

RAYMOND ARSENAULT. *The Wild Ass of the Ozarks: Jeff Davis and the Social Bases of Southern Politics*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 1984. Pp. xv, 336. \$34.95.

Historians have failed to understand the phenomenon of early twentieth-century southern demagoguery, Raymond Arsenault contends, because they have focused too much on the personalities and shenanigans of individual leaders and too little on the responses of voters. From 1898 to 1912, as an Arkansas attorney general, governor, and U.S. senator, Jeff Davis's mass base was rural and was attracted to him, Arsenault speculates, by a desire to resist the modernizing culture of towns and cities and its symbolic instrument, the railroad. Whereas in the 1880s and 1890s, Arkansas Wheelers and Populists had gained near-majority popular support

for significant economic and social change, the gentry-baiting, Yankee-baiting, race-baiting Davis, who filled the political air with irresponsible charges about his opponents but never carried through on any judicial, executive, or legislative program, offered the hicks only a "politics of catharsis" (p. 15), a rhetorical denigration of their geographically or racially distinct adversaries. Less neatly separated into politically relevant social groups than their ethnically and religiously divided northern counterparts and largely protected, as a result of disfranchisement, against racial and partisan schisms, voters in the disorganized and restricted one-party Arkansas electorate, Arsenault conjectures, were skeptical of governmental activism and were consequently well satisfied to attend Davis's breadless circuses.

The son of a prosperous small-town lawyer, real estate agent, and railroad promoter whose devotion to the Confederacy did not extend to volunteering to fight, Jeff Davis attended college and law school in Arkansas and Tennessee, married within the local gentry, became a loan agent for a cotton factor, and dressed during the 1880s not like the one-gallused farmer that he later celebrated in harangues, but as the vested booster he actually was at that time. A bitter opponent of the Republicans, Wheelers, and Populists, Davis staunchly backed the poll tax and secret ballot "reforms" that decimated those parties, especially their black supporters. Moving safely within William Jennings Bryan's shadow, Davis won a plurality Democratic nomination for state attorney general in 1898 by a stroke of luck, when the leading candidate died of apoplexy. The shift from a convention to a primary method of nomination enabled Davis, whose rough-and-tumble antics amused the crowds, to parlay his quickly abandoned, largely sham battles against out-of-state trusts and an expensive new state capitol building into a overwhelming gubernatorial victory two years later. As governor and senator, he preferred drinking, stump speaking, and hunting and fishing (in approximately that order) to working for or executing laws, so he left no legacy of accomplishment. The judgments of Arkansas's leading Populist, who thought Davis an unprincipled charlatan, and of a northern newspaper, which dismissed him as "explosive but not dangerous," seem to this reader, although not always to Arsenault, precisely on the mark.

Davis's coalition was not class based, the author's statistics show conclusively, nor was it as stable as Davis asserted or as Arsenault sometimes treats it. Indeed, the chief failing of Arsenault's book is that he never attempts to construct one or more explicit and comprehensive statistical models of the pro- and anti-Davis voter alignments. The large number of bivariate correlations that he presents—data aggregated at the township and county levels lead to

strikingly similar conclusions—implies that no multiple regression model would be very satisfactory. Davis's support varied widely from election to election (appendixes A and B) and could not be transferred to other candidates (pp. 108–09, 235, 238), and in only 3 out of 250 cases do social or economic variables explain more than 25 percent of the variance in the Davis vote (appendix A).

Although Arsenault at times tries to picture his central figure as something more, his evidence demonstrates that Davis was just a clever, besotted ranter, a somewhat extreme product of a primary system in a one-party polity with a restricted electorate. It is little wonder that this shifty figure attracted only shifting support. Although his findings are largely negative, Arsenault's clear and pleasantly written monograph advances the study of southern demagoguery to a new plane of self-consciousness and sophistication.

J. MORGAN KOUSSER

*California Institute of Technology and
Oxford University*