

The Constitution and the New Republic (1787–1800) **(Part two)**

Political Parties

Washington's election by unanimous vote of the Electoral College in 1789 underscored the popular belief that political parties were not needed. The Constitution itself did not mention political parties, and the Framers assumed none would arise. They were soon proven wrong. The debates between Federalists and Anti-Federalists in 1787 and 1788 were the first indication that a two-party system would emerge as a core feature of American politics.

Origins

In colonial times, groups of legislators commonly formed temporary factions and voted together either for or against a specific policy. When an issue was settled, the factions would dissolve. The dispute between Federalists and Anti-Federalists over the ratification of the Constitution closely resembled the factional disputes of an earlier period. What was unusual about this conflict was that it was organized—at least by the Federalists—across state lines and in that sense prefigured the national parties that emerged soon afterward.

In the 1790s, sometimes called the Federalist era because it was dominated largely by Federalist policies, political parties began to form around two leading figures, Hamilton and Jefferson. The Federalist Party supported Hamilton and his financial program. An opposition party known as the Democratic - Republican Party supported Jefferson and tried to elect candidates in different states who opposed Hamilton's program. The French Revolution further solidified the formation of national political parties. Americans divided sharply over whether to support France. A large number of them followed Jefferson's lead in openly challenging President Washington's neutrality policy.

Differences between the Parties

The Federalists were strongest in the northeastern states and advocated the growth of federal power. The Democratic-Republicans were strongest in the southern states and on the western frontier and argued for states' rights. By 1796, the two major political parties were already taking shape and becoming better organized. In that year, President Washington announced that he intended to retire to private life at the end of his second term.

The Importance of Washington's Farewell Address

Assisted by Alexander Hamilton, the retiring president wrote a farewell address for publication in the newspapers in late 1796. In this message, which had enormous influence

because of Washington's prestige, the president spoke about policies and practices that he considered unwise. He warned Americans:

- not to get involved in European affairs
- not to make "permanent alliances" in foreign affairs
- not to form political parties
- not to fall into sectionalism

For the next century, future presidents would heed as gospel Washington's warning against "permanent alliances." However, in the case of political parties, Washington was already behind the times, since political parties were well on their way to becoming a vital part of the American political system. One long-range consequence of Washington's decision to leave office after two terms was that later presidents followed his example. Presidents elected to two terms (including Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and Jackson) would voluntarily retire even though the Constitution placed no limit on a president's tenure in office. The two-term tradition continued unbroken until 1940 when Franklin Roosevelt won election to a third term. Then, the 22nd Amendment, ratified in 1951, made the two-term limit a part of the Constitution.

John Adams' Presidency

Even as Washington was writing his Farewell Address, political parties were working to gain majorities in the two houses of Congress and to line up enough electors from the various states to elect the next president. The vice president, John Adams, was the Federalists' candidate, while former secretary of state Thomas Jefferson was the choice of the Democratic-Republicans. Adams won by three electoral votes. Jefferson became vice-president, since the original Constitution gave that office to the candidate receiving the second highest number of electoral votes.

The XYZ Affair

Troubles abroad related to the French Revolution presented Adams with the first major challenge of his presidency. Americans were angered by reports that U.S. merchant ships were being seized by French warships and privateers. Seeking a peaceful settlement, Adams sent a delegation to Paris to negotiate with the French government. Certain French ministers, known only as X, Y, and Z because their names were never revealed, requested bribes as the basis for entering into negotiations. The American delegates indignantly refused. Newspaper reports of the demands made by X, Y, and Z infuriated many Americans, who now clamored for war against France. "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute" became the slogan

of the hour. One faction of the Federalist party, led by Alexander Hamilton, hoped that by going to war the United States could gain French and Spanish lands in North America. President Adams, on the other hand, resisted the popular sentiment for war. Recognizing that the U.S. Army and Navy were not yet strong enough to fight a major power, the president avoided war and sent new ministers to Paris.

The Alien and Sedition Acts

Anger against France strengthened the Federalists in the congressional elections of 1798 enough to win a majority in both houses. The Federalists took advantage of their victory by enacting laws to restrict their political opponents, the Democratic-Republicans. For example, since most immigrants voted Democratic-Republican, the Federalists passed the Naturalization Act, which increased from 5 to 14 the years required for immigrants to qualify for U.S. citizenship. They also passed the Alien Acts, which authorized the president to deport aliens considered dangerous and to detain enemy aliens in time of war. Most seriously, they passed the Sedition Act, which made it illegal for newspaper editors to criticize either the president or Congress and imposed fines or imprisonment for editors who violated the law.

The Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions

Democratic-Republicans argued that the Alien and Sedition Acts violated rights guaranteed by the 1st Amendment of the Constitution. In 1799, however, the Supreme Court had not yet established the principle of judicial review. Democratic-Republican leaders challenged the legislation of the Federalist Congress by enacting nullifying laws of their own in the state legislatures. The Kentucky legislature adopted a resolution that had been written by Thomas Jefferson, and the Virginia legislature adopted a resolution introduced by James Madison. Both resolutions declared that the states had entered into a "compact" in forming the national government, and, therefore, if any act of the federal government broke the compact, a state could nullify the federal law. Although only Kentucky and Virginia adopted nullifying resolutions in 1799, they set forth an argument and rationale that would be widely used in the nullification controversy of the 1830s.

The immediate crisis over the Alien and Sedition Acts faded when the Federalists lost their majority in Congress after the election of 1800, and the new Democratic-Republican majority allowed the acts to expire or repealed them. In addition, the Supreme Court under John Marshall asserted its power in deciding whether a certain federal law was constitutional.

The Election of 1800

During Adams' presidency, the Federalists rapidly lost popularity. People disliked the Alien and Sedition Acts and complained about the new taxes imposed by the Federalists to pay the costs of preparing for a war against France. Though Adams avoided war, he had persuaded Congress that building up the U.S. Navy was necessary for the nation's defense.

Election Results

The election of 1800 swept the Federalists from power in both the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government. A majority of the presidential electors cast their ballots for two Democratic-Republicans: Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. Because both these candidates received the same number of electoral ballots, it was to hold a special election in the House of Representatives to break the tie. In December 1800 the Federalists still controlled the House. They debated and voted for days before they finally gave a majority to Jefferson. (Alexander Hamilton had urged his followers to vote for Jefferson, whom he considered less dangerous and of higher character than Burr.) Democratic-Republican lawmakers elected in 1800 took control of both the House and the Senate when a new Congress met in March 1801.

A Peaceful Revolution

The passing of power in 1801 from one political party to another was accomplished without violence. This was a rare event for the times and a major indication that the U.S. constitutional system would endure the various strains that were placed upon it. The Federalists quietly accepted their defeat in the election of 1800 and peacefully relinquished control of the federal government to Jefferson's party, the Democratic-Republicans. The change from Federalist to Democratic-Republican control is known as the Revolution of 1800.