirely uniform. Blacks in the urban areas of the Upper South had a better chance to register and vote than those living in the rural Deep South. Moreover, change began right after the Second World War when African Americans, including many veterans, asserted their citizenship rights with new self-confidence. Nevertheless, the basic structure of the white supremacist political system persisted until the civil rights revolution of the 1960s. How did the white South achieve the disfranchisement of black voters and maintain the system for so long?¹ To begin with, violence, intimidation, economic pressure, and fraud—venerable traditions in American political culture in the first place (cf. Campbell)—were part and parcel of Southern politics. “You know and I know what’s the best way to keep the nigger from voting,” US Senator Theodore Bilbo, a notorious race-baiter from Mississippi, told his voters in a 1946 campaign speech, “[y]ou do it the night before the election [...]. Red-blooded men know what I mean” (qtd. in Lawson 104). Bilbo and his ilk meant business. Countless black voting rights activists lost their lives in the struggle for first-class citizenship (Berg, “Ticket” 149-52). For the most part, however, white Southerners preferred “orderly” legal suffrage restrictions “to keep the Negro in his place.”

The challenge for white supremacists was to devise laws that did not violate the letter of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments but nevertheless excluded large numbers of black voters. To maintain the fiction of equal treatment and color-blindness, a few blacks had to be admitted to the polls. As long as voting laws did not explicitly discriminate by race, the courts, including the US Supreme Court, accepted them at face value (Berg, “U.S. Supreme Court” 74-75). In nullifying the Fifteenth Amendment, the disfranchisers showed remarkable ingenuity. The institutional devices of disfranchisement enacted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries highlight the interplay of race and party politics, which resulted in the rise of a peculiar electoral culture whose legacies continue to affect black vot-

¹ For a more detailed overview, see Berg, “Disfranchisement.”

ing and office-holding today. For the sake of brevity, I will focus on the most important devices, namely literacy tests, poll taxes, and the white primary.

Literacy tests as prerequisites for registering and voting were predicated on the argument that responsible citizenship required the ability to read and write. Such tests were widely used outside the South as well (cf. Stevens 66-74). Due to the legacy of slavery and inferior segregated schools, Southern blacks had disproportionately high rates of illiteracy—37.2% of voting-age males were illiterate in 1910 compared to 8.9% among whites (Smith and Horton I: 667). Thus, even if administered fairly, simple reading and writing tests resulted in the disqualification of large numbers of black voters. To protect illiterate whites, some states passed so-called grandfather clauses that exempted all persons from taking the test whose ancestors had been qualified voters before Reconstruction. In 1915, the Supreme Court invalidated these clauses as an evident violation of the Fifteenth Amendment. As literacy increased among the black population, the Southern states introduced “understanding” clauses, which required applicants to give a “reasonable interpretation” of sections of the state or federal constitutions, granting registrars virtually unlimited discretion to reject anybody they disliked.

The poll tax had originally been a form of direct per capita taxation that had replaced more restrictive property qualifications for voting from the late eighteenth century onward. In the twentieth century only Southern states tied the poll tax to voting. Because the states made no effort to collect the tax but required voters to present their poll tax receipts upon registration, it became a *de facto* voting fee. Although nominal amounts of one or two dollars per year may seem small, the poll tax was a considerable burden on poor blacks and whites. According to one estimate, for a Southern farm laborer to pay one dollar in 1900 was the equivalent of paying 135 dollars in 2001 (cf. Valelly 125). Critics viewed the poll tax as an instrument of class rule to keep the poor of both races powerless and they called for interracial alliances to bring about its abolition. In 1964 the Twenty-Fourth Amendment finally banned the tax in federal elections; two years later the Supreme Court also prohibited its use in local and state elections (Berg, “*Ticket*” 104-09).

The most effective legal device to disfranchise black voters without excluding any whites was the so-called white primary. Ironically, early in the twentieth century primary elections had been introduced throughout the United States to break the power of bosses and party machines and make the electoral process more democratic. The Southern states, however, used primaries as a legal subterfuge for excluding African-American voters, arguing that parties were private associations not bound by the Fifteenth Amendment and perfectly at liberty to limit participation in their primary elections to whites. In reality, the Democratic primary was the only election that mattered in the one-party South, while the general election merely ratified the result of the primary and usually garnered little interest among voters. Although the obvious purpose of the white primary was to bypass the Con-

stitution, it took the lawyers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) nearly two decades, from 1927 until the 1944 ruling in *Smith v. Allwright*, to persuade the US Supreme Court that Southern primaries were not private business but an integral part of the electoral process protected by the Fifteenth Amendment (cf. Berg, “Ticket” 77-93; Zelden).

Although the political system of white supremacy was often depicted as a Southern peculiarity, it had a profound impact on the political status of African Americans in the North as well. While blacks could register and vote freely outside the South, that did not mean their political and economic interests were represented by the national party system. Black political integration thus was not just a matter of being able to cast a ballot; it entailed breaking free from the confines of political isolation. Once the disfranchisement of Southern blacks had become an accomplished fact, the Republican Party tacitly accepted the Democratic monopoly in the South, including the principle of white supremacy. All attempts the GOP made to gain influence below the Mason-Dixon line were on a strictly “lily-white” basis, meaning that the Republicans only appealed to whites. Meanwhile, the “Party of Lincoln” courted black voters in the North with memories of the “Great Emancipator,” but refused to represent their interests in any meaningful way (cf. Sherman; Lisio). Since the Democratic Party was dominated by its Southern wing, it offered no alternative. Prior to the 1924 presidential elections, NAACP leader James Weldon Johnson aptly spoke of a “gentlemen’s agreement” among the two parties: “The agreement provides that the Republican Party will hold the Negro and do as little for him as possible and that the Democrats will have none of it at all” (Johnson 262). The twelve million blacks in the United States, Johnson mused, were “a political nonentity” (261).

This situation changed very slowly. Even after the First World War had triggered the first Great Migration of Southern blacks to the urban North, African Americans made up no more than 2% to 4% of the voting-age population of such Northern states as New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and Michigan (cf. Smith and Horton II: 1319-20, 1505-06). However, blacks began to form sizeable voting blocs in major cities that the parties could no longer ignore. In 1928, black Republican Oscar DePriest was elected to the US House of Representatives from a district in Chicago.² A pivotal moment came in the mid-thirties when Northern black voters bid “Farewell to the Party of Lincoln” and joined President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal coalition (cf. Weiss).

² Ever since 1929, Illinois’ first congressional district, located on the South Side of Chicago, has elected African-American Representatives. In 2000, incumbent Bobby Rush soundly defeated a challenge from Barack Obama. The district currently has the highest percentage (65%) of black residents nationwide (Scott).