

THE AGE OF JACKSON, 1824–1844

The political activity that pervades the United States must be seen in order to be understood. No sooner do you set foot upon American ground than you are stunned by a kind of tumult.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

The era marked by the emergence of popular politics in the 1820s and the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1829–1837) is often called the Age of the Common Man, or the Era of Jacksonian Democracy. Historians debate whether Jackson was a major molder of events, a political opportunist exploiting the democratic ferment of the times, or merely a symbol of the era. Nevertheless, the era and Jackson’s name seem permanently linked.

Jacksonian Democracy

The changing politics of the Jacksonian years paralleled complex social and economic changes.

The Rise of a Democratic Society

Visitors to the United States in the 1830s, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, a young French aristocrat, were amazed by the informal manners and democratic attitudes of Americans. In hotels, under the American Plan, men and women from all classes ate together at common tables. On stagecoaches, steamboats, and later in railroad cars, there was also only one class for passengers, so that the rich and poor alike sat together in the same compartments. European visitors could not distinguish between classes in the United States. Men of all backgrounds wore simple dark trousers and jackets, while less well-to-do women emulated the fanciful and confining styles illustrated in wide-circulation women’s magazines like *Godey’s Lady’s Book*. Equality was becoming the governing principle of American society.

Among the white majority in American society, people shared a belief in the principle of equality—more precisely, equality of opportunity for white males. These beliefs ignored the oppression of enslaved African Americans

and discrimination against free blacks. Equality of opportunity would, at least in theory, allow a young man of humble origins to rise as far as his natural talent and industry would take him. The hero of the age was the “self-made man.”

There was no equivalent belief in the “self-made woman,” but by the end of the 1840s, feminists would take up the theme of equal rights and insist that it should be applied to both women and men (see Chapter 11).

Politics of the Common Man

Between 1824 and 1840, politics moved out of the fine homes of rich southern planters and northern merchants who had dominated government in past eras and into middle- and lower-class homes. Several factors contributed to the spread of democracy, including new suffrage laws, changes in political parties and campaigns, improved education, and increases in newspaper circulation.

Universal Male Suffrage Western states newly admitted to the Union—Indiana (1816), Illinois (1818), and Missouri (1821)—adopted state constitutions that allowed all white males to vote and hold office. These newer constitutions omitted any religious or property qualifications for voting. Most eastern states soon followed suit, eliminating such restrictions. As a result, throughout the country, all white males could vote regardless of their social class or religion. Voting for president rose from about 350,000 in 1824 to more than 2.4 million in 1840, a nearly sevenfold increase in just 16 years, mostly as a result of changes in voting laws. In addition, political offices could be held by people in the lower and middle ranks of society.

Party Nominating Conventions In the past, candidates for office had commonly been nominated either by state legislatures or by “King Caucus”—a closed-door meeting of a political party’s leaders in Congress. Common citizens had no opportunity to participate. In the 1830s, however, caucuses were replaced by nominating conventions. Party politicians and voters would gather in a large meeting hall to nominate the party’s candidates. The Anti-Masonic party was the first to hold such a nominating convention. This method was more open to popular participation, hence more democratic.

Popular Election of the President In the presidential election of 1832, only South Carolina used the old system in which the state legislature chose the electors for president. All other states had adopted the more democratic method of allowing the voters to choose a state’s slate of presidential electors.

Two-party System The popular election of presidential electors—and, in effect, the president—had important consequences for the two-party system. Campaigns for president now had to be conducted on a national scale. To organize these campaigns, candidates needed large political parties.

Rise of Third Parties While only the large national parties (the Democrats and the Whigs in Jackson’s day) could hope to win the presidency, other political parties also emerged. The Anti-Masonic party and the Workingmen’s party, for example, reached out to groups of people who previously had shown little interest in politics. The Anti-Masons attacked the secret societies of Masons and accused them of belonging to a privileged, antidemocratic elite.

