

The Age of Democracy: 1816 – 1844 *

In a single generation from 1816 to 1844, the United States underwent an economic, political, and social transformation. This market revolution occurred as a result of better transportation and communication systems. Canals, better roads, and new transportation via steamboats and railroads pushed farmers from subsistence agriculture to production for a vast national market.

A communication revolution in print technology and the telegraph coincided with this transportation revolution. The development of a national postal system allowed widespread, easy distribution of newspapers. Handicraft industry increasingly gave way to factory production, especially in the textile and shoe industries. This boom occurred in a nation of twenty-four states and three territories reaching west to the Missouri River with a population of nearly 13 million people, triple the number in 1790.

This market revolution facilitated rapid political changes including the expansion of the electorate, the rise of political parties, and pronounced egalitarianism in campaign rhetoric. By 1825, voting restrictions based on property had been swept away in all but three states. None of the original states, with the exception of New Jersey, granted voting rights to women, and even this limited suffrage ended in 1807. Though barred from voting, women played a prominent role in politics, as activists in temperance, antislavery, prison reform, and other benevolent causes. Women found the new Whig party, which emerged in response to Jacksonian Democrats, particularly accommodating, as it systematically included them in campaign parades, rallies, and other events. Throughout the nation women were seen as the moral conscience of the nation.

By 1825, free blacks held voting privileges in only eight of the twenty-four states, and the number continued to decline in the following decades. Restrictions on female and free black voting coincided with the rise of propertyless (mostly urban artisans) white male suffrage. In 1825, only six states continued to have legislators pick presidential electors. Now they are chosen directly by voters.

Expressions of antielitism sometimes took peculiar forms. Following the murder of William Morgan in upstate New York after he threatened to reveal the secrets of the Masons, the Anti-Masonic party emerged. This party organized the first national party convention in American political history in 1832, although its strength rested mostly in upstate New York, Vermont, parts of Pennsylvania, and Ohio. Antielitism manifested itself also in more vile forms, including anti-Catholicism in print media and, occasionally, urban riots.

The political parties that emerged in the late 1820s and over the next decade gave voice to this egalitarian spirit. Both the Democratic and the new Whig parties proclaimed themselves representatives of the people. Newspapers proved essential to the development of political parties in this period when literacy rose to close to 80 percent. Newspapers proliferated: In 1789, there were about ninety; by 1829, about eight hundred. Most were local weeklies and highly partisan. Editors who did not follow the respective party line were removed.

The creation of a rudimentary two-party system increased participation among white male voters. At the same time, parties bolstered partisan spirit within the electorate. Election Days turned into great festivities, where free drinks, drunkenness, and violence were common. Party loyalty was reinforced by a polling system of voice votes in some localities, or ballots produced and distributed by candidates or parties in other places. Parties routinely printed ballots on colored paper, so they could tell which party's ballot was dropped in the ballot box. In these conditions, voters found it difficult to hide their affinities.

Political campaigning changed. Candidates projected themselves as “the common man,” one of the people, not just someone running to represent the people. Campaigning resembled a kind of religious revival, which is not surprising because this was one of the great ages of religious revivalism in America, the so-called Second Great Awakening led by preachers such as Charles Grandison Finney. American politics always reflected moral passion combined with self-gain and economic and social interest, but these tendencies were intensified in this “age of democracy.” This was an age of riots, and violent attacks against Catholics, Mormons, and Masons occurred.

In this age of party formation, politics often remained personal. For example, in Illinois coalitions, often dictated by personality and patronage, proved more important than party loyalty. Prior to becoming a state in 1819, Illinois instituted universal white male suffrage, making it the most democratic territory in the United States. As a territory, Illinois banned slavery and its Constitution prohibited reinstating it. Territories and young states such as Illinois became laboratories in democracy and imparted a raw democratic sentiment and egalitarianism on the frontier.

