Lesson 14

Andrew Jackson and the Growth of American Democracy

How well did President Andrew Jackson promote democracy?

Introduction

Perhaps the dirtiest campaign in U.S. history was the presidential election of 1828. The two candidates were John Quincy Adams, running for reelection, and Andrew Jackson, the popular hero of the War of 1812's Battle of New Orleans.

During the campaign, both sides hurled accusations at each other, a practice called mudslinging. Sometimes, these accusations had little to do with an opponent's political beliefs, focusing instead on often exaggerated or untrue personal attacks. Each side hoped that these assaults would undermine their opponent in the eyes of the public.

One example of mudslinging between candidates occurred when Jackson's supporters called Adams a "Sabbath-breaker" for traveling on Sunday. He was also accused of using public money to purchase "gambling furniture" for the White House. In reality, however, Adams had used his own money to buy a chess set and a billiard table.

The president's supporters lashed back by calling Jackson a crude and ignorant man who was unfit to be president. They attacked Jackson's parents, rural upbringing, and even brought up old scandals about his relationship with his wife. Jackson's troops called him "Old Hickory" because he was as tough as "the hardest wood in all creation," but when he read such lies, he broke down and cried.

Despite the trying campaign, when the votes were counted, Jackson was the clear winner. This result was because his supporters came from among the general population, not the rich and upper class. In this lesson, you will discover how his presidency was viewed by different groups of people. You will also learn how Jackson's government affected the growth of democracy in the nation.
Andrew Jackson was born on the South Carolina frontier. In the early 1800s, he moved to Tennessee and bought a plantation called the Hermitage. His first home there was a log cabin similar to this one.

1. From the Frontier to the White House

Andrew Jackson was born in 1767, on the South Carolina frontier. His father died before he was born, leaving the family in poverty. Young Jackson loved sports more than schoolwork, but he also had a hot temper. A friend recalled that he would pick a fight at the drop of a hat, and “he’d drop the hat himself.”

Jackson's childhood ended at the age of 13 after he joined the local militia and was captured by the British during the American Revolution. One day, a British officer ordered Jackson to polish his boots. “Sir,” he replied boldly, “I am a prisoner of war, and claim [demand] to be treated as such.” The outraged officer lashed out with his sword, slicing the boy's head and hand, leaving scars that Jackson would carry with him for the rest of his life.

Frontier Lawyer  After the war, Jackson decided to become a lawyer. He went to work in a law office in North Carolina, where he quickly became known as “the most roaring, rollicking, game-cocking, horse-racing, card-playing, mischievous fellow” in town.

In 1788, Jackson headed west to practice law in Nashville, Tennessee, which was a tiny frontier settlement of rough cabins and tents at the time. The town grew quickly, and Jackson's practice grew with it. He soon earned enough money to buy land and slaves and set himself up as a gentleman farmer.

Despite his success, Jackson never outgrew his hot temper. A slave trader named Charles Dickinson found this out when he called Jackson “a worthless scoundrel.” Enraged, Jackson challenged Dickinson to a duel with pistols, which was an acceptable way of settling disputes between gentlemen at that time. Jackson killed Dickinson with a single shot, even though Dickinson shot first and wounded him.
Jackson entered politics in Tennessee, serving in both the House and Senate. However, he did not become widely known until the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812, in which his defense of the city made “Old Hickory” a national hero.

In 1824, Jackson ran for president against three other candidates: Henry Clay, William Crawford, and John Quincy Adams. Jackson won the most popular votes as well as the most electoral votes, but he did not have enough electoral votes for a majority. When no candidate has an electoral majority, the House of Representatives chooses a president from among the three leading candidates.

Clay, who had come in fourth, urged his supporters in the House to vote for Adams. That support gave Adams enough votes to be elected president. In return, Adams chose Clay to be his secretary of state.

It made sense for Adams to bring Clay into his cabinet because the two men shared many of the same goals. Jackson’s supporters, however, promised revenge in the election 1828 against Adams and Clay, whom they accused of making a “corrupt bargain” to rob their hero of his rightful election.

