

The Presidential Election of 1800: A Story of Crisis, Controversy, and Change

by Joanne B. Freeman



Nasty political mud-slinging. Campaign attacks and counterattacks. Personal insults. Outrageous newspaper invective. Dire predictions of warfare and national collapse. Innovative new forms of politicking capitalizing on a growing technology. As much as this seems to describe our present-day presidential contests, it actually describes an election more than two hundred years past.

The presidential election of 1800 was an angry, dirty, crisis-ridden contest that seemed to threaten the nation's very survival. A bitter partisan battle between Federalist John Adams and Republican Thomas Jefferson, it produced a tie between Jefferson and his Republican running mate, Aaron Burr; a deadlock in the House where the tie had to be broken; an outburst of intrigue and suspicion as Federalists struggled to determine a course of action; Jefferson's election; and Burr's eventual downfall. The unfolding of this crisis tested the new nation's durability. The deadlock in the House revealed a constitutional defect. It also pushed partisan rivalry to an extreme, inspiring a host of creative and far-reaching electoral ploys. As a sense of crisis built, there was even

talk of disunion and civil war, and indeed, two states began to organize their militias to seize the government if Jefferson did not prevail.

Oddly enough, this pivotal election has received relatively little scholarly attention. Much of it is recent, possibly inspired by the presidential election of 2000. One recent study—*Adams vs. Jefferson*, by John Ferling—does an excellent job of tracing the contest's many twists and turns. (Judging from its title, *Jefferson's Second Revolution*, by Susan Dunn, to be released in September 2004, promises to do the same.) A recent collection of articles, *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic*, edited by James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter S. Onuf, offers an excellent survey of different historical approaches to the election, such as the study of constitutional realities, political culture, or the influence of slavery. Garry Wills's *Negro President: Jefferson and the Slave Power* focuses on the influence of slavery on Jefferson's politics, including his election as president. And yours truly examines the election as a prime example of the period's political culture in the final chapter of *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*. Older studies that discuss the election include Noble E. Cunningham Jr., *The Jeffersonian Republicans: The Formation of Party Organization, 1789–1801* (1957); Daniel Sisson, *The American Revolution of 1800* (1974); Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (1993); and James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (1993).

Why so little scholarship? In part, because of our tendency to view the election of 1800 as a victory for our modern two-party system—the first such victory in American national politics. As the nation's constitutional

framework dictated, Federalist Adams handed the presidency to Republican Jefferson, a new regime took command, and the nation endured. Viewed in this light—as a neat and tidy stepping-stone to modern party politics—the election doesn’t seem to merit further analysis.

This is not to say that the calm transfer of power from one regime to another is not noteworthy. It was certainly a powerful endorsement of our Constitution. But envisioning the election as the birth of our modern political system masks the many ways in which it was distinctly not modern. In fact, in 1800, there was no modern party system. The Republicans and Federalists were not parties as we now understand them. An institutionalized two-party system would not be accepted for decades to come. And events were far more uncertain and crisis-ridden than the idea of a “system” allows; there was no telling what would happen or why. Similarly, participants operated according to ideas and assumptions very different from our own. In short, the election of 1800 transpired in a world with its own culture and contingencies.

To recapture the contingency of this historical moment, we have to look through the eyes of our historical subjects and understand them in the context of their own world. In 1800, the American Constitution had been in effect for only eleven years. The national government was still a work-in-progress, a political experiment with no model of comparison in the modern world. A republic was supposedly superior to its Old World predecessors, but this assumption had yet to be tested. Political parties were not an accepted part of this picture: instead they were viewed as illicit groups of self-interested men intent on winning power and position in the next election. The stability and long-term practicability of a republic was likewise a question, every political crisis raising fears of disunion and civil war. This tense, tenuous political environment produced anxiety, bitterness, and high emotion for good reason.

