White Man’s Democracy

A Symbol for the Era

Politicians were responding to the changing times, and politics and political parties took on a different shape during the 1820s and 1830s. Andrew Jackson, the first president from west of the Appalachian Mountains, became closely associated with the spirit of the age and the image of the "common man." However, neither Jackson's personal background nor his presidential decisions were ordinary.

Video: The People's Politician

This video analyzes Andrew Jackson's rise from frontiersman to President of the United States.

Look for answers to these questions when watching the video:

• Why was Andrew Jackson an appealing presidential candidate in the 1820s? What distinguishes Jacksonian democracy from Jeffersonian democracy?
• Why was the outcome of the 1824 presidential election decided by the House of Representatives? From which regions of the country did the respective candidates gain their support? What is important about the "corrupt bargain"?
• What scandals and questions of character influenced the presidential election of 1828? Why did Andrew Jackson win? Where did he get his support? What did his victory mean?
• What elements of the 1828 Presidential election have carried over into modern day elections?
• What factors explain the emergence of the second-party system? How were the Democrats and Whigs different from each other? What political traditions from the previous party system did each party carry forward?

Video script:

Music introduction

Narrator: Affectionately known as “Old Hickory,” Andrew Jackson, like the tree itself, was tough
and imposing. He reflected the vitality and irascible confidence of the common man, railing against “the system” and boldly asserting his right to take center stage within the political arena.

Harry Watson: Jackson, first of all, was an enormously appealing masculine figure to a very masculine self-assertive electorate. He was a highly successful general who never had a day of formal military training. He just seemed to come by it naturally. He had pulled himself up from what could have been an absolute disastrous childhood to the pinnacle of personal success and then he had gone out and further asserted his personal strength by whipping the Creek Indians and the British at the Battle of New Orleans.

Narrator: Jackson became the first congressman from Tennessee, and subsequently served as a senator, as a judge on the Tennessee Supreme Court, and as Governor of the Florida territory. But his reputation for violent outbursts, his obsession with honor and vengeance, and his aggressive militarism alarmed many.

Richard Ellis: People were scared of him, literally scared of him because his whole experience had been drenched in violence. I mean he fought duels. I mean no other president had actually killed other people the way Jackson had in duels.

Narrator: Jackson was also a bundle of contradictions. He possessed a life-long suspicion of the rich and powerful—but he was quite proud of the wealth he had amassed and placed on display at the hermitage. Jackson was guided by a belief in equality, but he was one of the largest slaveholders in Tennessee. He insisted on deference, yet he did not seek the approval of the elite.

Actor, Andrew Jackson: “They expect to see me with a tomahawk in one hand, and a scalping knife in the other.”

Narrator: In 1824, Jackson ran for president on the basis of his military record, a fact that appalled the aging Thomas Jefferson.

Actor, Thomas Jefferson: “Jackson is one of the most unfit men I know of for such a place, an able military chief, perhaps, but a dangerous man.”

Harry Watson: Jeffersonian democracy still had a strong element of deference in it in which the average voter was not supposed to presume to be a congressman or even a president himself, but to choose which one among natural aristocrats should be the leader. Jacksonian democracy
takens that position and moves it a little bit further in a populist direction and says that the role of the electorate is not only to choose the leaders but to produce the leaders and that the leaders should come out of the great body of the people.

Narrator: Jackson won the popular vote in 1824. But none of the four candidates received a majority of electoral votes, so the decision went to the House of Representatives. In what became known as the “corrupt bargain,” candidate Henry Clay threw his support to John Quincy Adams—then was promptly named secretary of state in the new Adams administration.

Actor, Andrew Jackson: “Was there ever witnessed such bare-faced corruption in any country before?”

Narrator: The presidential election of 1828 was a rematch between John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson. It would go down as one of the nastiest political campaigns in history. Adams was accused of being cold, elitist, and in the pocket of the special interests. Jackson’s men suggested that Adams had diverted public funds to buy himself foreign luxuries, and that he had equipped the Russian tsar with a mistress.