Jackson’s supporters used the time between elections to build a new political organization that came to be called the Democratic Party, the name it still uses today. This new party, they promised, would represent ordinary farmers, workers, and the poor, not the rich and upper class who controlled the Republican Party.

In the election of 1828, Jackson’s supporters worked hard to reach the nation’s voters. Besides hurling insults at Adams, they organized parades, picnics, and rallies where supporters sang “The Hunters of Kentucky”—the nation’s first campaign song—and cheered for Old Hickory. They wore Jackson badges, carried hickory sticks, and chanted catchy campaign slogans like “Adams can write, but Jackson can fight.”

The result was a great victory for Jackson, but it was also a victory for the idea that the common people should control their government. This idea eventually became known as Jacksonian Democracy.

This campaign poster shows the theme of Jackson’s presidential campaign. His supporters said that if Jackson was elected, the government would finally be in the hands of ordinary people, not just the rich and upper class.
2. The Inauguration of Andrew Jackson

On March 4, 1829, more than 10,000 people, who came from every state, crowded into Washington, D.C., to witness Andrew Jackson’s inauguration. The visitors overwhelmed local hotels, sleeping five to a bed. “I never saw such a crowd here before,” observed Senator Daniel Webster. “Persons have come five hundred miles to see General Jackson, and they really seem to think that the country is rescued from some dreadful disaster!”

Many of the people flocking into the capital were first-time voters. Until the 1820s, only white men with property were thought to have the education and experience to vote wisely, and so the right to vote had excluded many poorer citizens.

The new states forming west of the Appalachians challenged this argument. Along the frontier, all men—rich or poor, educated or not—shared the same opportunities and dangers, and they believed that they should also share the same rights, including the right to vote.

With the western states leading the way, voting laws were changed to give the “common man” the right to vote. While this expansion of democracy did not yet include African Americans, American Indians, or women, it did allow over one million Americans to vote in 1828, more than three times the number who voted in 1824.

Many of these new voters did believe they had rescued the country from disaster because, in their view, the national government had been taken over by corrupt “monied interests”—that is, the rich. Jackson had promised to throw the rich out and return the government to “the people.” His election reflected a shift in power to the West and to the farmers, shopkeepers, and small-business owners who supported him.

After Jackson was sworn in as president, a huge crowd followed him to the White House, where the celebration turned into a near riot as the crowd surged in. “Ladies fainted, men were seen with bloody noses, and such a scene of confusion took place as is impossible to describe,” wrote an eyewitness, Margaret Bayard Smith. Jackson was nearly “pressed to death” before escaping out a back door. “But it was the People’s day, and the People’s President,” Smith concluded. “And the people would rule.”
3. Jackson’s Approach to Governing

Andrew Jackson approached governing much as he had leading an army. He listened to others, but then did what he thought was right.

The Kitchen Cabinet  Instead of relying only on his cabinet for advice, Jackson made most of his decisions with the help of trusted friends and political supporters. Because these advisers were said to meet with him in the White House kitchen, they were called the “kitchen cabinet.”

The rich men who had been used to influencing the government viewed the “kitchen cabinet” with deep suspicion because they believed that the men around the president were not the proper sort to be running the country. One congressman accused Amos Kendall, Jackson’s closest adviser, of being “the President’s . . . lying machine.” Jackson ignored such charges and continued to turn to men he trusted for advice.

The Spoils System  Jackson’s critics were even more upset by his decision to replace many Republican officeholders with loyal Democrats. Most of these civil servants viewed their posts as lifetime jobs, but Jackson disagreed. Rotating people in office was more democratic than lifetime service, he said, because it gave more people a chance to serve their government. Jackson believed that after a few years in office, civil servants should go back to making a living as other people do.

Jackson’s opponents called the practice of rewarding political supporters with government jobs the spoils system. This term came from the saying “to the victor belong the spoils [prizes] of war.”

