

Did the Election of 1828 Represent a Democratic Revolt of the People?

YES: Robert V. Remini, from "Election of 1828," in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed.. *The Coming to Power: Critical Presidential Elections in American History* (McGraw-Hill, 1972)

NO: Richard P. McCormick, from "New Perspectives on Jacksonian Politics/' *The American Historical Review* (January 1960)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Professor of history Robert V Remini argues that the 1828 presidential election symbolized die people's arrival at political responsibility and began a genuine, nationally organized, two-party system that came of age in the 1830s.

NO: Professor of history Richard P. McCormick maintains that voting statistics demonstrate that a genuine political revolution did not take place until the presidential election of 1840, when fairly well balanced political parties had been organized in virtually every state.

According to conventional wisdom, Andrew Jackson's election to the presidency in 1828 began the era of the common man, in which the mass of voters, no longer restrained from voting by property requirements, rose up and threw the elite leaders out of our nation's capital. While recent historians are not quite sure what constituted Jacksonian democracy or who supported it, and they question whether or not there ever existed such an era of egalitarianism, American history textbooks still include the obligatory chapter on the age of Jackson.

There are several reasons why this old-fashioned view of the period continues to prevail. In part it is because it is still easier to generalize about political events, even in spite of the new scholarly interest in social history. Consequently, many texts continue to devote the major portion of their pages to detailed examinations of the successes and failures of various presidential administrations. Whether or not Jackson was more significant than other presidents is difficult to assess because "Old Hickory's" forceful personality compounded with his use of strong executive authority, engendered constant controversy during his eight years in office.

Another reason the traditional concept of Jacksonian democracy has not been abandoned is because critics of the progressive interpretation have not been able to come up with an acceptable alternative view. Culminating with Arthur M. Schlesinger,

Jr.'s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Age of Jackson* (Little, Brown, 1945), the progressive historians viewed Jackson's election in 1828 as the triumph of the common man in politics. Oversimplified as this interpretation may be, there is little doubt that a major change was taking place in the political system during these years. The deaths of both Thomas Jefferson and John Adams on July 4, 1826, the 50th anniversary of the U.S. Declaration of Independence from England, signified the end of the revolutionary generation's control over American politics. The first six presidents had been leaders or descendants of leaders in the revolutionary movement. At the Constitutional Convention in 1787, most of the time was spent discussing the powers of the presidency. Because of their experiences with the British king, the Founding Fathers were fearful of strong executive authority. Therefore, the presidency was entrusted only to those individuals whose loyalty remained unquestioned. Jackson was the first president of the United States who did not come from either Virginia or Massachusetts. Although Jackson was only a teenager at the time of the American Revolution, his career was similar to those of the early Founding Fathers. Like Washington and Jefferson, Jackson became a living legend before he was 50 years old. His exploits as an Indian fighter and the military hero of the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812 were more important than his western background in making him presidential material.

During the past two decades, a number of historians have studied the effects of presidential elections on the development and maintenance of the two-party system. Borrowing concepts and analytical techniques from political scientists and sociologists, the "new political" historians have demonstrated the effectiveness of the parties in selecting candidates, running campaigns, developing legislation, and legitimizing conflicts within the democratic system. By 1815, the first-party system of competition between the Federalists and the Republican-Democrats had broken down, in part because the Federalists had refused to become a legitimate opposition party. A second-party system developed during the Jackson era between Old Hickory's Democratic party and his Whig opponents. It lasted until the 1850s, when the slavery issue led to the formation of a new system of party competition between Republicans and Democrats.

The following selections disagree on the significance of the 1828 presidential race as a critical election in the development of the second-party system. Robert V. Remini argues that the 1828 presidential election symbolized the people's arrival at full political responsibility and began a genuine, nationally organized, two-party system that matured in the 1830s. Richard P. McCormick revises the traditional interpretation. His analysis of the voting statistics demonstrates that a genuine political revolution did not take place until the presidential election of 1840, when fairly well balanced parties had been organized in virtually every state.