

What changed, and what did not change, with the election of Thomas Jefferson to the presidency in 1800? Can his election be described as a "revolution"?

The election of 1800 could be considered our Nation's first constitutional crisis, testing the Constitution's election process. The voting system for the president, the electoral college, did not differentiate between the president and the vice president. Therefore, the candidate receiving the most votes was named the president and the runner up would be vice president. The crisis situation arising within the contest of 1800 was when the leading candidates received a 'tie.' Pursuant to Article II, Sec. I, Cl III., the contest would be decided by the House of Representatives from that point. Given the political situation among the two distinct parties and the nature of early American politics, this set the stage for a crisis that would affect all parties for years to come. The Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804, would correct, or modify this constitutional defect.¹

Despite this election being identified as a crisis, it carries with it the distinction of the "first transfer of power from one party to the other." This distinction demonstrates that the constitution works as it was written and the 'fears' associated with the crisis were unfounded. With the contest decided in favor of Jefferson as president and Burr as vice president, the new national identity would be justified to the world.²

The election revealed many problems that plagued early American politics. Communication was hindered by "poor roads, unreliable mail delivery, and limited channels of communication."³ The use of newspapers would provide a reasonable solution to this problem. The circulation of a shared publication provided a much needed tool to serve the purpose of national unity.⁴ The election itself "tested loyalties, forged new alliances, and destroyed old ones."⁵ In a sense the national elections were a new stage that candidates must choose between their party loyalty and the loyalty among friends. These shifting alliances made the new landscape difficult to predict and even more difficult to navigate.⁶ Within this shifting landscape of alliances, honor became a distinct quality that politicians would have to rely upon more than loyalty to a party or group of colleagues. Thus, the principles of the past, aristocratic in origin, allowed these groups of men to navigate uncharted territory that would inevitably lead to the crisis during the election process. This crisis "forced both sides to acknowledge their mutual commitment" to the Union, while at the same time, revealing the very dangerous divisions within.⁷

The many problems early American political contests faced outlined the issues to be resolved by later political parties that would naturally develop to change the political landscape. What was a

1Joanne B. Freeman. *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001. 199.

2Freeman. *Affairs of Honor*. 203.

3Freeman. *Affairs of Honor*. 218.

4Freeman. *Affairs of Honor*. 234-35.

5Freeman. *Affairs of Honor*. 226.

6Freeman. *Affairs of Honor*. 227.

7Freeman. *Affairs of Honor*. 242-44.

changing landscape of “personal contests of reputations” evolved into a contest characterized by the “anonymity of party warfare.” This allowed for the shift from local and regional politics to national politics. Also, represented a fundamental change from prior to the election of 1800 afterwards.⁸

In Jefferson’s words, the advent of a “partisan system of mass political communication” was of such a value that it represented a “revolution on the public mind” and gives this instrument the credit to saving the Constitution and the union. In Jefferson’s thoughts, the election of 1800 was a revolution that saved our republic. And the election of 1800 was their the last opportunity for them to perform such an act of salvation.⁹

Until the election of 1800 come to pass, it was unknown if there could a peaceful transfer of power. With the realization that a national unity could be achieved through the advent of the newspaper industry, the evolution of American politics was able to achieve the shift from personal reputations to party warfare. And the passage of the twelfth amendment that corrected the voting system to be inline with the evolving political party system allowed for a stabilization of early American politics in the national arena. Along with Jefferson’s words that this election saved the republic, I feel that it is appropriate to call this election a revolution as it sought to avert disaster and preserve the constitution save the minor alteration of the ratification of the twelfth amendment.

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⁸Freeman. *Affairs of Honor*. 261.

⁹Mel Laracey. “The Presidential Newspaper as an Engine of Early American Political Development: The Case of Thomas Jefferson and the Election of 1800.” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 11, no. 1 (2008). 12-13.