

Elections



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Presidential Elections

In the nineteenth century presidential elections helped shape the course of national politics in decisive ways. The process of electing the chief executive remained as the framers of the Constitution had specified it, with the exception of the Twelfth Amendment (1804), which was designed to correct a flaw in the operation of the electoral college. The college consisted of the electors from each state; their number was the same as the state's senators and representatives in Congress. Each elector was to vote for two candidates. To become president a candidate had to receive a majority of all the electors' votes. The candidate with the second-highest number of votes was elected vice president. In the elections of 1789 and 1792, George Washington was elected unanimously. By 1796 political parties had formed, and John Adams, a Federalist, won a narrow victory over his Democratic-Republican rival, Thomas Jefferson.

The Election of 1800

In 1800 Jefferson and his running mate, Aaron Burr, won decisively over Adams on the Federalist ticket. Because each Democratic-Republican elector cast his two votes for Jefferson and for Burr, there was a tie that put the contest into the House of Representatives. After thirty-six ballots, Jefferson was chosen. This controversy produced the Twelfth Amendment, which made the electoral college's votes for president and for vice president separate processes.

What made the 1800 presidential election so important was not this procedural tangle, bitter as it was at the time. When Thomas Jefferson took the oath of office on 4 March 1801, it demonstrated that a transfer of power from one political party to another could occur without violence or civil discontent. John Adams and his followers did not contest the result or question the legitimacy of Jefferson's election. In that sense the election of 1800 may have been the most important in the nation's history.

Three other presidential elections—1828, 1860, and

1896—produced changes in how the nation conducted its political affairs. A fourth contest, in 1876, led to the only disputed election result in American history. Together these elections demonstrate the evolution of the nation's politics during the course of the nineteenth century.

The Election of 1828

The contest between President John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson produced important changes in the way that Americans chose their national leader. Three significant developments came together in this contest to transform the conduct of presidential elections. The manner of waging campaigns was changed; a presidential candidate ran on his personality and national popularity, as well as his program; and a two-party system received a large impetus.

The transformation in campaign style occurred because of a more involved and active white male electorate. No longer did state legislatures (except in Delaware and South Carolina) choose presidential electors. The voters now made the selection, and they expected the candidates to court their support. The Jacksonian forces responded to this new situation with newspapers that proclaimed the message of their candidate across the country in a focused and disciplined manner. The rudiments of a national campaign organization also appeared with a network of committees that sent information to voters. State conventions endorsed Jackson, and rallies, parades, and marches provided political entertainment.

The personal appeal of Andrew Jackson was another central element in the 1828 contest. Jackson's heroic military record, particularly his success at the Battle of New Orleans in 1815, made him nationally known, and his appearance at the celebration of the thirteenth anniversary of the battle in January 1828 got his campaign off to a tumultuous start. Jackson's nickname, "Old Hickory," led to production of an abundance of trees, canes, brooms, and poles that conveyed the message of his resolute toughness. Its emphasis on personality and popularity made the 1828 election one of the dirtiest in American history, as each party threw mud

at the other's candidates. Jackson's opponents attacked his wife and questioned whether Andrew and Rachel Jackson were legally married. In the process the presidential election was being turned into a form of mass entertainment.

To finance and manage a national appeal, the political party became an indispensable organizational weapon. Although the 1828 election did not see the well-defined Democratic and Whig alignments that characterized the 1830s and 1840s, the outlines of the party system were evident by the time Jackson swept to a decisive victory over John Quincy Adams. From that point on, presidential elections placed greater emphasis on selling the candidates, merchandising their personalities, and entertaining the voters as they considered the choices for leadership of the country.

The Election of 1860

The importance of Abraham Lincoln's victory in the presidential election of 1860 lies in the brutal and protracted Civil War that followed. The contest revealed the extent to which the normal processes of national politics had broken down over the slavery question and the sectional bitterness that it spawned. Where the other decisive presidential elections of the nineteenth century showed the ability of the political system to manage change peacefully, the 1860 contest demonstrated the limits of democracy in the face of irreconcilable differences among the American people.

The election had four major parties and their candidates in the field: the Constitutional Union Party's John Bell of Tennessee; the Northern Democratic Party's Stephen A. Douglas; the Southern Democrats' John C. Breckinridge; and the Republican Party's Abraham Lincoln. It was clear that the election would be decided in the North, since neither Lincoln nor Douglas could expect any electoral votes from the South. Lincoln stayed home, avoided campaigning, and made no speeches. Douglas campaigned actively throughout the North. The Republicans poured their energies into organization, including such innovations as marching societies known as the Wide-Awakes. The martial spirit that infused the election would dominate campaign styles for a generation.

Lincoln won a decisive victory with 180 electoral votes, but his popular vote total of less than 40 percent meant that he was a minority president. In the North, however, he was the clear choice of the voters; even if the votes of his rivals had been added together, he still would have attained his electoral college triumph.