By the 1840s, professional politicians had built efficient organizations to conduct campaigns and rally voters. The turbulence of mass democracy and popular insurgency, however, limited the control that party managers could exercise. Political leaders spoke of “popular sovereignty” as the basis of legitimate political authority. Popular sovereignty found expression in having most government offices filled by election, in holding local, state, and national conventions, and in using mass conventions to pick candidates. Yet, even with the development of political parties, a strong antiparty sentiment continued to prevail inside both parties, especially the Whig party. As late as 1840, when

* Critchlow, Donald T. *American Political History: A Very Short Introduction*. (Chapter 3) New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Illinois Whigs began organizing county conventions, they refused to declare themselves “Whigs,” but instead called for “Harrison supporters and reformers” to gather. In this call, Illinois Whigs projected their candidate William Henry Harrison as an antiparty reformer. Antiparty sentiment also surfaced in the periodic rise of antebellum third-party movements such as the Anti-Masonic Party, the Liberty Party, the Free Soil Party, and the Know-Nothing Party, each of which accused the established parties of corruption, self-interest, and control by alien forces, whether it be Masons, Catholics, or slaveholders.

Democrats and Whigs created national parties. In doing so, party leaders needed to smooth over ideological and sectional differences. New York politician Martin Van Buren—the “Little Magician”—allied the South and the Northeast through a program of limited government, states’ rights, and low tariffs. Whigs backed Henry Clay’s American System of a national bank, federally funded internal improvements, federal promotion of manufacturing interests, and high tariffs. In their competition to win sectional and regional support in the North, South, and expanding West, national party leaders avoided divisive issues, especially slavery. Until the 1850s, most political leaders and voters accepted the right to own slaves in the South, although whether slavery should be introduced into new territories or states proved a more controversial question.

Division over slavery appeared when Missouri applied for statehood early in James Monroe’s administration. With the Federalist Party all but dead as a national party, politics remained confined within the Adams came under immediate attack as soon as he stepped into the White House. A cold, temperamental man, he was not a natural politician. He was wealthy, spoke fourteen languages, and collected books, hardly an appealing figure to the common voter. He refused to listen to Clay, who urged Adams to make political appointments and to clear out incumbent government officials, especially in the postal system headed by John McLean, who directed local postmaster appointments to Jackson supporters. When Adams called for internal improvements including lighthouses, a national road, the establishment of a federally sponsored university, and a national observatory, his program drew charges of elitism.

Adams pursued contradictory policies. His exertions as Secretary of State to recover compensation from England for slaveholders who lost human property during the War of 1812, and his energetic evasions of British entreaties to cooperate in patrolling the seas for transoceanic slavers should have ingratiated him with the South. Adams saw protecting maritime commercial interests as good politics and good business, but he still did not garner Southern support. His position on Indian removal did not help with the South either. He wobbled at first. As Secretary of State he had advocated the removal of Indians to west of the Mississippi. As president he continued to believe that Indians

could not be civilized, but came to believe that the Creek Nation in Georgia had been betrayed by their chiefs who had been bribed by land speculators. Adams eventually agreed to the removal of Creek Indians, but his earlier criticism had alienated many Southerners.

The midterm elections in 1826 gave Congress to Jackson’s supporters. Vice President John C. Calhoun, who backed Jackson, joined with Senator Martin Van Buren to attack Adams. Van Buren engineered a tariff bill that set higher duties on many items, and the “Tariff of Abominations” particularly outraged Southern cotton planters. In this politicized environment, he became increasingly dejected, forgoing a once-vigorous exercise regimen of swimming in the Potomac River and walking five miles a day. Instead he sat for hours in his darkened office.

The 1828 election proved to be one of the nastiest in American history, with both sides launching vile personal attacks. Adams was charged with procuring an American virgin for the Czar’s pleasure when he was ambassador to Moscow, while Jackson was accused of living out of wedlock with his beloved wife before she divorced her first husband. Opponents described Jackson’s mother as a “common prostitute.” On real issues Jackson and his followers were vague, even on the tariff. Called “Old Hickory” by his supporters, Jackson projected an image of a common man. Hickory Clubs and Central Committees supporting Jackson were organized across the country. In Pennsylvania, pro-Jackson pamphlets were published in German. Adams carried New England and other parts of the Northeast; Jackson, the South and West. Pennsylvania, with many Scots-Irish, and New York, with Martin Van Buren’s political machine, proved critical to Jackson’s election. He won 178 electoral votes to Adams’s 83, and 56 percent to Adams’s 43 percent in the popular vote.