Given America’s survival for more than two hundred years, it is easy to forget this central political reality of the early Republic: The United States was new, fragile, shaky, and likely to collapse, a prevailing anxiety that could not help but have an enormous impact on the period’s politics. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, the two driving forces behind the Constitution, went to their deaths with the Union’s vulnerability on their minds. Both men wrote final pleas for its preservation on the eve of their demise, Madison composing a memorandum entitled “Advice to My Country,” and Hamilton writing one last letter on the night before his duel with Aaron Burr, urging a friend to fight against the “Dismemberment of our Empire.”[1] Indeed, Hamilton fought the duel in part to preserve his reputation for that future time when the Republic would collapse and his leadership would be in demand.[2] Virginian Henry Lee’s offhand comment in a 1790 letter to James Madison is a blunt reminder of the tenuous nature of the national Union: “If the government should continue to exist . . . ,” Madison wrote in passing, offering evidence of a mindset that is difficult to recapture.[3]

Witness the period’s political chronology. In 1790, the controversy over the location of the national capital and Alexander Hamilton’s financial plan convinced many that the Union was not long for this world. In 1792, partisan conflict exploded into the newspapers, threatening, as George Washington put it, to “tare the [federal] Machine asunder.”[4] In 1793, the inflammatory activities of “Citizen” Edmond Genet threatened to spread French revolutionary fervor to American shores, prompting even Francophile Republicans to abandon his cause. In 1794, when western Pennsylvania farmers refused to pay a national whiskey tax, President George Washington called an armed force of 15,000 soldiers to the field.[5] In 1795, the lackluster Jay Treaty with Britain provoked angry public protests around the nation; thousands of people gathered in New York City alone, a handful of them reputedly throwing rocks at Alexander Hamilton’s head. In 1796, with George Washington’s retirement, the nation had its first real presidential election, Washington’s departure alone prompting many to fear the nation’s imminent collapse. The 1797–1798 XYZ Affair (prompted by a French attempt to get bribe money from American diplomats), the Quasi-War with France (stemming from French seizure of American ships and the XYZ Affair), the 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts (wartime measures to deport threatening aliens and silence attacks on the government), the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions (recommending that state governments interpose their authority over the Alien and Sedition Acts), Fries’s Rebellion (a revolt against wartime taxes), and finally, the presidential election of 1800—these are only the

most prominent of the period's many crises, each one raising serious questions about the survival and character of the national government and its relationship to the body politic.

Even the Constitution itself was uncertain—a work-in-progress with serious design flaws. The election ultimately centered on one of these flaws—a fundamental constitutional defect in the presidential and vice presidential voting process. As originally drafted, the Constitution did not differentiate between presidential and vice presidential candidates. Each presidential elector cast two votes, and regardless of political affiliation, the man who received the most votes became president and the runner-up became vice president; any candidate could win either office. When two candidates were tied, the election was thrown into the House, where each state had one vote, to be decided by a majority of the delegation. In 1796, this produced a Federalist president (John Adams) and a Republican vice president (Thomas Jefferson). In 1800, it created a tied election in which both candidates were entitled to claim the presidency, and even the backup procedure of deciding the election in the House almost failed; it took six days and thirty-six ballots to break the deadlock. This defect was resolved by the Twelfth Amendment in 1804, which provided separate balloting for president and vice president.

So the dire predictions and overwrought rhetoric that characterized the election were not mere campaign excess; people really feared disunion. They were also nervous about party loyalties. Rather than intense party unity, there was a jumble of suspicions and conflicting loyalties—personal, ideological, and regional, as well as partisan—at the heart of the election. For example, Northerners and Southerners deeply distrusted each other—Federalists and Republicans alike. Aware of this potential problem, both alliances held a congressional caucus before the election, during which Northerners and Southerners personally vowed to support the candidate from the other region. These vows ultimately proved necessary, for regional loyalties came to the fore throughout the election, prompting a string of nervous demands for reassurance. After hearing a rumor that Virginia Republicans were going to drop votes for Burr to ensure Jefferson's victory, Burr's friend David Gelston sent two anxious letters to Madison, reminding him that personal honor was at stake. "I am not willing to believe it possible that such measures [as dropping votes for Burr] can be contemplated," he wrote, suggesting just the opposite. "We know that the honour of the Gentlemen of Virginia, and N.Y. was pledged at the adjournment of Congress," and to violate such an agreement would be "a sacrilege."^[6] A letter from Madison to Jefferson reveals that Gelston's fears were well founded. Gelston "expresses much anxiety & betrays some jealousy with respect to the integrity of the Southern States," Madison wrote. "I hope the event will skreen all the parties, particularly Virginia[,] from any imputation on this subject; tho' I am not without fears, that the requisite concert may not sufficiently pervade the several States." Such fears eventually compelled Jefferson himself, as he later explained, to take "some measures" to ensure Burr Virginia's unanimous vote.^[7]

