

The Elections of 1800 and 2020

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I thank Professor Mimi Chapman for her leadership of the Faculty Council and for her great work in representing the views and concerns of our diverse faculty. I also thank her for asking me to share a few reflections on how our current public culture might be placed in historical perspective.

History reminds us that others have faced huge challenges and divisive conflicts--and continued to make social and political progress. Some students ask if people in the United States have ever been so divided and angry as they are today; and history reminds us that Americans have often been intensely divided—as people are divided in every country.

We could talk about the election of 1968, for example, and the divisive events of that era; and, of course, the election of 1860 led to a four-year Civil War. But I want to note briefly that our situation today seems closest to the polarized election of 1800: the Federalist John Adams against the Democratic Republican Thomas Jefferson.

There were 16 states in 1800 and each elector in the Electoral College could cast two votes for president, so the 138 voters in the Electoral College cast 276 votes. All of the Democratic Republican Electors voted for their candidates Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, so they ended up tied at 73 votes. Adams came in third with 65 electoral votes; and his vice-presidential candidate, Charles Coatsworth Pinckney received 64 votes. If one of Jefferson's electors had not voted for Burr, Jefferson would have won.

But the tie vote in the Electoral College meant that the House of Representatives had to settle the election between the two top candidates. The vote in the House did not begin until mid-February 1801, so we can only imagine what it would be like for us to live with this kind of electoral uncertainty until next February. Each state delegation had one vote, and there were 16 states; so victory in the House would require 9 states. The Republicans had the majority in 8 delegations, the Federalists had the majority in 6; and two were tied.

The votes in the House of Representatives in mid-February 1801 thus continued over 35 ballots, and every vote came out the same way: eight for Jefferson, six for Burr (supported by the Federalists) and two did not go to either. Finally, on the 36th ballot, the Federalists in the Maryland and Vermont delegations stopped voting, so those two states swung over to Jefferson; Delaware and SC did not vote on this ballot. So Jefferson was finally elected in the House of Representatives by a vote of 10 to 4.

The bitterness on all sides was intense, and yet one of the most notable of all US presidents, Thomas Jefferson, emerged as the victor, and the Federalist party never really

recovered. After John Adams there would never be another Federalist president. The hostility between the Federalists and Republicans in 1800 grew out of the increasing polarization of the previous decade; and many of the issues that are affecting us in 2020 were already present in 1800. The polarization was partly regional (north vs. south).

But the polarization was much more than regional, and the main aspects of the polarization suggest how our current conflicts resemble past conflicts. The key points of conflict included:

1. Different Views on Europe and especially the French Revolution.
2. Different Views on the danger of Authoritarian Threats to the Republic.
3. Different Views on Religion and the role of Churches in the US.
4. Different Views on Conspiracies that Threatened the Republic.
5. Different Views on Immigration and the Rights to Citizenship.
6. Different Views on the Press and Newspapers
(Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798)
7. Different Views on African Americans, Slavery, and Abolitionism
(Gabriel's Rebellion in Virginia in 1800)
8. Different Views on how the Electoral College Should Work
9. Different Views on the role of the Judiciary and Judges
(Appointment and approval of new Supreme Court Justice John Marshall in February; many other judges were appointed in February to Circuit courts.)

What is so striking about 1800 is that all of these issues are shaping the polarization of our own time, though of course with reference to different events and conflicts. Like today, each side believed in 1800 that a victory by the other side could well doom the values of the American Republic.

So the election finally ended with Jefferson's victory and Adams' packing of the judiciary; but Jefferson went forward with his inauguration on March 4, 1801. Adams and his main allies all left Washington on that morning and did not attend the ceremony.

Jefferson gave a remarkably conciliatory speech, noting that "We are all Republicans, We are all Federalists." He did not call for his opponents to be arrested or locked up:

"This [election] being now decided by the voice of the people....let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty, and even life itself, are but dreary things.... We are all Republicans: We are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union, or to challenge its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free." [Jefferson's Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801]

The election of 1800 is often celebrated as the most momentous of all early elections because it established the principle that the defeated candidate would accept a peaceful transfer of power. But the Election of 1800 also showed how the systemic racism of the Constitution benefitted the South and gave southerners greater influence over the American political system through the Electoral College. If enslaved people had not counted for purposes of political representation—the notorious 3/5 Clause in the Constitution—Adams would have won the election in 1800 by two electoral votes.

So the election of 1800 was ultimately a step forward in the history of American democracy, but it was also a glaring example of how polarization could nearly destroy the political system. It also was an example of how systemic racism has influenced and shaped American history from the beginning. Adams lost the election because of the Electoral College system, but enslaved people lost much more—as the execution of enslaved rebels in 1800 showed all too clearly.

What does this history tell us? Americans have long been deeply divided and the struggle for power never ends. But I also think we need to believe that the long arc of history bends toward progress and greater social justice. And the events of 2020 will be studied far into the future at great universities such as UNC—showing again why we need universities as surely as we need democratic institutions.