

## Democracy and Civility in Gilded Age America

**Grinspan, Jon. *The Age of Acrimony: How Americans Fought to Fix Their Democracy, 1865-1915*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2021. 384 pp. \$30.00 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1635574630.**

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Jon Grinspan provides a stimulating account of the state of American democracy in the post-Civil War period, chronicling the rise of what he labels the “normal” politics that would come to define twentieth-century America. Reconstruction, covered in the first part of the book, began with the promise of mass, or “pure,” democracy, with citizens embracing politics “with a zealous fixation” but leading to “maddening” results (xi). The post-Reconstruction period is characterized as a period of inertia, in which the political “system was overheating and standing still, attracting great interest but offering little change” (108). Ultimately, attempts to “fix” American democracy, discussed in the third part of the book, provided a series of “new tools” of democracy that acted as restraints on the system, curtailing the era’s perceived vices—for instance, the tribalism of mass partisanship—but also the virtues of mass participation and the sense of community provided by strong parties. The “normal” politics of the twentieth century, according to Grinspan, is “an invention” (ix) and a historical aberration, but a standard by which we evaluate contemporary American politics. At its core, *The Age of Acrimony* documents a set of interrelated tradeoffs: civility for participation, private decision-making for public engagement, and independence for partisanship.

Grinspan brings this acrimonious age to life through an analysis of the lives of Congressman William Kelley and his daughter, Florence. The Kelleys are important contributors to American politics in their own right, but the focus on this father-daughter pairing provides a narrative structure that personalizes broader political developments. William Kelley proves to be a key player in expanding participatory democracy, joining the Republican party and becoming an ally of African Americans in his Philadelphia-based district. He became an advocate of the working class, favoring protectionist policies that became Republican orthodoxy in the decades after Reconstruction. Grinspan argues that Kelley represents the politicians of the time by looking at his travels, oratory, and the fact that he became a life-long member of Congress. Kelley’s notion of democracy, “the bigger the better, the louder the safer—captured the populist tone of nineteenth-century politics” (7).

“Florie,” while sharing her father’s passion for politics and raised to be “a special kind of daughter, one who would learn about the lives of the less fortunate,” approached politics with a more progressive worldview, owing partly to Florence being a woman in an era when the franchise was still limited to men (49). Florence promoted alternative forms

of political participation than those her father's generation found comfort in. She also embraced socialism during her time overseas and later became active in Hull House. Unlike her father, Florence embodied a form of politics that could exist beyond parties and elections. Indeed, Florence expressed a suspicion of the popular will. Florence becomes disillusioned with American politics, but "disillusionment did not mean disengagement" (158). For Florence, and many members of the era's numerous reform movements, politics could be improved by means other than the ballot box and the means of conducting elections needed to be improved by making campaigns more educational and the balloting process more private.

Grinspan's latest book is a worthwhile read and builds on his previous work, *The Virgin Vote*. The work is timely, offering insight into an era with parallels to the current political landscape. In particular, Kelley's travels and his place within Congress and the Republican party offer a point of comparison to contemporary members of Congress. Though this is not a work on political institutions, the Kelley we meet in the book illustrates the pressures members of Congress are subjected to and recreates the lived experience of politics. Likewise, Florie's political engagement demonstrates the possibilities of politics beyond the electoral process, avenues for citizen engagement that are still available today.

Grinspan's narrative is strongest when focused squarely on the Kelleys. In order to capture the complexities of the era, Grinspan introduces a series of other players—Roscoe Conkling, Ignatius Donnelly, William Allen White, among others—and the story sometimes shifts from the Kelley's vantage point to those of these others. At times complicating the book's overall narrative, the tradeoff between simplicity of argumentation and thick description seems fitting for a discussion of an age of acrimony. The Kelleys are important figures to this story, but Grinspan's work is not a biography. Rather, the story of the Kelley family offers a means for twenty-first-century Americans to understand a bygone era and, hopefully, our current politics.

As a political scientist who focuses on American political development, I read this work looking for points of comparison and contrast between the late nineteenth century and today. On this front, Grinspan delivers. Though not making a causal argument, he brings to life the performative and social dimensions of politics of the Gilded Age: the marches, the saloon culture on Election Day, and the violence attributable to such a lively politics.

A second feature I was looking for was a diagnosis of the contemporary problems of American politics and how the history of the Gilded Age might offer insights into the ills of the current system. This problem motivates the writing of the book. Here, Grinspan offers a telling line: "instead of fixing their system, reformers broke it in a different way, one that we got used to" (xii). I agree, but Grinspan does not go so far as to make recommendations as to what the reformers of that era could have done differently, or for that matter, what reforms we should consider to address today's political maladies. In the final analysis, there seems to be a tradeoff among values inherent in decisions as to how to improve American democracy. Perhaps I am being greedy, but in our current age of acrimony, I want to maximize both the participatory nature of democracy associated with the high tide of "pure democracy" and the perceived civility of twentieth century.