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## Review of *The Revolution of '28: Al Smith, American Progressivism, and the Coming of the New Deal*

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**Comments**

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Robert Chiles. *The Revolution of 1928*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1928), Pp. x, 286.

The historian Terry Golway recently told me he had some difficulty interesting young editors in a book on Al Smith (and Franklin Roosevelt); fortunately he found a good one and the work will be published. They kept asking who Smith was and why he is important.

The historical community, on the other hand, is celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of Smith's epic run for the White House in 1928, with a host of new interpretations analyzing his contribution to American life and politics. Among these: many historians argue that Smith's foremost accomplishment in American life was championing the immigrant, urban masses during the nativist 1920s. Lisa McGirr, in *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American States* claimed that the real issue that decade was Prohibition; Smith lost in 1928 because he did not pursue that cause, and FDR should have used that platform in 1932.

Robert Chiles take a different approach. Smith was more than a rich personality, he had a full Progressive agenda that laid the groundwork for the New Deal and reconfigured American politics. His is a class, rather than a cultural analysis. Thus, Chiles introduces a new interpretation to the conversation analyzing Smith's life and his crucial election, claiming his supporters recognized "*both the cultural symbolism of the Smith candidacy and the progressive initiatives the candidate expounded.*"(5, italics in original) More than any other historian, he takes Smith's policy statements in 1928 seriously. Smith laid out a broad agenda, not only drawing on his record as governor, but attacking Hoover and the Republican Party for their neglect of America's workers. Despite prosperity there had been significant unemployment, and Smith criticized the status quo on that score, the only politician at his level of prominence to do so; that election, "The lines between the candidates' ideologies were sharply drawn." (81). Contrasting himself to other historians, Chiles writes, "Smith was an economic reformer with a robust agenda *as well as* a symbol of urban-immigrant America, and I maintain that voters in 1928 were simply abreast of Smith's gubernatorial progressivism...." (10, italics in original)

Smith's progressive agenda had multiple dimensions. Concerning reform of state hospitals, the governor asserted that there was "no more sacred duty...than the proper care of the unfortunate sick and afflicted whom we promised to care for, and we are not doing it," (39) then proceeded to implement bond drives and a building program. Chiles also discusses, among others, Smith's rich conservation and parks program, although he minimizes the impact of Robert Moses' influence on the governor's thinking, which was profound. He also discusses the coalition that Smith built, giving the fullest description of the campaign's outreach to the African-American community to date.

This, in turn, shaped both the presidential election and the future of American politics. Because of the economic issues Smith raised, as well as their different approaches to American society, "voters were presented with a clear choice in 1928" which would soon "instigate an important cultural realignment." (112) With these approaches, Chiles notes, Smith captured both "economic and cultural priorities" of his supporters and thus was "exerting a fundamental influence on the direction of New Deal liberalism from within an evolving Democratic Party." (9)

The book also features some notable shortcomings. Chiles discusses the reform of Tammany as the result of leadership by Charlie Murphy, Smith, and Robert Wagner. Yet he neglects the decline and corruption that followed Murphy's death in 1924, as detailed in Thomas Kessner's *Fiorello LaGuardia and the Making of Modern New York*. The author also needs to engage Douglas Craig's *After Wilson*, and the argument that while Smith increased voter turnout in 1928, it was only FDR in 1932 who boosted registration in the Democratic Party. How does this fit with Chiles' portrait of an emerging party fostered by Smith?

Worst of all, he dismisses any historian who does not agree with him, does not recognize Smith's place in the Progressive Parthenon, with derogatory language. An opposing historical interpretation (not this reviewer's) "draws from a long tradition of elite dismissiveness" (5), one of several instances he uses "elite" to attack other writers, a term unnecessary and inaccurate. He refers to those who have not recognized Smith's economic agenda as being "superficial...even condescending". Later, he rejects the "myopic gaze the literature has fixed..." upon any alternative interpretation. The vast body of scholarship that has preceded Chiles deserves better than this.

This is a mixed study. While there are some valuable additions to our discussion of 1928, much of the material is familiar ground, not as novel as the author finds it. It remains a useful addition to our continuing discussion of an important historical event.

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