

The Causes and Effects of the Election of 1800

Option A

Lexile: 1090
Word Count: 806

Adapted from: <https://billofrightsintstitute.org/activities/handout-a-the-election-of-1800>

Vocabulary

- ▶ demagogue ▶ smooth-talking ▶ deadlock ▶ tyrannical ▶ week-long
- ▶ abstain ▶ elector ▶ runner-up ▶ divisive ▶ ratify

Cause and Effect in the Creation and Evolution of the Presidency

When drafting the Constitution, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention struggled to define the office of the presidency. Because they wanted to create a government that was powerful enough to function but not tyrannical, they paid special attention to how the president would be elected. Their goal was to prevent either too much power from concentrating in one person or the government being too weak to govern effectively.

Some delegates feared that tyranny could result from a president who gained too much power. As a result, they argued that the president should not be directly elected by the people. They believed that the general population might be misled by a demagogue—a smooth-talking politician who could manipulate voters. Therefore, they favored a process where a small group of experienced politicians, such as members of Congress, would choose the president.

In contrast, other delegates feared tyranny from the legislature itself. Because they saw Congress as a potential threat to liberty, they believed the president should act as a check on legislative power. As a result, they opposed giving Congress the power to elect the president. This disagreement led to the search for a compromise.

The Cause of the Electoral College

To resolve this issue, the delegates created the Electoral College. This compromise was meant to balance the concerns on both sides. Instead of a direct popular vote or selection by Congress, the president would be chosen by a group of electors. These electors, selected by the people of each state, were expected to use their knowledge, experience, and judgment to vote for the best candidate. The Founders believed this system would reduce the risk of electing someone who merely appealed to popular passions and would instead help ensure that qualified leaders were chosen.

The Effect of Political Parties on the Electoral Process

However, once political parties emerged, the Electoral College system began to show its flaws. The original design had each elector cast two votes for president, with the runner-up becoming vice president. This led to a serious problem in the election of



Trumbull, John. Thomas Jefferson. 1788. Oil on mahogany. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Portrait of Thomas Jefferson, painted by John Trumbull in 1788, depicting Jefferson in the years following the American Revolution before his Presidency.

on the 36th vote, a few Federalists abstained, breaking the tie and allowing Jefferson to become president and Burr vice president.

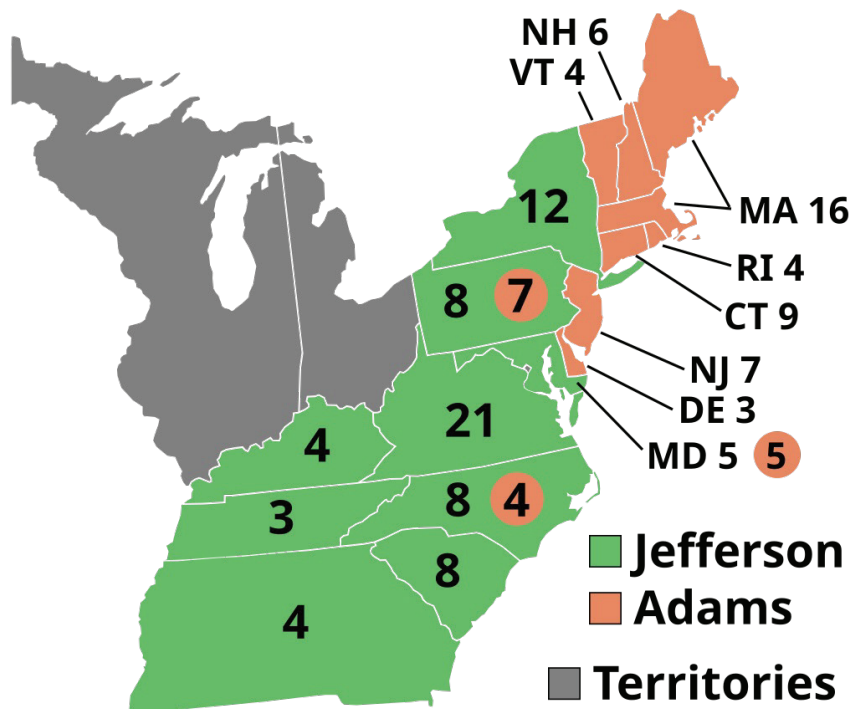
This prolonged crisis revealed the danger of the existing system. As a direct consequence of the election of 1800, Congress proposed—and the states ratified—the Twelfth Amendment. This amendment required electors to cast one vote for president and a separate vote for vice president, correcting the flaws that had caused the tie and confusion.

1796: John Adams, a Federalist, became president, while Thomas Jefferson, a Republican, became vice president. Because they belonged to rival parties, this outcome created tension and confusion within the executive branch.

As a result of this issue, by the election of 1800, political parties had started nominating a “ticket”—a pair of candidates for president and vice president. But this new practice caused a different problem: electors were expected to vote for both candidates on their party’s ticket, which led to a tie between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr, both from the Republican Party. The constitutional process had not anticipated the rise of organized political parties, and the effect was a deadlock in the Electoral College.

The Deadlock of 1800 and Its Consequences

Because the Electoral College produced no clear winner, the Constitution required the House of Representatives to decide the election. The Federalists in the House, many of whom disliked Jefferson, tried to prevent him from winning. The result was a week-long deadlock, during which the House voted 35 times without a decision. Finally,



AndyHogan14. 1800 Electoral College. SVG image. Public domain.