Jackson’s opponents also exaggerated the number of Republicans removed from office. Only about 10 percent of civil servants were replaced—and many deserved to be. One official had stolen $10,000 from the Treasury. When he begged Jackson to let him stay, the president said, “I would turn out my own father under the same circumstances.”

civil servant  an employee of the government

spoils system  the practice of rewarding political supporters with government jobs
4. The Nullification Crisis

Andrew Jackson’s approach to governing met its test in an issue that threatened to break up the United States. In 1828, Congress passed a law raising tariffs, or taxes on imported goods such as cloth and glass. The idea was to encourage the growth of manufacturing in the United States. Higher tariffs meant higher prices for imported factory goods, which would allow American manufacturers to outsell their foreign competitors.

While Northern states, humming with new factories, favored the new tariff law, southerners opposed tariffs for several reasons. Tariffs raised the prices they paid for factory goods. High tariffs also discouraged trade among nations, and planters in the South worried that tariffs would hurt cotton sales to other countries. In addition, many southerners believed that a law favoring one region—in this case, the North—was unconstitutional. Based on this belief, John C. Calhoun, Jackson’s vice president, called on southern states to declare the tariff “null and void,” or illegal and not to be honored.

Jackson understood southerners’ concerns and signed a new law that lowered tariffs in 1832. However, these tariffs were still not low enough to satisfy the most extreme supporters of states’ rights in South Carolina. Led by Calhoun, they proclaimed South Carolina’s right to nullify, or reject, both the 1828 and 1832 tariff laws. Such an action was called nullification.

South Carolina took the idea of states’ rights even further. The state threatened to secede if the national government tried to enforce the tariff laws.

Even though he was from South Carolina, Jackson was outraged. “If one drop of blood be shed there in defiance of the laws of the United States,” he raged, “I will hang the first man of them I can get my hands on to the first tree I can find.” He called on Congress to pass the Force Bill, which would allow him to use the federal army to collect tariffs if needed. At the same time, Congress passed a compromise bill that lowered tariffs still further.

Faced with such firm opposition, South Carolina backed down and the nullification crisis ended. However, the tensions between the North and the South would increase in the years ahead.

**tariff** a tax imposed by the government on goods imported from another country

**secede** to withdraw from an organization or alliance
5. Jackson Battles the Bank of the United States

Andrew Jackson saw himself as the champion of the people, and never more so than in his war with the Bank of the United States. The bank was partly owned by the federal government, and it had a monopoly on federal deposits.

Jackson thought that the bank benefited rich eastern depositors at the expense of farmers and workers, as well as smaller state banks. He felt that the bank stood in the way of opportunity for capitalists in the West and other regions. He also distrusted the bank’s president, Nicholas Biddle, who was everything Jackson was not: wealthy, upper class, well educated, and widely traveled.

The bank’s charter, or contract, was due to come up for renewal in 1836. Jackson might have waited until after his reelection to “slay the monster.” However, Henry Clay, who planned to run for president against Jackson in 1832, decided to force the issue by pushing a bill through Congress that renewed the bank’s charter four years early. He thought that if Jackson signed the bill, the farmers who shared his dislike of banks would not reelect him. If Jackson vetoed the bill, he would lose votes from businesspeople who depended on the bank for loans. What Clay had forgotten was that there were many more poor farmers to cast votes than there were rich bankers and businesspeople.

Jackson vetoed the recharter bill. Even though the Supreme Court had held that the bank was constitutional, Jackson called the bank an unconstitutional monopoly that existed mainly to make the rich richer. The voters seemed to agree, and a large majority elected Jackson to a second term in 1832.

Andrew Jackson, on the left, attacks the many-headed Bank of the United States with a veto stick. Bank president Nicholas Biddle, in the center, wears a top hat. The many heads represent the 24 state directors of the bank. Vice President Martin Van Buren, in the center, chokes Massachusetts and Delaware.
Rather than wait for the bank to die when its charter ran out, Jackson decided to starve it to death by ordering the secretary of the treasury to remove all federal deposits from the bank and put the money in state banks. Jackson’s enemies called these banks “pet banks” because the president’s supporters ran them.

