

The Myth of "Jacksonian Democracy"

ANDREW JACKSON, WHO WAS ELECTED president in 1828, said he spoke for "the humble members of society"—for workers and farmers. He certainly did not speak for the Indians being pushed off their lands or for enslaved African Americans. But the government needed a large base of support among white people, and the myth of "Jacksonian Democracy" was designed to win that support.

That myth led ordinary people to believe that they had a voice in government and that government looked out for their interests. It was a way of speaking for the lower and middle classes to get their support when the government needed it. Giving people a choice between two political parties, and letting them choose the slightly more democratic one, was a good way to control them. The leaders of both parties understood that they could keep control of society by making reforms that gave people some of what they wanted—but not too much.

The United States was developing with enormous speed and excitement. It was turning into an urban, or city-dwelling, nation. In 1790, fewer

than a million Americans lived in cities. By 1840, the figure was 11 million. New York City alone grew from 130,000 people in 1820 to a million in 1860.

Many city-dwellers lived in extreme poverty. Working-class families in Philadelphia crowded into apartment buildings called tenements, one family to a room, with no fresh water or toilets. In New York the poor lay in the streets with the garbage. The slums had no sewers. Filthy water drained into them, causing outbreaks of deadly diseases.

The very poor could not be counted on to support the government. They were like the slaves and Indians—invisible most of the time, but frightening to the elite if they started an uprising. Other citizens, though, might support the system. Farmers who owned their land, better-paid laborers, and urban office workers were paid just enough, and flattered just enough, that in a crisis they would be loyal to the system and the upper classes that dominated it.