

Chapter 8

The Election of 1800

The question is – whether to have Adams, God, and a religious President, or Jefferson, no God, and violence, plunder, riot and the worst form of dictatorship.

Adams says that some men should be born Kings, and some should be born nobles. He is a confessed MONARCHIST. Will you by your vote let him saddle you with political Slavery?

Does it seem possible that the men referred to in these political speeches were none other than John Adams and Thomas Jefferson? Both men today are considered true patriots, and great Americans. But in the year 1800, the United States was in the midst of a political campaign. John Adams was the Federalist candidate for President. During his first term, 1797-1801, Congress had passed the Sedition Act, managed finally to avoid war with France, and carried out other Federalist policies of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. Now, President Adams was being accused of plotting to establish a monarchy in America. One argument against him, in fact, was that he had sons whom he planned to have succeed him to the Presidency.

Thomas Jefferson was the Republican's candidate to unseat President Adams. Jefferson had served as Washington's Secretary of State and later as Vice President under John Adams. He had opposed most of the Federalists' policies during the 1790s—from paying the domestic debt at face value to passing the Sedition Act. He had opposed the Federalists' anti-French, pro-British foreign policy. Because of his support for France and the French Revolution, Jefferson was often accused of favoring a violent revolution in America.

Perhaps the real lesson from the election of 1800 is that things said during political campaigns should not be taken too seriously. But there were important issues before the American people in 1800, and the accusations at the start of this chapter highlighted some of them. The election campaign is reviewed in this chapter; you will be asked to decide whether the Federalists deserved re-election.

Twelve Years of Federalist Rule

When George Washington took his oath of office in April 1789, not many people were convinced that this nation would survive. The government was deeply in debt and had almost no income. It survived chiefly with the support of Dutch bankers. There was little national trade and no national currency. There had been a rebellion in Massachusetts, and the nation was further split along regional, class, and political lines. Wars with England and Spain were possibilities, and the country had no army or navy to defend itself from Great Britain along the Great Lakes or from Spain along the lower Mississippi.

After twelve years of Federalist rule, trade had been restored and the economy was sound. The nation's credit was excellent: bonds were being traded for 100 cents on the dollar and they had been used to pay for the National Bank. The Bank had branches in seven different states, and its printed notes served as a widely accepted national currency. The nation's laws were being enforced. Furthermore, war with England had been avoided, and the British had left some of the forts in the Northwest.

This is not to say that there were no problems caused or at least blamed on Federalist policies. Many of the bondholders who sold at market value still felt the government had unfairly rewarded

speculators who bought bonds with inside information. With the tax on whiskey to help pay for these bonds, it was believed, the government was favoring wealthy Americans at the expense of the poor. Furthermore, it was feared that the Federalists took far too much power. The Bank was understood as an example. Nowhere in the Constitution was the government specifically given the power to establish a Bank and the use of the elastic clause to start the Bank was seen as setting a dangerous precedent of expanding the federal government's powers that would deprive the states and people of their rights. The Sedition Act was understood to be an even greater threat. Many thought that the Constitution was being twisted and the First Amendment guaranteeing free speech, forgotten. Political opponents were jailed for criticizing the government. In western Pennsylvania, a few years earlier, farmers who opposed a tax on their money were hauled some 300 miles to face trials in far off courts after an army of 13,500 men had spent two months rounding up suspects. The government, many thought, sided with the rich, and jailed those who disagreed with its policies.

A Dialogue on Federalist Rule

"Not so," Federalists might have responded. "The government of George Washington and John Adams had solved the nation's financial problems, built a strong national government, used the elastic clause as was intended in the Constitution, enforced the law, and curbed false and malicious criticisms. Furthermore, the Federalists kept the nation out of war!"

"Only by violating our agreement with France," anti-Federalists might reply, "and by signing a one-sided treaty with England in which we crawl for the sake of peace. Yes, we establish credit by paying the debt at face value – but then killed our credit in foreign affairs. What foreign country would ever trust a country that would not keep its promises?"

"Jefferson and the Republicans seem to love France more than their own country. They do not realize that most of our government's income comes from our trade with England. We can not at this time risk war with a country on which we depend for trade."

"Rather dead than Fed", Republicans might retort. "Elect Adams, and you have the beginning of a monarchy in the United States."

"Elect Jefferson, and you will have revolution in America."