More Elected Offices During the Jacksonian era, a much larger number of state and local officials were elected to office, instead of being appointed, as in the past. This change gave the voters more voice in their government and also tended to increase their interest in participating in elections.

Popular Campaigning Candidates for office directed their campaigns to the interests and prejudices of the common people. Politics also became a form of local entertainment. Campaigns of the 1830s and 1840s featured parades of floats and marching bands and large rallies in which voters were treated to free food and drink. The negative side to the new campaign techniques was that in appealing to the masses, candidates would often resort to personal attacks and ignore the issues. A politician, for example, might attack an opponent's "aristocratic airs" and make him seem unfriendly to "the common man."

Spoils System and Rotation of Officeholders Winning government jobs became the lifeblood of party organizations. At the national level, President Jackson believed in appointing people to federal jobs (as postmasters, for example) strictly according to whether they had actively campaigned for the Democratic party. Any previous holder of the office who was not a Democrat was fired and replaced with a loyal Democrat. This practice of dispensing government jobs in return for party loyalty was called the *spoils system* because of a comment that, in a war, victors seize the spoils, or wealth, of the defeated.

In addition, Jackson believed in a system of rotation in office. By limiting a person to one term in office he could then appoint some other deserving Democrat in his place. Jackson defended the replacement and rotation of officeholders as a democratic reform. "No man," he said, "has any more intrinsic claim to office than another." Both the spoils system and the rotation of officeholders affirmed the democratic ideal that one man was as good as another and that ordinary Americans were capable of holding any government office. These beliefs also helped build a strong two-party system.

Jackson Versus Adams

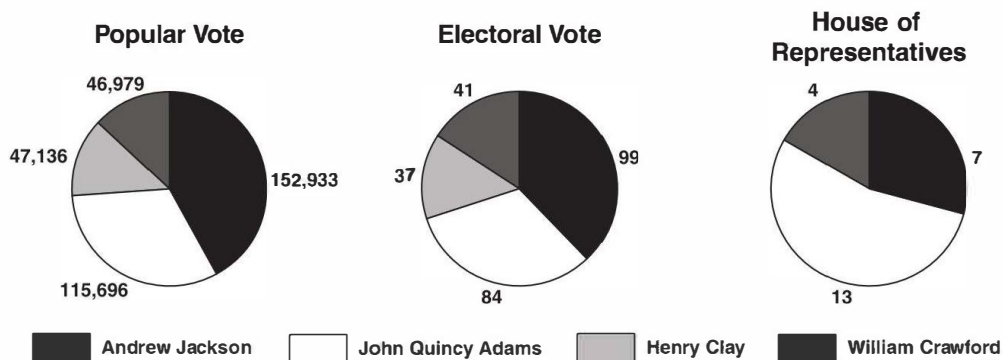
Political change in the Jacksonian era began several years before Jackson moved into the White House as president. In the controversial election in 1824, Jackson won more popular and electoral votes than any other candidate, but he ended up losing the election.

The Election of 1824

Recall the brief Era of Good Feelings that characterized U.S. politics during the two-term presidency of James Monroe. The era ended in political bad feelings in 1824, the year of a bitterly contested and divisive presidential election. By then, the old congressional caucus system for choosing presidential candidates had broken down. As a result, four candidates of the Democratic-Republican party of Jefferson campaigned for the presidency: John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, William Crawford, and Andrew Jackson.

Among voters in states that counted popular votes (six did not) Jackson won. But because the vote was split four ways, he lacked a majority in the electoral college as required by the Constitution. Therefore, the House of Representatives had to choose a president from among the top three candidates. Henry Clay used his influence in the House to provide John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts with enough votes to win the election. When President Adams appointed Clay his secretary of state, Jackson and his followers charged that the decision of the voters had been foiled by secret political maneuvers. Angry Jackson supporters accused Adams and Clay of making a “corrupt bargain.”