Clearly, this was no election of simple party politics. Nor did it represent a sudden acceptance of a "modern" politics. The Federalist and Republican congressional caucuses of May 1800 suggest as much. Led astray by the word "caucus," many scholars pinpoint these meetings as a modern innovation. But in truth, they were something quite different. Participants sometimes referred to them as "caucuses," but they also called them "the agreement," "the promise," "the compromise," and "the pledge," to which they would be "faithful" and "true."^[8] Clearly, these caucuses involved negotiation and compromise between men of different views, rather than the simple confirmation of a presidential ticket. Nor was the result of these compromises—electoral tickets featuring a northerner and a southerner—a foregone conclusion, regardless of how obvious such a strategy seems to us. For national politicians, a cross-regional ticket was risky, for it required a high degree of national partisan loyalty and mutual trust between North and South. The national caucuses were attempts to create national party unity, not expressions of it. Indeed, as suggested by words such as "pledge" and "promise," national party loyalty was so weak that it had to be supplemented by personal vows. To compel politicians to stay the course, they had to commit themselves by pledging their word of honor and their reputations; the only way to unite Northerners and Southerners was to appeal to them as gentlemen who would be dishonored if they abandoned their allies. These honor-pledging ceremonies were not party caucuses as we understand them today.

The election was ultimately decided by a Federalist who abandoned his political loyalties, putting his loyalty to his home state above all else; James Bayard, the lone representative from Delaware, had an entire state's vote in his power during the deadlock in the House. A letter to Hamilton written shortly after the tie was announced reveals Bayard's dilemma. First and foremost, he considered himself a Federalist who would require "the most undoubting conviction" before he separated himself from his Federalist friends. He also thought of himself as a Northerner whose intense dislike of Virginia seemed to make Burr the preferable choice for president. Under normal circumstances, these two perspectives would have been in accord, for the Federalists were largely a Northern party with a particular hatred of Virginia, the heart of their Republican opposition. Bayard's problems arose when he perceived a conflict between Federalist concerns and the welfare of his home state. New England Federalists seemed willing to sacrifice the Union rather than install Jefferson as president. And if the Union collapsed, the tiny state of Delaware would probably be swallowed by another state or a foreign power. As Bayard explained after the election, "Representing the smallest State in the Union, without resources which could furnish the means of self protection, I was compelled by the obligation of a sacred duty so to act as not to hazard the constitution upon which the political existence of the State depends." [9] Compelled to decide between loyalty to Federalism and to his home state, Bayard abandoned Federalism.

In all of these ways, the election of 1800 cannot be summed up as a stepping-stone to modern party politics. Of course, there are exceptions to all rules, and not surprisingly, Aaron Burr offers one exception. Inspired by the prevailing sense of crisis (as well as by his sheer enjoyment of the political game), Burr pushed political innovation to an extreme. Anxieties were certainly at an extreme in the spring of 1800, for New York City was the most crucial contest of the campaign, capable of deciding the election. The challenge of the moment spurred Burr to new heights of political creativity. For example, he personalized his campaign to an extraordinary degree, purportedly compiling a roster with the name of every New York City voter, accompanied by a detailed description of his political leanings, temperament, and financial standing. His plan was to portion the list out to his cadre of young supporters, who would literally electioneer door-to-door; in the process, he was politically organizing the citizenry—not his goal, but the logical outcome. Similarly, rather than selecting potential electors based on their rank and reputation, he selected the men "most likely to run well," canvassing voters to test the waters. Perhaps his most striking innovations concerned his advance preparations for the city's three polling days. As one contemporary described it, Burr "kept open house for nearly two months, and Committees were in session day and night during that whole time at his house. Refreshments were always on the table and mattresses for temporary repose in the rooms. Reporters were hourly received from sub-committees, and in short, no means left unemployed." [10] In essence, Burr created an early version of a campaign headquarters.