Delegations of business owners begged Jackson not to kill the bank, but Jackson refused. Abolishing the bank, he believed, was a victory for economic democracy.

6. Jackson’s Indian Policy

As a frontier settler, Andrew Jackson had little sympathy for American Indians. During his presidency, it became national policy to remove American Indians who remained in the East by force.

White settlers had come into conflict with American Indians ever since colonial days. After independence, the new national government tried to settle these conflicts through treaties, which typically drew boundaries between areas claimed for settlers and areas that the government promised to let the American Indians have forever. In exchange for giving up their old lands, American Indians were promised food, supplies, and money.

Despite the treaties, American Indians continued to be pushed off their land. By the time Jackson became president, only 125,000 American Indians still lived east of the Mississippi River. War and disease had greatly reduced their number in the East, while others had sold their lands for pennies an acre and moved west of the Mississippi. Jackson was determined to remove the remaining American Indians to a new Indian Territory in the West.

Most of the eastern Indians lived in the South and belonged to one of five groups, called tribes by whites: the Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Seminole. Hoping to remain in their homelands, these American Indians had adopted many white ways. Most had given up hunting to become farmers, and many had learned to read and write. The Cherokee had their own written language, a newspaper, and a constitution modeled on the U.S. Constitution. Whites called these American Indians the “Five Civilized Tribes.”

While the Five Civilized Tribes may have hoped to live in peace with their neighbors, many whites did not share this goal. As cotton growing spread westward, wealthy planters and poor settlers alike looked greedily at Indian homelands and decided that these American Indians had to go.
The Indian Removal Act  In 1830, urged on by President Jackson, Congress passed the Indian Removal Act. This law allowed the president to make treaties in which American Indians in the East traded their lands for new territory on the Great Plains. The law did not say that they should be removed by force, and in 1831 the Supreme Court held that American Indians had a right to keep their lands. An angry Jackson disagreed, however, and groups that refused to move west voluntarily were met with military force, usually with tragic results.

This was true of the Sac and Fox Indians of Illinois, who fought removal for two years under the leadership of a chief named Black Hawk. Black Hawk's War ended in 1832 with the slaughter of most of his warriors, and as he was taken off in chains, the chief told his captors,

Black Hawk is an Indian. He has done nothing for which an Indian ought to be ashamed. He has fought for his countrymen, the squaws [women] and papooses [young children], against white men who came, year after year, to cheat them of and take away their land. You know the cause of our making war. It is known to all white men. They ought to be ashamed of it.

The Trail of Tears  Many whites were ashamed over the treatment of American Indians and sent protests to Washington, D.C. Still, the work of removal continued, and in 1836, thousands of Creek Indians who refused to leave Alabama were rounded up and marched west in handcuffs. Two years later, under President Martin Van Buren, more than 17,000 Cherokees were forced from their homes in Georgia and herded west by federal troops. Four thousand of these American Indians died during the long walk to Indian Territory, which took place in the winter. Those who survived remembered that terrible journey as the Trail of Tears. A soldier who took part in the Cherokee removal called it "the cruelest work I ever knew."

This artist painted an unrealistic picture of the Trail of Tears. Most of the Cherokees had no horses or warm blankets. They were dragged from their homes and allowed to take only the clothes they had on. Many died as they walked barefoot for hundreds of miles.
In the 1830s, American Indians were removed from their homelands and sent to a government-created territory in the West. Many American Indians became ill or died during this forced removal.

Led by a young chief named Osceola (ah-see-OH-luh), the Seminoles of Florida resisted removal for ten years. Their long struggle was the most costly Indian war ever fought in the United States. A number of Seminoles were finally sent to Indian Territory, but others found safety in the Florida swamps. Their descendants still live in Florida today.

When Andrew Jackson left office, he was proud of having “solved” the American Indian problem for good. In reality, Jackson had simply moved the conflict between American Indians and whites across the Mississippi River.