THE ELECTION OF 1824



Source: Jeffrey B. Morris and Richard B. Morris, editors. *Encyclopedia of American History*

President John Quincy Adams

Adams further alienated the followers of Jackson when he asked Congress for money for internal improvements, aid to manufacturing, and even a national university and an astronomical observatory. Jacksonians viewed all these measures as a waste of money and a violation of the Constitution. Most significantly, in 1828, Congress patched together a new tariff law, which generally satisfied northern manufacturers but alienated southern planters. Southerners denounced it as a “tariff of abominations.”

The Revolution of 1828

Adams sought reelection in 1828. But the Jacksonians were now ready to use the discontent of southerners and westerners and the new campaign tactics of party organization to sweep “Old Hickory” (Jackson) into office. Going beyond parades and barbecues, Jackson’s party resorted to smearing the president and accusing Adams’ wife of being born out of wedlock. Supporters of Adams retaliated in kind, accusing Jackson’s wife of adultery. The mudslinging campaign attracted a lot of interest and voter turnout soared.

Jackson won handily, carrying every state west of the Appalachians. His reputation as a war hero and man of the western frontier accounted for his victory more than the positions he took on issues of the day.

The Presidency of Andrew Jackson

Jackson was a different kind of president from any of his predecessors. A strong leader, he not only dominated politics for eight years but also became a symbol of the emerging working class and middle class (the so-called common man). Born in a frontier cabin, Jackson gained fame as an Indian fighter and as hero of the Battle of New Orleans, and came to live in a fine mansion in Tennessee as a wealthy planter and slaveowner. But he never lost the rough manners of the frontier. He chewed tobacco, fought several duels, and displayed a violent temper. Jackson was the first president since Washington to be without a college education. In a phrase, he could be described as an extraordinary ordinary man. This self-made man and living legend drew support from every social group and every section of the country.

Presidential Power Jackson presented himself as the representative of all the people and the protector of the common man against abuses of power by the rich and the privileged. He was a frugal Jeffersonian, who opposed increasing federal spending and the national debt. Jackson interpreted the powers of Congress narrowly and therefore vetoed more bills—12—than all six preceding presidents combined. For example, he vetoed the use of federal money to construct the Maysville Road, because it was wholly within one state, Kentucky, the home state of Jackson's rival, Henry Clay.

Jackson's closest advisers were a group known as his "kitchen cabinet," who did not belong to his official cabinet. Because of them, the appointed cabinet had less influence on policy than under earlier presidents.

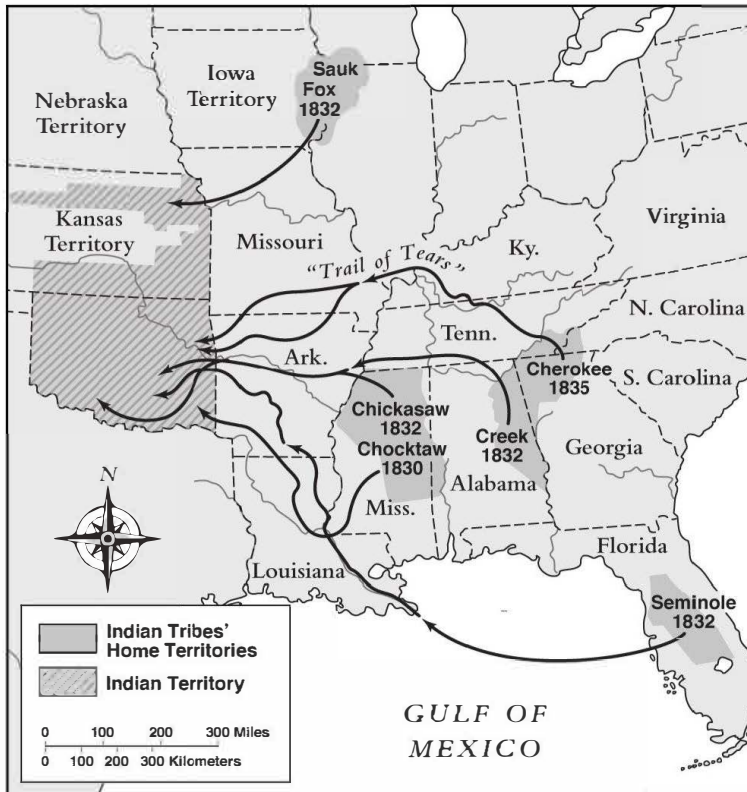
Peggy Eaton Affair The champion of the common man also went to the aid of the common woman, at least in the case of Peggy O'Neale Eaton. The wife of Jackson's secretary of war, she was the target of malicious gossip by other cabinet wives, much as Jackson's recently deceased wife had been in the 1828 campaign. When Jackson tried to force the cabinet wives to accept Peggy Eaton socially, most of the cabinet resigned. This controversy contributed to the resignation of Jackson's vice president, John C. Calhoun, a year later. For remaining loyal during this crisis, Martin Van Buren of New York was chosen as vice president for Jackson's second term.

