

Jeffersonian Democracy

Competing visions: the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans

George Washington, as the first president of the United States, was acutely aware that everything he did set a precedent. His administration established a fully financed federal government, maintained American neutrality in the French revolutionary wars, and decisively demonstrated its ability to suppress armed resistance by quelling the **Whiskey Rebellion**, a violent protest against excise taxes on whiskey. Though Washington was opposed to the formation of political parties, his Secretary of State, [Thomas Jefferson](#), and his Secretary of the Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, became the respective leaders of the Democratic-Republican party and the Federalist party, from which emerged the first party system.

In many ways, the election of 1800 was a referendum on how this new young nation—the United States of America—should develop and be governed. John Adams, who had served as George Washington’s vice president before becoming the second president of the United States, represented the **Federalist** party, while Thomas Jefferson, a wealthy Virginia planter, author of the [Declaration of Independence](#), and vice president under John Adams, represented the **Democratic-Republicans** (also called the **Anti-Federalists**).

Adams and Jefferson had different ideas about what the United States should look like and how it should be governed. Whereas Adams and the Federalists, including George Washington, envisioned a strong federal government and a thriving urban manufacturing sector, Jefferson and the

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Democratic-Republicans adhered to a vision of the nation as an agrarian republic, rooted in the virtues of the independent, or **yeoman, farmer**.

Issues of the election of 1800

There were a number of pressing issues debated during the presidential campaign. The major foreign policy debate revolved around the appropriate American response to the [French Revolution](#). Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans were sympathetic to France, while the Federalists leaned more toward Britain, fearing the growing radicalism of the French

Revolution and attempting to prevent the United States from being drawn into the conflict. The Federalist party’s pro-British stance led to accusations that Adams and his compatriots were seeking to undo the political effects of the American Revolution and restore the monarchy. The **Alien and Sedition Acts**, which John Adams had signed into law in 1798, were another point of contention. The acts made it more difficult for immigrants to become US citizens, and included a provision criminalizing false statements critical of the federal government. This provision was squarely aimed at the Democratic-Republican opposition, which had been sharply critical of Adams and the Federalists. Critics of the Alien and Sedition Acts, many of them Democratic-Republicans, charged that they were

unconstitutional and violated the First Amendment right to free speech. While the Democratic-Republicans were well-organized and effective, the Federalist party suffered from a split between John Adams and Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton penned a 54-page letter denouncing Adams, and it hurt the Federalist cause when it was published after falling into the hands of a



Portraits of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.
Thomas Jefferson, left, and John Adams, right, became bitter rivals in the election of 1800. [Jefferson](#) and [Adams](#) portraits courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Democratic-Republican. The campaigns were bitter and divisive, with both sides launching heated accusations, vilifying each other, and engaging in slander and character assassination. Adams and Jefferson, former friends and compatriots, had become bitter enemies.

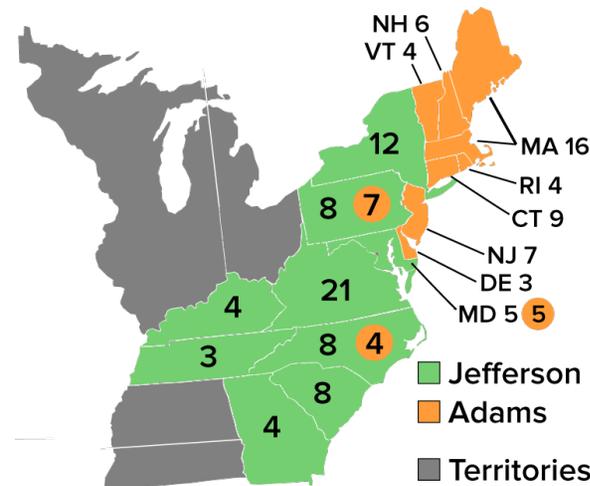
“The Revolution of 1800”

In 1800, each state was allowed to choose its own voting day; thus, voting in the presidential election lasted from April through October. With only one state remaining—South Carolina—Adams and Jefferson were tied, with 65 electoral votes each. When South Carolina returned its results, it awarded the election to Jefferson. However, there were a number of disputed returns, and the election was ultimately decided in the House of Representatives.

Jefferson had chosen for his running mate Aaron Burr, a New Yorker who had served as president of the Senate. (Burr would later go down in infamy for killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel in 1804.) But during the election of 1800, Burr proved a consummate tactician, gaining control of the state legislature of New York and awarding its votes to Jefferson.

The election of 1800 was fiercely contested and extremely acrimonious, to the point that outgoing president John Adams refused to even shake incoming president Thomas Jefferson’s hand. The election facilitated the spread of bitter partisanship, and ushered in the demise of the Federalist party and a political realignment that effectively ended the **first party system**.

At the same time, it was the first peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another. Despite the fierce hostility of the campaigns and the election, Federalist John Adams bequeathed the presidency to his greatest political foe and rival, Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson. This demonstrated and strengthened the viability of the American democratic system.



Map of the electoral college votes in the election of 1800. Jackson carried the South and most of the mid-Atlantic, while Adams captured New England. **Map showing electoral college votes cast for each candidate in the election of 1800. Orange bubbles indicate votes cast for Adams in states that cast votes for both candidates.** [Map](#) adapted from Wikimedia Commons.

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