By singling out Jefferson and Lincoln, I certainly do not mean to say that presidents and other great men were solely responsible for the vicissitudes of American politics. One of the book’s recurring themes is how ordinary Americans, including some beyond the outermost reaches of the country’s formal political life, had lasting influence on the exercise of power. But just as political leaders did not create American democracy out of thin air, so the masses of Americans did not simply force their way into the corridors of power. That Jefferson and not John Adams was elected president in 18...