The important aspect of the 1860 election was that the losers in the South did not accept the legitimacy of Lincoln's

victory. They believed that the inauguration of a Republican president foreshadowed the end of slavery and the culture of the South as they had known it. Accordingly, in the wake of Lincoln's triumph, southern states began to adopt ordinances of secession from the Union. By Lincoln's inauguration on 4 March 1861, sectional tensions had reached such a height that hostilities had become inevitable. By April 1861 the North and South were at war. The election of 1860 stands as a testament to the inability of a democratic society to accommodate fundamental disagreements about the nature of society, the rights of all human beings within the nation, and the proper role of government in the settlement of disputes between major sections of the country.

The Election of 1876 and the Compromise of 1877

After the bloody Civil War ended, the nation embarked on the painful process of sectional reconciliation and social change in the South, known as Reconstruction. For a dozen years after 1865, the North endeavored to establish the rights of the freed slaves to take part in the political life of the South on a basis approaching equality with whites. That campaign encountered a number of obstacles: southern resistance, including the violence of the Ku Klux Klan; growing northern indifference to the fate of blacks; and competing issues of industrialism and westward expansion. By the mid-1870s the Democratic Party had regained control of the House of Representatives, and the Republicans were clearly tired of their commitment to a multiracial South.

In the 1876 presidential election these crosscurrents produced a disputed result and a sectional bargain to end Reconstruction. On Election Night the Democratic candidate, Samuel J. Tilden, was within one electoral vote of the 185 needed to win. His Republican rival, Rutherford B. Hayes, had 165 electoral votes, and three states were undecided. In the weeks that followed, Congress found itself confronted with contested returns from those states—Florida, Louisiana, and South Carolina—with no clear way to resolve the impasse. A stalemate ensued as Congress tried to decide how to deal with the controversy and produce an acceptable tally of the electoral votes. The prospect of violence and unrest loomed.

Elaborate negotiations led to the creation of an electoral commission composed of three Republican and two Democratic senators, two Republican and three Democratic representatives, and two Republican and two Democratic Supreme Court justices (who chose a fifth justice). The commission voted 8-7 along party lines to give all the disputed electoral votes to Hayes. But what became known as the

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Compromise of 1877 had broader dimensions. Behind the scenes northern and southern economic interests brokered a deal. In return for an implicit Republican agreement not to extend Reconstruction and to let the white South determine its own destiny, southern Democrats accepted the election of Hayes. The losers in the compromise were black Americans, who saw their political fate returned to the hands of their former masters. The 1877 result produced a peaceful inauguration and electoral continuity at the price of avoiding the racial issue at the heart of Reconstruction.

The Election of 1896

The last notable nineteenth-century presidential election came in 1896, when William Jennings Bryan, the candidate of the Democratic and Populist parties, ran against William McKinley, the Republican nominee. The election occurred during one of the most turbulent decades in the nation's history. The economic downturn known as the panic of 1893 resulted in massive unemployment and a high degree of social discord. The administration of Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, became the focus for protests against the severity of the depression. The president, convinced of the rightness of his views on the gold standard and limited government, gave very little comfort to Americans who felt the weight of the hard times. In the congressional elections of 1894, discontent with the Democrats produced sweeping Republican gains in the House of Representatives. The Democrats and the agrarian third party, the Populists, were less successful with the unhappy voters. The election of 1894 realigned the American electorate and began a sustained period of Republican dominance.

All three major parties looked to 1896 as the election that would decide the nation's political and economic future. The Republicans selected their most popular figure, William McKinley. A Civil War hero and a midwesterner identified with the protective tariff, he had the greatest appeal to the mainstream of his party. He expected to run on the issues of Democratic failures and the tariff. To the surprise of the Republicans, the Democrats repudiated Cleveland and nominated William Jennings Bryan, who ran on the inflationary platform of free silver. The Populists also selected Bryan to lead their farmer-based campaign.

Bryan aroused an initial surge of enthusiasm, helped by his decision to campaign personally across the country—his oratorical skills attracted enthusiastic audiences. McKinley and the Republicans had raised a large campaign fund from corporations and expended it on merchandising their appeal through newspapers and pamphlets. McKinley also made an effective “front-porch campaign” from his home

in Canton, Ohio. In its use of advertising techniques, the Republican campaign looked forward to the practices of the twentieth century. Bryan's whistle-stop campaign became standard for future candidates, by train and later by airplane.

McKinley won a decisive electoral and popular vote victory in the election, and thus confirmed the Republicans as the majority party. The patterns that the election established—a Republican North and Midwest against a Democratic South—endured for decades. By the end of the nineteenth century, presidential elections had largely assumed the form that they would retain for the next century, in terms of how they were waged and the issues at stake.

Despite the convulsions of the 1860 and 1876 elections and their aftermaths, presidential elections in the nineteenth century developed into an accepted national means of selecting a leader for the country through a process that commanded broad popular support. To that important result the presidential elections of 1800, 1828, and 1896 made significant contributions in terms of political stability and the growth of national power.

Further Readings

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