Indian Removal Act (1830) Jackson's concept of democracy did not extend to American Indians. Jackson sympathized with land-hungry citizens who were impatient to take over lands held by American Indians. Jackson thought the most humane solution was to compel the American Indians to leave their traditional homelands and resettle west of the Mississippi. In 1830, he signed into law the Indian Removal Act, which forced the resettlement of many thousands of American Indians. By 1835 most eastern tribes had reluctantly complied and moved west. The Bureau of Indian Affairs was created in 1836 to assist the resettled tribes.

Most politicians supported a policy of Indian removal. Georgia and other states passed laws requiring the Cherokees to migrate to the West. When the Cherokees challenged Georgia in the courts, the Supreme Court ruled in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* (1831) that Cherokees were not a foreign nation with

the right to sue in a federal court. But in a second case, *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832), the high court ruled that the laws of Georgia had no force within Cherokee territory. In this clash between a state’s laws and the federal courts, Jackson sided with the states. The Court was powerless to enforce its decision without the President’s support.

INDIAN REMOVAL IN THE 1830s



Trail of Tears Most Cherokees repudiated the settlement of 1835, which provided land in the Indian territory. In 1838, after Jackson had left office, the U.S. Army forced 15,000 Cherokees to leave Georgia. The hardships on the “trail of tears” westward caused the deaths of 4,000 Cherokees.

Nullification Crisis Jackson favored states’ rights—but not disunion. In 1828, the South Carolina legislature declared the increased tariff of 1828, the so-called Tariff of Abominations, to be unconstitutional. In doing so, it affirmed a theory advanced by Jackson’s first vice president, John C. Calhoun. According to this *nullification theory*, each state had the right to decide whether to obey a federal law or to declare it null and void (of no effect).

In 1830, Daniel Webster of Massachusetts debated Robert Hayne of South Carolina on the nature of the federal Union under the Constitution. Webster attacked the idea that any state could defy or leave the Union. Following this famous Webster-Hayne debate, President Jackson declared his own position in a toast he presented at a political dinner. “Our federal Union,” he declared, “it must be preserved.” Calhoun responded immediately with another toast: “The Union, next to our liberties, most dear!”

In 1832, Calhoun's South Carolina increased tension by holding a special convention to nullify both the hated 1828 tariff and a new tariff of 1832. The convention passed a resolution forbidding the collection of tariffs within the state. Jackson reacted decisively. He told the secretary of war to prepare for military action. He persuaded Congress to pass a Force bill giving him authority to act against South Carolina. Jackson also issued a Proclamation to the People of South Carolina, stating that nullification and disunion were treason.

But federal troops did not march in this crisis. Jackson opened the door for compromise by suggesting that Congress lower the tariff. South Carolina postponed nullification and later formally rescinded it after Congress enacted a new tariff along the lines suggested by the president.