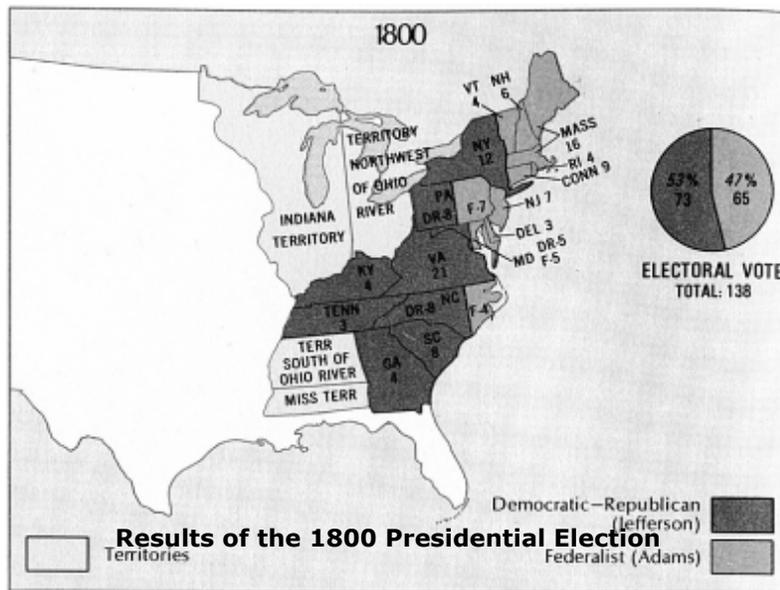
Federalists and Republicans

Behind all of the fighting and disagreement, it was clear that two distinctly differing political parties had been formed in the U.S. The Federalist Party was composed of people who had worked for and supported the Constitution. Their leaders included George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and Charles Pinckney. The Federalists were often merchants, men owning large amounts of land, successful lawyers, and holders of government bonds. Whether as store owners, merchants, ship owners and captains, or men who lent money at interest, they were often involved in trade. They hoped to unite the country under the umbrella of a strong government, uniform currency, excellent credit, and a respect for law. Their foreign policy tended to favor England, just like their programs at home favored the political and economic ideals represented by the old mother country.

The Republicans (formerly anti-Federalists, later known as the Democratic-Republicans, and finally as the Democrats we know today) were the first opposition party. Their leaders included Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Aaron Burr, and Elbridge Gerry. Although they spoke mainly for the moderately successful, middle-class farmer throughout the nation, they also tried to appeal to workers in the cities and planters on Southern plantations. The people they represented generally asked little from

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the national government and opposed granting special favors to well-to-do speculators or investors. They looked toward the states to protect their liberties. They admired the ideals of the French Revolution and their foreign policy generally favored France.

The campaign literature was misleading when it placed the question of Jefferson and revolution versus Adams and monarchy at the forefront. The key issue, rather, was whether after twelve years in office, the Federalists deserved to be re-elected. The reader of today, just like the citizens of those days, should try to answer that question.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. What would you say were the real issues in the election of 1800?
2. Based on the following issues, state why you would have supported Federalists or Republicans.
 - a. Philosophy of Hamilton and Jefferson
 - b. Payment of the domestic debt: face, market or discrimination
 - c. Establishment of the First National Bank
 - d. Interpretation of the elastic clause
 - e. The Whiskey tax
 - f. The way the Whiskey Rebellion was suppressed
 - g. The Proclamation of Neutrality and the Jay Treaty
 - h. The Sedition Act and its interpretation in the Lyons case
3. Write a short speech or poem or draw a cartoon supporting the election of either Jefferson or Adams.
4. Write an essay on why the Federalists either did or did not deserve to be re-elected. Note: you may use one of the following thesis statements (with foreshadowing included):

The Federalists deserved to be re-elected because they helped the economy, created a strong national government, and kept the nation out of war.

The Federalists did not deserve to be re-elected because they favored the rich over the poor, betrayed an ally, and suppressed the opposition.

Epilogue: The Election Results

After a hard-fought election campaign, neither Adams nor Jefferson had gained a majority of the country's electoral votes. The problem was that each elector was allowed to cast two votes, and the candidate with the most votes was to become President. Jefferson received the most votes, but each

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Republican elector voted for Jefferson and his vice-presidential candidate Aaron Burr. As a result, both Jefferson and Burr had 73 electoral votes while Adams had 65, and his running mate, Thomas Pinckney received 64. In other words, neither candidate had a majority.

According to the Constitution, when any candidate fails to get a majority of the electoral votes, the election is thrown into the House of Representatives with each state allowed one vote. In order to prevent Jefferson from becoming President, most of the Federalists, who controlled the House of Representatives, supported Burr. On the first ballot, not cast till February 10, 1800, 8 states voted for Jefferson, 2 for Burr, and 2 were divided. So the count stood through the next 36 ballots. Finally, on the 37th ballot, the delegate from Delaware switched his vote from Burr to Jefferson, making the latter the third President of the United States. Interestingly, this change of heart was encouraged by Alexander Hamilton who was able to rise above his hatred for Jefferson and encourage the election of the man he considered the most honorable. Therefore, Hamilton worked tirelessly behind the scenes in order to secure the election of his long-time rival, Thomas Jefferson.