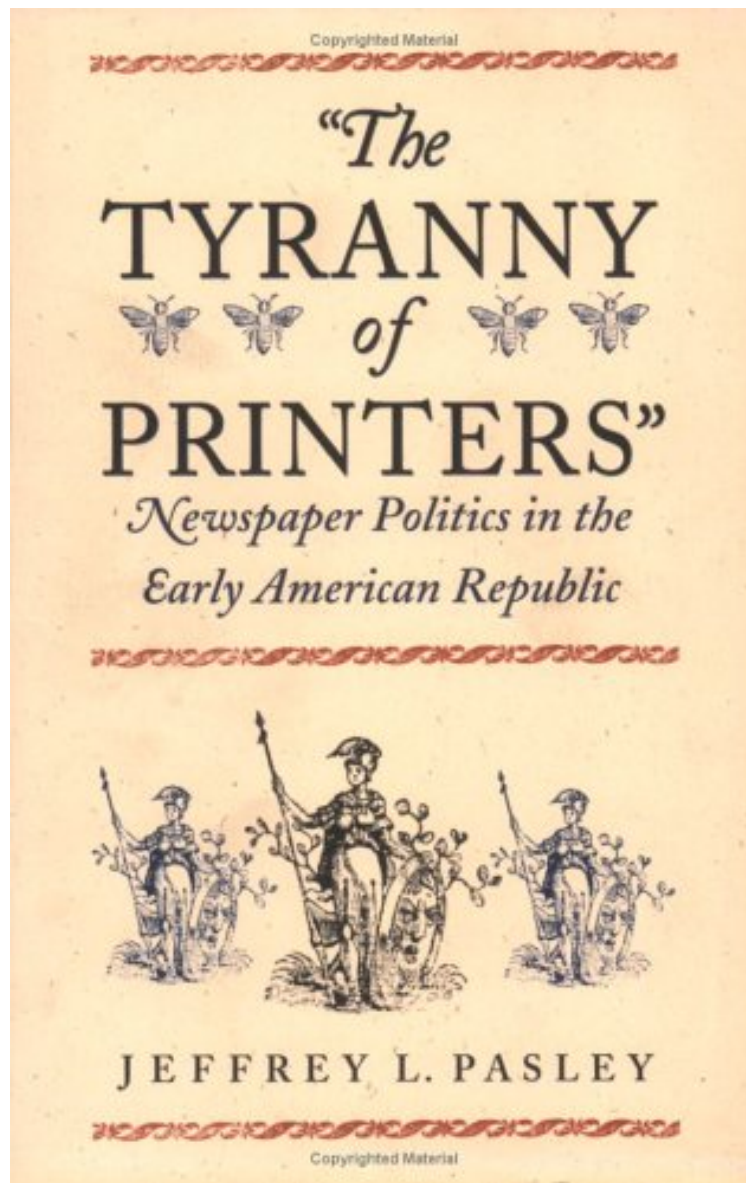


## The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic

Jeffrey L. Pasley

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Jeffrey L. Pasley : The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Tyranny of Printers": Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Early American politics brought to life By Tom Chatt This fascinating book traces the evolution from a relatively apolitical printing trade to a highly politicized press, from the founding of the republic up through the Jackson administration. While the book is a solid contribution to historical scholarship, it is written in a highly accessible style, providing plenty of context for those of us who have forgotten many of the details of high school US History class. But what makes the book most readable is Pasley's style of substantiating his general accounts of demographic and political trends with numerous engaging mini-biographies of specific printers, a colorful lot of characters, to illustrate his points. For me, the book also went beyond forgotten high school history to explain things I never knew about the development of party politics, about the "Federalists" (who stood for the opposite of what is called "federalism" today) and the "Republicans" (the precursor of the modern Democratic party). Given today's highly polarized political climate, it is especially interesting to read about the founding fathers' fears of party politics. In 18th century elections, it was considered quite unseemly for a candidate to campaign or promote himself in any way. Thomas Jefferson was conflicted in his views of the press, working behind the scenes to encourage a pro-Republican press, while making every effort to personally disassociate himself from newspapers. This book first came to my attention in the course of my family history research, as it turns out that my great-great-great-grandfather Charles Holt is one of the printers given biographical treatment in the book. Holt served as an example of printers who became politicized by the infamous Sedition Act under John Adams' presidency. He started publishing his newspaper intending to be neutral, printing all viewpoints, but quickly discovered that the Federalists who utterly dominated Connecticut would not countenance a newspaper that published any viewpoints other than their own. Just for publishing diverse views, he was labeled "a Jacobin, a Frenchman, a disorganizer, and one who would sell his country." (Sound familiar?) Frustrated in his attempts to be a neutral printer, he dug in, editorializing: There are generally \*two sides\* to every subject. To the public opinion, in a free country, there ever will and should be. And it is the duty of an impartial printer to communicate to the public on \*both sides\* freely. But nine tenths of the newspapers in Connecticut are decidedly partial to \*one side\*, and keep the \*other\* totally out of sight. This is not fair.... The public may therefore rest assured that so long as my brethren in this state print on \*one side only\*, so long will I print on \*the other\*.