Jackson's strong defense of federal authority forced the militant advocates of states' rights to retreat. On another issue, however, militant southerners had Jackson's support. The president shared southerners' alarm about the growing antislavery movement in the North. He used his executive power to stop antislavery literature from being sent through the U.S. mail. Southern Jacksonians trusted that Jackson would not extend democracy to African Americans.

Bank Veto Another major issue of Jackson's presidency concerned the rechartering of the Bank of the United States. This bank and its branches, although privately owned, received federal deposits and attempted to serve a public purpose by cushioning the ups and downs of the national economy. The bank's president, Nicholas Biddle, managed it effectively. Biddle's arrogance, however, contributed to the suspicion that the bank abused its powers and served the interests of only the wealthy. Jackson shared this suspicion. He believed that the Bank of the United States was unconstitutional.

Henry Clay, Jackson's chief political opponent, favored the bank. In 1832, an election year, Clay decided to challenge Jackson on the bank issue by persuading a majority in Congress to pass a bank-recharter bill. Jackson promptly vetoed this bill, denouncing it as a private monopoly that enriched the wealthy and foreigners at the expense of the common people and the "hydra of corruption." The voters agreed with Jackson. Jackson won reelection with more than three-fourths of the electoral vote.

The Two-Party System

The one-party system that had characterized Monroe's presidency (the Era of Good Feelings) had given way to a two-party system under Jackson. Supporters of Jackson were now known as Democrats, while supporters of his leading rival, Henry Clay, were called Whigs. The Democratic party harked back to the old Republican party of Jefferson, and the Whig party resembled the defunct Federalist party of Hamilton. At the same time, the new parties reflected the changed conditions of the Jacksonian era. Democrats and Whigs alike were challenged to respond to the relentless westward expansion of the nation and the emergence of an industrial economy.

Democrats and Whigs in the Age of Jackson		
	Democrats	Whigs
Issues Supported	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local rule • Limited government • Free trade • Opportunity for white males 	American System: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A national bank • Federal funds for internal improvements • A protective tariff
Major Concerns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monopolies • National bank • High tariffs • High land prices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crime associated with immigrants
Base of Voter Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The South and West • Urban workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New England and the Mid-Atlantic states • Protestants of English heritage • Urban professionals

Jackson's Second Term

After winning reelection in 1832, Jackson moved to destroy the Bank of the United States.

Pet Banks Jackson attacked the bank by withdrawing all federal funds. Aided by Secretary of the Treasury Roger Taney, he transferred the funds to various state banks, which Jackson's critics called "pet banks."

Specie Circular As a result of both Jackson's financial policies and feverish speculation in western lands, prices for land and various goods became badly inflated. Jackson hoped to check the inflationary trend by issuing a presidential order known as the Specie Circular. It required that all future purchases of federal lands be made in specie (gold and silver) rather than in paper banknotes. Soon afterward, banknotes lost their value and land sales plummeted. Right after Jackson left office, a financial crisis—the Panic of 1837—plunged the nation's economy into a depression.

The Election of 1836

Following the two-term tradition set by his predecessors, Jackson did not seek a third term. To make sure his policies were carried out even in his retirement, Jackson persuaded the Democratic party to nominate his loyal vice president, Martin Van Buren, who was a master of practical politics.

Fearing defeat, the Whig party adopted the unusual strategy of nominating three candidates from three different regions. In doing so, the Whigs hoped to throw the election into the House of Representatives, where each state had one vote in the selection of the president. The Whig strategy failed, however, as Van Buren took 58 percent of the electoral vote.

President Van Buren and the Panic of 1837

Just as Van Buren took office, the country suffered a financial panic as one bank after another closed its doors. Jackson's opposition to the rechartering of the Bank of the United States was only one of many causes of the panic and resulting economic depression. But the Whigs were quick to blame the Democrats for their laissez-faire economics, which advocated for little federal involvement in the economy.