The death of his wife, Rachael, following the election left the grieving Jackson embittered. He believed that campaign attacks on her had caused her death. Jackson came into office as a critic of elite corruption and a defender of Jeffersonian “Old Republicanism” that called for small, frugal government and states’ rights. As a frontier Tennessee planter, slaveholder, Scots-Irish Presbyterian, and military general, Jackson brought to the White House strong, and sometimes vindictive, leadership. Through close advisers such as journalist Amos Kendall and Martin Van Buren, Jackson rewarded supporters with patronage jobs in government and fired opponents, sometimes on fabricated charges. He was a firm believer in the spoils system. Cabinet appointments reflected his insistence on party loyalty. His program aimed to improve the fortunes of his constituents—white backwoods farmers, southern planters, and urban workers in the East.

Jackson’s insistence on loyalty was evident when he demanded that members of his cabinet and their wives stop ostracizing Peggy Eaton, the wife of Jackson’s campaign manager and Secretary of War John Eaton. Daughter of a tavern keeper, Peggy O’Neale Eaton exuded voluptuous sexuality and brought

a sordid past from a previous marriage. The Eaton Affair so consumed Jackson that finally he forced his entire cabinet to resign, all except for Martin Van Buren, a widower who had befriended Peggy. Jackson selected Van Buren as his heir-apparent. The more substantive issue in Jackson's first administration was the removal of all Eastern Indians, including the Five Civilized Tribes of Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole from Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi. The Cherokee had received Western education, converted to Christianity, intermarried with whites, taken up cotton growing, and owned slaves. About 8 percent of the Cherokee families held slaves. Removing the Indians from lands desired by poor whites and land speculators proved to be good politics for Jackson. He disregarded complaints by Protestant missionaries, clergymen, and anti-Jackson congressmen including Senator Theodore Frelinghuysen of New Jersey and Clay. Jackson also willfully disregarded a Supreme Court decision upholding Indian rights.

The Indian Removal Act passed the House by only five votes. Shortly after, Jackson vetoed a major internal improvement measure, the Maysville Road Bill, which would have connected Kentucky with Ohio. Later he vetoed other internal improvement legislation, claiming that he supported internal improvements if they benefited the nation as a whole, such as river improvements and ports. As a result his administration actually spent more on internal improvements than previous administrations. These improvements often benefited cotton producers.

Jackson sought to make government more frugal, in order to pay off the national debt, which was accomplished in his administration. When it became clear that Jackson was not going to lower the tariff, Vice President John C. Calhoun secretly pushed the South Carolina legislature to resist tariff duties through a doctrine of nullification. This doctrine maintained that individual states could nullify any federal law. Although a believer in states' rights, Jackson was a nationalist. In a toast before Calhoun at a Democratic Party dinner, Jackson declared, "Our Union: It must be preserved." Jackson and Calhoun became bitter enemies. A defiant Calhoun took the nullification argument a step further in an anonymous pamphlet called the Fort Hill Address. Congress reduced the tariff in 1832, but South Carolina announced that the tariff was still too high and would not obey the law. Calhoun resigned as vice president, and Jackson replaced him in the 1832 election with Martin Van Buren. Only in 1833, after Jackson threatened to march personally with federal troops into South Carolina and hang Calhoun, did the state back down and suspend nullification of the tariff. Ironically, Henry Clay, Jackson's avowed enemy, arranged the compromise. Not all states' rights supporters, old Jeffersonians, supported Calhoun's doctrine that a single state could nullify a federal law, but this doctrine was to have important consequences for the nation.

Just prior to the election of 1832, another political controversy confronted the administration: Jackson's refusal to sign legislation rechartering

the Second Bank of the United States. Nicholas Biddle, president of the bank, decided to bring rechartering up early to put Jackson on the political spot in an election year. Jackson disliked Biddle personally and politically for his support of paper money. Jackson believed the only legitimate money was gold or silver. He called the Second Bank an unconstitutional "hydra-headed" monster. When the bill came before him, Jackson, shown here in caricature, vetoed it in a message denouncing foreign investors and powerful banking interests. Jackson supporters rallied to the president's cause because they feared the bank's concentrated power. New York financial interests also disliked the Philadelphia-based bank.

Jackson's actions became the major campaign issue in 1832. Clay and his Whig supporters believed that the public favored the bank. Jackson tapped into a hatred of all banks shared by many, while appealing to entrepreneurs eager to start local banks. He won in a landslide.