Meanwhile, Adams’ men accused Jackson of being the bastard son of a prostitute, a dueler, a vigilante, and an unprincipled adulterer who had lived with his wife Rachel before her divorce was final.

Actor, Charles Hammon of the Gazette: “Ought a convicted adulteress and her paramour husband to be placed in the highest offices of this free and Christian land?”

Narrator: Although some of their accusations may have been true, the strategy backfired. By emphasizing Jackson’s fiery, iconoclastic nature, the national republicans actually made him more attractive to many voters.

Narrator: Jackson’s victory meant different things to different people.

Harry Watson: To Jackson’s supporters, it meant that the people had triumphed. To people who were a little bit more cynical than that, it was the triumph of barbarism over reason, civility, civilization, common sense, educational attainments. A dualism was set up between the untutored voice of the people and the judgment of the experts, the elite, the people who had inherited advantages and so that created a kind of cultural tension that would be a rich source of American political culture.
Narrator: Jackson, who had pledged to be a president for all of the people, literally opened the white house to all comers—starting with his inauguration. The raucous crowd that showed up to celebrate the occasion got so drunk, made so much noise, and broke so many dishes, that Jackson was eventually forced to escape the celebration by climbing out a back window.

End of video.

The Coffin Handbill

Mudslinging and personal attacks on candidates characterized the presidential campaign of 1828. One of the most famous broadsides circulated against Andrew Jackson was "The Coffin Handbill." Published in dozens of newspapers across the United States, the handbill featured a black border with six coffins representing soldiers that Jackson had executed during his military career. Ironically, military experience is one reason Jackson was able to overcome the negative publicity and win the election by a landslide.

"He has, more than any other candidate, roots back to the American Revolution. He's not a significant figure at the time of the Revolution, but as a young boy he fought against the British. There was a famous story of how he refused to shine a British officer's shoes and therefore carried a scar. The British officer used his whip to hit him on the face, and he had a scar from that. And people in the 1820s felt the country was in real trouble and wanted to go back to their roots and the roots being the American Revolution. Jackson symbolized that."

—Richard Ellis, Professor of History, SUNY Buffalo

Activity: Check Your Understanding

Points out that part of Andrew Jackson's appeal as a political candidate was based on his rapport with a masculine electorate. His personality and military background resonated with the all-male electorate of the 1820s and 1830s. His decisions and actions may have appeared to be contradictory at times, but he remained popular with the common white man. Andrew Jackson's presidential victory in 1828 helped create a dualism in American political culture between the elite and the common people. His election symbolized the emergence of the West as an important political region in the country. Furthermore, Jackson and the West were associated with common people pursuing their versions of liberty. Elite bankers and power brokers were now going to be challenged.
Political Parties

The two party political system in America evolved over many years. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, political parties became more clearly identifiable with what we recognize today as Democrats and Republicans. The modern Democratic Party was established during Andrew Jackson's era, but traces its roots to the Anti-Federalism views of Thomas Jefferson. The modern day Republican Party did not actually exist until the 1850s; however, its roots go back to various groups that opposed slavery in pre-Civil War days. This activity is an overview of the characteristics and key people associated with political parties as they existed in the 1790s and 1840s. As you complete the activity, look for connections between the political parties of the past and the present.

Interactive Activity: Political Parties

This activity compares the characteristics and key people associated with political parties as they existed in the 1790s and 1830s. The Federalist Party of the 1790s believed in a strong central government. It was the party of John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and the aristocratic elite of the commercial Northeast. It was more likely to be pro-commerce and pro-British. The Democratic-Republican Party of the 1790s believed that power derives from the people. Both plantation owners and small farmers of the mid-Atlantic and South supported the party of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Democratic-Republicans were more likely to be pro-French instead of pro-British. In the 1830s, Henry Clay and Daniel Webster led the Whig Party, generally comprised of wealthy merchants who favored a national bank, high tariffs, state sponsored entrepreneurship, and government control over moral issues. The opposing party in the 1830s was the Democrat Party, led by Andrew Jackson and John C. Calhoun. Democrats espoused personal liberty, free competition, and equal opportunities for white men.