

The Election of 1800 QuickTime Slide Presentation—Teacher Notes

Slide 1: Title Slide

Slide 2: Background History

By 1800, the United States had won its independence, established a new government with the Constitution, and grown to 16 states. The population was over five million; one-fifth of the population was in slavery.

As the country grew in size and population, it became more diverse economically, culturally, and politically. Small industries, such as ironworking and fishing, expanded in the New England and the Mid-Atlantic states. Large plantation farming, individual plot farming, and small businesses, such as merchants and artisans, grew in the Southern and Western states.

Slide 3: Problems Inside and Outside the Young Country

Though growth was good, the young United States faced many problems both inside and outside its borders. The British government continually violated terms of the 1783 Treaty of Paris that ended the Revolutionary War. Great Britain was slow to move its military forts out of American territories, and its navy harassed American merchant shipping.

The French were angry at the United States for rebuilding relations with Great Britain and refusing to pay its debt to France after the monarchy was overthrown. The United States was angry with France for attacking American merchant and navy ships. After the infamous XYZ Affair, the United States cut off relations with France.

The U.S. Congress, under the control of the Federalists, passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which were intended to restrict immigration and stop political opposition. The Alien Act increased requirements to become a citizen and made it easier for the government to arrest, deport, or imprison foreigners it considered a threat to the country. The Sedition Act made any criticism of the government a crime punishable by fines and imprisonment.

Many citizens were also struggling with the hypocrisy of slavery in a nation that claimed that “all men are created equal.” Slave rebellions in the West Indies and Virginia made many citizens afraid. Some people hoped slavery could be ended, while others thought any talk of freeing the slaves was a violation of their property rights.

All of this led many in the country to believe that the democratic experiment would fail. Deep divisions began to emerge on the issues of slavery, taxes, and federal versus state power. From New England to the Deep South, several regions considered breaking away and forming their own republics.

Slide 4: The Emergence of Two Strong Political Parties

Even before many of the divisions arose, two groups with very different visions for the future of the nation emerged during the administration of George Washington. The Federalists, led by John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, believed the future of the nation lay in its abundance of natural resources and the ambitions of its people to create a rich economy. Federalists supported the growth of industry and trade. They believed America had a bright future if it could enact policies favorable to business and

commerce. Most Federalists favored a strong alliance with Great Britain, seeing it as helpful to the United States.

The other political vision for the country was held by the Democratic-Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson. They thought the Federalists had too much power and that the government was becoming controlled by the wealthy. They supported the small farmer and craftsman and wanted to ensure the government did not forget them. Jefferson personally believed France and its culture was superior to Great Britain's and that America owed its loyalty, if not its very existence, to the French for their help in the Revolutionary War.

Slide 5: Differences between the Two Parties

As the two political parties began to exercise their power, they disagreed on important issues that affected the future of the nation. Federalists favored a strong central government that would run the country efficiently and help the economy grow. They believed that the states had too much power and that citizens were incapable of running the government. They favored a more powerful, centralized government. To do this, they placed limits on those who wanted to become citizens and on individuals' rights to criticize the government (Alien and Sedition Acts).

The Democratic-Republicans believed that the true power of government was given to its citizens and the states. They preferred small, local government to the large, central government advocated by the Federalists. They encouraged the common people to participate in the government and believed that many of the Federalists' policies were a threat to the rights and liberties of the people.

Slide 6: Negative Feelings between the Two Parties

As a result of these differences, the two parties distrusted each other intensely—to the point of hating one another. Each party believed that if the other's policies and beliefs were allowed to succeed they would set the country on an irreversible path to disaster.

Federalists believed that the Democratic-Republicans' support for a state's right to run its affairs and to disagree with the federal government was a sign of disloyalty. They saw such actions as defying their authority. Federalists believed that the Democratic-Republicans' demand for less federal government control and their support of revolutionary France would lead to chaos and possible civil war.

Democratic-Republicans saw the Federalists' increasing national power as a sign that the country was moving toward a monarchy. They saw the Alien and Sedition Acts as a clear attempt to by the Federalists to destroy the Democratic-Republican party and rule without opposition, thus ending democracy.

Slide 7: Election Results

The election of 1800 was a difficult one without a clear winner. The votes were very close, a sign of how divided the people were over which future course the nation should take. Federalist John Adams received 65 electoral votes. Jefferson and fellow Democratic-Republican Aaron Burr both received 73 electoral votes. (Because of the way electoral votes were cast at the time, electors could vote for more than one candidate and not indicate whether they were voting for president or vice president. The result was a tie.) The election was forced to the House of Representatives to break the tie vote.

Finally, after 36 ballots separate ballots are cast, Jefferson won the election by one vote. Aaron Burr became vice president.

Slide 8: Peaceful Transition of Power

On March 1, 1801, Thomas Jefferson was inaugurated as third president of the United States. When it was time for Jefferson to be sworn into office and take control of the government from the Federalists, John Adams quietly left town and returned to his home in Massachusetts. Before the inauguration, Adams had appointed hundreds of Federalist judges to the bench and left office defeated and depressed, but he didn't contest the outcome or call out the army to keep him in power.

The election also brought changes in the Congress, where the Democratic-Republicans had gained a majority. The outgoing Federalist legislators also left office without a fuss.

While attempting to reduce tensions between the different political groups in the country, Jefferson also pushed for significant differences in the way government would be run. The Democratic-Republicans set a new course for the country by repealing the Alien and Sedition Acts or allowing them to expire. Jefferson turned the efforts of the country to the West, expanding and absorbing territories. He called for a return to the principles of the American Revolution, supporting the rights of the states, and restoring the rights of the people.

Slide 9: The Importance of the Election of 1800

The election of 1800 was remarkable for a number of reasons. It marked the first time that power was peacefully transferred from one political party to another. Though both sides believed the election was crucial to the survival of the nation, the departing Federalists left government quietly. The Democratic-Republicans reversed many Federalist policies, but did not attempt to destroy the Federalist Party. The Federalist Party pulled itself apart from within as splinter factions continued to struggle for what little power remained.

The peaceful transition of power set a pattern for future elections. Though not apparent at the time, the idea that one party could leave government peacefully also implied it could return. A minority party could still have influence and power in a democracy as long as it had some support from the people. Similarly, the election also proved that citizens could successfully change the course of the government when they saw fit.

The deadlocked election brought about a change to the Constitution. The Twelfth Amendment called for electors to cast separate votes for president and vice president. [Prior to this change, electors voted for two candidates for president, with the person receiving the most votes becoming president and the second-place candidate vice president. Such a practice could lead not only to a tie vote, as in the 1800 election, but also to the awkward circumstance of political rivals having to serve as partners in the executive branch.]

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