In his second term, Jackson pursued a policy of destroying the Second Bank and instituting a hard-money policy. He ordered the removal of federal government deposits from the bank. When two treasury secretaries refused to remove the funds, Jackson forced them out and put Roger Taney in charge. He withdrew the funds and placed them in local "pet banks." (Taney was later rewarded by being appointed chief justice of the Supreme Court.) Jackson's policy ensured the dismantling of central banking in the United States for the rest of the century. Banks popped up across the country and issued their own paper currency. Inflation soared. Finally, Jackson issued the Specie Circular (1836) requiring federal debts, tariff duties, and land purchases to be paid in gold. The demand for gold (specie) forced the collapse of many banks and plunged the country into economic depression in 1837. Van Buren received the Democratic Party nomination in 1836.

The only discord at the second Democratic national convention appeared when western delegates placed Richard M. Johnson on the ticket. Johnson was a populist Kentuckian who claimed to have killed the Indian chief Tecumseh back in 1813. He drew support in the urban east among radical supporters of working men with his call to end debt laws. Many disliked Johnson because he openly lived with a mulatto slave woman.

A disorganized Whig opposition refused to call a national convention and instead put up three regional candidates, Indian fighter William Henry Harrison from Indiana, Hugh Lawson White from Tennessee, and Daniel Webster from Massachusetts. They centered the campaign on Van Buren's role as a sly manipulator in Jackson's autocratic administration. The campaign was conducted largely through stump speeches and publications. Tennessee Whig politician David Crockett, about to go off to Texas where he would die in the Alamo, authored a book in which he compared Van Buren to Jackson in terms of the analogy "dung to a diamond." Van Buren barely won 50 percent of the

national popular vote, but took 170 electoral votes to the three Whig candidates' 113.

A national depression that began in 1837 ruined Van Buren's presidency. He exerted weak leadership in this crisis, even though Democrats controlled Congress. A prolonged and inconclusive war against the Seminole Indians, begun in Jackson's administration, added another burden to a frustrated Van Buren presidency. The mismanaged removal of Indians from the Southeast led to a "trail of tears" in which thousands died, generating outrage in the press. Van Buren's major accomplishment was the creation of an independent Treasury to receive federal funds. However, that action alienated many hard-core Jacksonians who feared any form of centralized banking.

Van Buren entered the 1840 race a wounded incumbent. Whigs smelled blood and this time put forward a single nominee, William Henry Harrison, who had been the strongest of the 1836 candidates and a war hero for defeating Indian leader Tecumseh at the battle of Tippecanoe. To balance the ticket, they selected states' rights Democrat John Tyler from Virginia, shouting "Tippecanoe and Tyler, Too." Whigs added to their ranks anti-Masons, such as Thurlow Weed and William H. Seward in New York and Thaddeus Stevens in Pennsylvania.

By 1840, both Democrats and Whigs were more ideologically coherent. Under Van Buren, Democrats became the party of hard money, although New York's workingmen's faction articulated more anticapitalist, antibanking views. Whigs still supported a new national bank, but they presented Harrison as a common man and Van Buren as an elitist. Clay told voters that the choice was between "the log cabin and the palace, between hard cider and champagne." Whigs distributed small log cabin containers filled with hard cider to voters. Campaign speeches, editorials, and pamphlets attacked Van Buren as anti-republican and aristocratic. Democrats countered with thousands of pamphlets and campaign biographies written for the occasion. Federal employees, census takers, postal employees, and customhouse clerks were called out to support of Van Buren. These efforts fell short as Harrison swept the Electoral College and won popular majorities in nineteen of twenty-four states.

Whigs won the White House using the Democratic playbook of a well-organized campaign, a sectionally balanced ticket, and a strategy of out-playing their opponents on the field of egalitarianism. Their success proved short-lived, however. Harrison died within a month of his inauguration. His vice president, Tyler, undermined the Whig program by refusing to charter a new national bank and vetoing legislation for internal improvements. As the election of 1844 approached, he tried unsuccessfully to win popular support by calling for the annexation of Texas, which had become independent from Mexico in 1836. The Texas issue threw American politics into a new world that disrupted Democrats and Whigs alike.