The "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" Campaign of 1840

In the election of 1840, the Whigs were in a strong position to defeat Van Buren and the Jacksonian Democrats. Voters were unhappy with the bad state of the economy. In addition, the Whigs were better organized than the Democrats, and had a popular war hero, William Henry "Tippecanoe" Harrison, as their presidential candidate. The Whigs took campaign hoopla to new heights. To symbolize Harrison's humble origins, they put log cabins on wheels and paraded them down the streets of cities and towns. They also passed out hard cider for voters to drink and buttons and hats to wear. Name-calling as a propaganda device also marked the 1840 campaign. The Whigs attacked "Martin Van Ruin" as an aristocrat with a taste for foreign wines.

A remarkable 78 percent of eligible voters (white males) cast their ballots. Old "Tippecanoe" and John Tyler of Virginia, a former states' rights Democrat who joined the Whigs, took 53 percent of the popular vote and most of the electoral votes in all three sections: North, South, and West. This election established the Whigs as a national party.

However, Harrison died of pneumonia less than a month after taking office, and "His Accidency," John Tyler, became the first vice-president to succeed to the presidency. President Tyler was not much of a Whig. He vetoed the Whigs' national bank bills and other legislation, and favored southern and expansionist Democrats during the balance of his term (1841–1845). The Jacksonian era was in its last stage, and came to an end with the Mexican War and the increased focus on the issue of slavery. (See Chapter 12.)

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: WERE THE JACKSONIANS DEMOCRATIC?

Historians debate whether the election of Jackson in 1828 marked a revolutionary and democratic turn in American politics. The traditional view is that Jackson's election began the era of the common man, when the masses of newly enfranchised voters drove out the entrenched ruling class and elected one of their own. The Revolution of 1828 was a victory of the democratic West against the aristocratic East. On the other hand, 19th-century Whig historians viewed Jackson as a despot whose appeal to the uneducated masses and "corrupt" spoils system threatened the republic.

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In the 1940s, the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. argued that Jacksonian democracy relied as much on the support of eastern urban workers as on western farmers. Jackson’s coalition of farmers and workers foreshadowed a similar coalition that elected another Democratic president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in the 1930s.

Contemporary historians have used quantitative analysis of voting returns to show that increased voter participation was evident in local elections years before 1828 and did not reach a peak until the election of 1840, an election that the Whig party won. Some historians argue that religion and ethnicity were more important than economic class in shaping votes. For example, Catholic immigrants objected to the imposition of the Puritan moral code (e.g., temperance) by the native Protestants.

Recent historians see Jackson’s popularity in the 1830s as a reaction of subsistence farmers and urban workers against threatening forces of economic change. A capitalist, or market, economy was taking shape in the early years of the 19th century. This market revolution divided the electorate. Some, including many Whigs, supported the changes giving a greater role for enterprising businessmen. Jackson’s veto of the bank captured popular fears about the rise of capitalism.

KEY TERMS BY THEME

<p>Migration (NAT, MIG) Indian Removal Act (1830) <i>Cherokee Nation v. Georgia</i> <i>Worcester v. Georgia</i> Cherokee trail of tears</p> <p>Economics (WXT) Bank of the United States Nicholas Biddle Roger Taney “pet banks” Specie Circular Panic of 1837 Martin Van Buren</p>	<p>Common Man (NAT, POL) common man universal white male suffrage party nominating convention “King Caucus” popular election of president</p> <p>Jacksonian Politics (POL) Anti-Masonic party Workingmen’s party popular campaigning spoils system rotation in office John Quincy Adams Henry Clay “corrupt bargain”</p>	<p>Tariff of 1828; “tariff of abominations” Revolution of 1828 Andrew Jackson role of the president Peggy Eaton affair states’ rights nullification crisis Webster-Hayne debate John C. Calhoun Proclamation to the People of South Carolina two-party system Democrats Whigs “log cabin and hard cider” campaign</p>
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