(In other words, Holt anticipated by a couple of centuries Rush Limbaugh's quip that "I am equal time.") Eventually, Holt was convicted under the Sedition Act, heavily fined, and jailed for six months. But as Pasley shows through Holt's example and many others, the Sedition Act, which criminalized criticism of the government, and which intended to stifle the much-feared evils of a politicized press, instead had the opposite effect. A whole generation of printers became more politicized than ever before, and The Sedition Act was not only repealed, but a newly energized explicitly Republican press put Thomas Jefferson into office. It is amazing how timely and relevant some of the issues of 200 years ago seem, with parallels to today's politically divided climate. (Just as one example, I was struck by Pasley's comment on a trend in the wake of Jefferson's election: "there was a sudden awakening of libertarianism among some Federalists now that some of the weapons of state were in Republican hands." Not unlike our present-day Democrats who are rediscovering federalism, and our Republicans who think government should be small except when they're in control of it.) I really enjoyed getting to know the many colorful characters who enliven this history. I think anyone who enjoys politics and history will greatly enjoy this book.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Fantastic new look at Revolutionary journalism By C.D. Usselman The Tyranny of Printers is a history book that accomplishes a lot at the same time. On one hand, it offers a new and fascinating look at journalism during the Revolutionary Period. Pasley essentially argues that rather than being tools of the parties, journalists themselves were responsible for dictating the rise of party politics. The book is very well-written and manages to be entertaining enough for a general audience but also incredibly useful for the academic world, which is very tough to do. Pasley mainly uses a series of biographical portraits to construct his narrative, which makes the book easy to digest but does restrict his ability to apply his conclusions to a larger population, but I never doubted his findings. As with any book, Pasley obviously takes sides. The newspaper men emerge as the true heroes: bold and fearless spreaders of democracy who had a fundamental role in the rise of party politics of the period. Extending that, the Jeffersonians (and not the currently chic Hamiltonians) are the politicians who were more in touch with spirit of democracy that the nation was founded on, and this propelled them to their dramatic victory in the election of 1800. Pasley's book is inventive, enjoyable, and highly informative. I suggest to any casual or serious student of the Early American Republic. It is a welcome antidote to the current trend in Founding Father hagiography.

11 of 13 people found the following review helpful. How newspaper editors created our political system By R. Weir Jeff Pasley's "The Tyranny of Printers" is a fresh look at American politics and journalism in the early Republic. The traditional narrative of journalism in the early Republic is that a weak press tyrannized by political parties produced some of the most subservient and unfree journalism ever seen in America. Pasley turns this narrative on its head, arguing that printers and newspapers in fact created the modern party system. Far from being party stooges, printers were in fact politicians with a major stake in the issues of the day; far from politically subservient, printers provided the organizational glue that held the early parties together. Pasley argues that newspaper editors provided the crucial ideological and organizational tools that were needed to negotiate the chaotic political waters of the early Republic in part because printers were the only truly professional politicians of the time. Parties lacked permanent organization in the early