Indeed, as a whole, the election featured a number of electoral innovations. Newspapers were used with particular effectiveness, partly the result of creative politicking, and partly the result of the ever-spreading power of the press—a growing technology. Also, some elite politicians spent more time electioneering among voters than they had before; for example, both Burr and Hamilton pledged "to come forward, and address the people" during the course of the election. During New York City's three days of voting, both men scurried from polling place to polling place, addressing the crowds. As Burr supporter Matthew Davis noted, this Burr had "never done at any former election." [11] The partisan presses recognized the novelty of such a gesture. How could a "would be Vice President . . . stoop so low as to visit every corner in search of voters?" asked the Federalist *Daily Advertiser*. The *Commercial Advertiser* likewise commented on the "astonished" electorate that greeted Hamilton's efforts. [12]

The tone of politics was slowly shifting. But such changes do not signal a simple acceptance of a "modern" form of politics. In the crisis-ridden election of 1800, the many prevailing anxieties about the fate of the Union pushed people to change past habits. Of course, people did not accept such change in a blind rush. Rather, they forged a gradual, intricate series of compromises between "shoulds" and "should-nots," negotiating between past standards and the demands of the moment. For the political elite, this involved new levels of communication with the populace. Examined closely, this type of compromise reveals the complex dynamic of political change. The nature of politics changed slowly, one decision at a time.

- [1] James Madison, “Advice to My Country,” 1834, in Irving Brant, *James Madison, Commander in Chief, 1812–1836* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1961), 530–31; Alexander Hamilton to Theodore Sedgwick, July 10, 1804, Harold C. Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 27 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961–87), 26:309.
- [2] See Alexander Hamilton, [Statement on Impending Duel with Aaron Burr], [June 28–July 10, 1804], *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 26:278, 280.
- [3] Henry Lee to James Madison, April 3, 1790, Robert Rutland and J. C. A. Stagg, eds., *The Papers of James Madison*, 17 vols. to date (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1962–), 13:136.
- [4] George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, August 26, 1792, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 12:276.
- [5] See Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 481. This book offers a detailed discussion of the many crises of the 1790s.
- [6] David Gelston to James Madison, October 8 and November 21, 1800, *The Papers of James Madison*, 17:418–19, 438; James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, October 21, 1800, *ibid.*, 17:425–26.
- [7] Jefferson, memorandum, January 26, 1804, in Franklin B. Sawvel, ed., *The Complete Anas of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Round Table Press, 1903), 224–28.
- [8] See, for example, James Monroe to James Madison, October 21, 1800, George Jackson to Madison, February 5, 1801, *The Papers of James Madison*, 17:426, 460–61; Charles Cotesworth Pinckney to James McHenry, June 10, 1800, Bernard C. Steiner, ed., *The Life and Correspondence of James McHenry* (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers, 1907), 459–60; Robert Troup to Rufus King, December 4, 1800, Fisher Ames to Rufus King, August 26, 1800, Charles R. King, ed., *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King*, 6 vols. (New York: Putnam’s, 1897), 3:295–97, 340–41; John Rutledge, Jr. to Alexander Hamilton, July 17, 1800, and George Cabot to Alexander Hamilton, August 21, 1800, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 25:30–38, 74–75; David Gelston to Madison, October 8 and November 21, 1800, *The Papers of James Madison*, 17:418–19, 438.
- [9] James Bayard to Alexander Hamilton, January 7, 1801, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 25:199–203; James Bayard to John Adams, February 19, 1801, “Papers of James A. Bayard, 1796–1815,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association* 2 (1913): 129–30.
- [10] Diary of Benjamin Betterton Howell, in Milton Lomask, *Aaron Burr*, 2 vols. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), 1:244; Matthew Davis to Albert Gallatin, March 29, 1800, Albert Gallatin Papers, New-York Historical Society; [New York] *Daily Advertiser*, April 2, 1800, in Lomask, *Aaron Burr*, 1:244; [New York] *General Advertiser*, April 3, 1800, *ibid.*
- [11] Matthew Davis to Albert Gallatin, March 29, 1800, *Albert Gallatin Papers*, New-York Historical Society.
- [12] [New York] *Daily Advertiser*, April 2, 1800, in Lomask, *Aaron Burr*, 1:244; [New York] *General Advertiser*, April 3, 1800, *ibid.*
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