Map of the 1800 Electoral College results, showing the distribution of electoral votes among the states in the contentious presidential election between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

The Peaceful Transfer of Power

Even after such a bitter and divisive election, Jefferson made an effort to bring the country back together. In his Inaugural Address, he reminded Americans that their differences of opinion did not mean they lacked shared principles. He declared, “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.” His message helped calm tensions and reinforced unity.

But this moment also demonstrated a larger truth: repeated contested elections could weaken public faith in the Constitution. To prevent further electoral chaos, the Twelfth Amendment helped align the constitutional process with the reality of party politics. Over time, political parties became the standard method for nominating presidential candidates and organizing elections.

Conclusion: Cause and Effect in American Democracy

Throughout this history, a pattern of cause and effect is clear. Fear of tyranny led to the creation of the Electoral College. The rise of political parties caused confusion and deadlock in the electoral process. These problems, in turn, led to constitutional reform through the Twelfth Amendment. Despite political divisions, Americans showed a strong commitment to the Constitution and peaceful transfers of power. That devotion remains one of the key reasons the U.S. has maintained a stable democracy for over two centuries.

The Causes and Effects of the Election of 1800

Option B

Lexile: 950
Word Count: 317

Adapted from: <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/activities/handout-a-the-election-of-1800>

Vocabulary

- | | | | | |
|-------------|------------|--------------|------------|--------------|
| ▶ demagogue | ▶ partisan | ▶ federalist | ▶ deadlock | ▶ tyrannical |
| ▶ abstain | ▶ elector | ▶ runner-up | ▶ mislead | ▶ tyranny |

Drafting the Constitution

While drafting the Constitution, the delegates struggled to define the presidency. They aimed to create a powerful government without risking tyranny, so they focused carefully on how the president would be elected.



Trumbull, John. Thomas Jefferson. 1788. Oil on mahogany. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Portrait of Thomas Jefferson, painted by John Trumbull in 1788, depicting Jefferson in the years following the American Revolution before his Presidency.

Some feared a powerful president could become tyrannical and wanted Congress, not the people, to choose the president. They worried voters might be misled by a demagogue. Others feared tyranny from the legislature and wanted the president to serve as a check on legislative power—so they opposed letting Congress elect the president.

The Electoral College

As a compromise, delegates created the Electoral College. This body of electors, chosen by the people of each state, would select the president. The Founders believed this system would lead to the election of capable leaders rather than candidates appealing only to partisan interests.

Political Parties and the Electoral Process

Two problems soon emerged. First, electors cast two votes for president, and the runner-up became vice president. In 1796, this resulted in President John Adams (Federalist) and Vice President Thomas Jefferson (Republican) from opposing parties. For the 1800 election, both parties

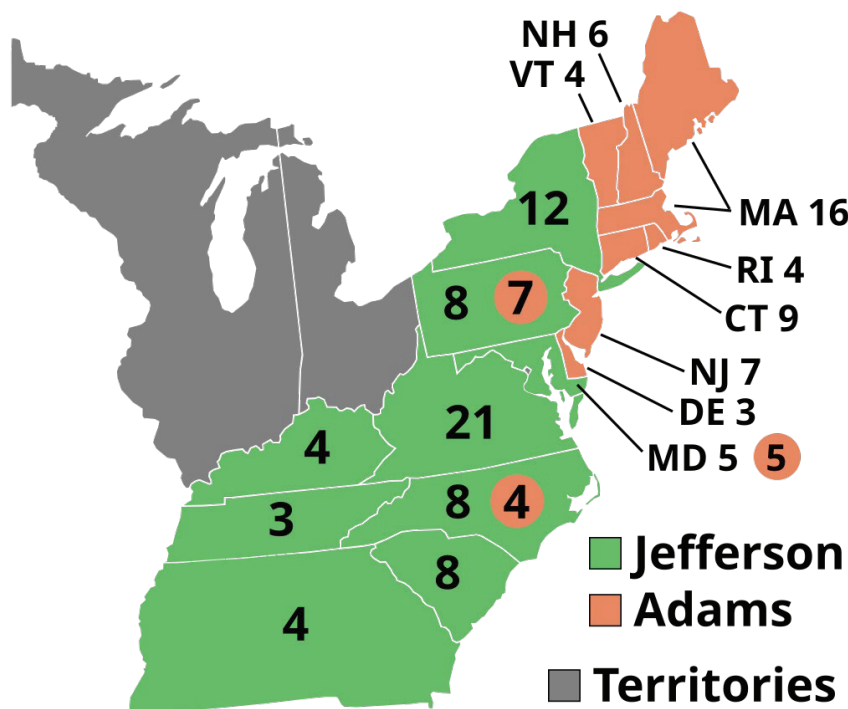
ran tickets for president and vice president. Electors, expected to act independently, were now expected to vote along party lines. This led to a tie between Jefferson and his running mate, Aaron Burr.

The Deadlock of 1800

The tie went to the House of Representatives, where each state cast one vote. The House was a tie for 35 straight votes. On the 36th vote, some Federalists abstained from voting, allowing Jefferson to win. Burr became vice president, as intended by the Republican Party.

Keeping the Peace

Afterward, Jefferson called for unity in his Inaugural Address, saying, “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.” To prevent future deadlocks, the Twelfth Amendment (1804) required electors to vote separately for president and vice president. Since then, political parties have played a key role in organizing presidential elections.



AndyHogan14. 1800 Electoral College. SVG image. Public domain.

Map of the 1800 Electoral College results, showing the distribution of electoral votes among the states in the contentious presidential election between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