Republic; campaign season brought political operatives and candidates out of the woodwork, but for the rest of the year it fell to editors to mediate between politicians and constituents. Newspaper offices, which often doubled as local post offices and as reading rooms for out-of-town papers, were logical locations for official party meetings and informal affairs. Editors were uniquely placed to gauge public opinion because of the volume of other papers that passed through their offices. By reprinting accounts of party rallies, toasts, speeches and marches, newspapers spread the party's message to many more people than ever could have seen the event in person and created an "imagined community" of party followers spread over the entire nation. The printing of toasts and speeches also allowed editor-politicians to simultaneously forge a national party ideology and to tone down the parts of that ideology that might not play well in certain states or regions. Pasley argues that the first party to understand and use newspapers in politics was Thomas Jefferson's Republican party. The Republicans were able to deploy the press effectively as a weapon at least partly because of their willingness to let a certain class of people into the political arena - artisan printers. The Federalist newspapers that sprang up to counter the Republican press were generally run by young aristocrats who wrote and copied articles from other papers but didn't actually do the hard manual labor of setting type and printing papers. Republican editors, by contrast, tended to be printers themselves, raised in a declining artisanal tradition and realizing that the road to success might lead them down an untraditional path. By understanding artisanal editors to have played such a large role in the birth of political parties, Pasley provides fresh new evidence for the idea of a great democratization of politics occurring in the early Republic. The party editors of Jefferson's and Jackson's days were certainly not of the lowest class of people, but they were manual laborers who conformed to an old, hard-drinking tradition that was anathematic to refined Federalist or neo-Federalist aristocrats. The most revolutionary aspect of Pasley's book may be found in the way it understands the relationship between journalists and politicians. The received wisdom of the journalism world focuses on notions of objectivity and partisanship; the era of the political press is seen as a low point of American journalism. Pasley's argument suggests that printers of that era may well have had more influence over politics and that ordinary voters may have been much more well-informed than voters are today. The union of journalism and politics that Pasley describes is one that held many advantages for both the printers and the parties of the day.

Although frequently attacked for their partisanship and undue political influence, the American media of today are objective and relatively ineffectual compared to their counterparts of two hundred years ago. From the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century, newspapers were the republic's central political institutions, working components of the party system rather than commentators on it. The Tyranny of Printers narrates the rise of this newspaper-based politics, in which editors became the chief party spokesmen and newspaper offices often served as local party headquarters. Beginning when Thomas Jefferson enlisted a Philadelphia editor to carry out his battle with Alexander Hamilton for the soul of the new republic (and got caught trying to cover it up), the centrality of newspapers in political life gained momentum after Jefferson's victory in 1800, which was widely credited to a superior network of papers. Jeffrey L. Pasley tells the rich story of this political culture and its culmination in Jacksonian democracy, enlivening his narrative with accounts of the colorful but often tragic careers of individual editors.

The Tyranny of Printers is...an essential journey for those who care about the history of our nation's early years, and the emergence of ordinary artisans as extraordinary leaders, sounding and heeding the call to freedom. (Washington Post Book World) This liberal critique should be read by many of the great number who are now exposed to the conservative biography of Adams by David McCullough.... [The Tyranny of Printers] is a sprightly and provocative history, written with far more flair than the usual scholarly treatise. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch) Pasley's book is the best ever written about journalism in the early republic and one of the best about the broader political culture of that era.... For the first time, we can see, brightly and clearly, the vital importance of that era in the history of journalism. (American Historical ) The most comprehensive and important work on the partisan printer-editors of the early republic.... [I]t is the first work students and general readers should consult on the subject. (Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography) This is a tremendously valuable work.... Anyone interested in journalism, the rise of political parties, or early America should read The Tyranny of Printers at least twice. (Southern Historian) This is an important book not just for historians of the press, but for students of the early republic generally. Highly recommended. (CHOICE) From the Author This book presents a side of early American politics not told by Joseph Ellis or David McCullough. Here you can find the stories of the journalists who were jailed by the now-cuddly John Adams or beaten by his supporters. Reader of Richard Rosenfeld's "American Aurora" should particularly enjoy this book. About the Author Jeffrey L. Pasley, a former staff writer for the New Republic, is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Missouri.