

1961 *The Concept  
of Jacksonian  
Democracy:  
New York  
as a Test Case*

Lee Benson

Historian Lee Benson was a key figure in the “new political history”—the attempt to apply social-science methods, concepts, and theories to American political history—and *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy*,

his pioneering study of nineteenth-century New York State political culture, was a major breakthrough in the field. One reviewer demanded that “every American political historian take cognizance of Benson’s challenges,” while another said the book “merited the attention of all political historians.”

Benson challenged the very notion of a “Jacksonian” democracy, calling the concept “sterile and deceptive.” Previous work, including that of Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., argued that voters cast their ballots according to economic status—rich for one party and poor for another. Benson’s work turned this interpretation on its head. Using extensive quantitative research, he argued that ethnic and religious affiliations—not simply economic status—were the crucial determinants of political affiliation. Ethnocultural groups, as he called them, were often hostile to one another on the basis of prejudice or, more exactly, different lifestyle. Roman Catholics distrusted Protestants and vice versa, and each group tried to use its voting power to block the other’s and enhance its own position. Calling previous interpretations “untenable,” Benson argued that it was incorrect to understand voter behavior along strictly socioeconomic lines; the poor were no more likely to be Jacksonian Democrats than were the rich. In short, Benson suggested a new theory of American voting behavior.

