CHAPTER TEN: THE GROWTH OF DEMOCRACY, 1824–1840

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THE JACKSON PRESIDENCY
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JACKSON AND HIS OPPONENTS: THE RISE OF THE WHIGS
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THE SECOND AMERICAN PARTY SYSTEM
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AMERICAN ARTS AND LETTERS
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CONCLUSION

KEY TOPICS
   *The role of Andrew Jackson’s presidency in affirming and solidifying the new democratic politics
   *The part played by the transportation revolution in unifying the nation
   * Establishment of the basic two-party pattern of American political democracy
   * The creation of a distinctive American cultural identity by writers, artists and their audiences

AMERICAN COMMUNITIES: MARTIN VAN BUREN FORGES A NEW KIND OF POLITICAL COMMUNITY
   The son of a tavern keeper, Martin Van Buren lacked the aristocratic connections that had been necessary for political advancement in New York. Unhappy with the old-style aristocratic and personal patronage policies of Governor DeWitt Clinton, he and his supporters pushed democratic reforms through a state constitutional
convention. He built a democratically controlled, well-disciplined party organization that brought him political power. The vignette shows how he went on to help shape the newly emerging political system not by his belief that the American people could govern themselves.

**THE NEW DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN NORTH AMERICA**  
In 1821, after eleven years of revolts, Mexico won independence from Spain. Its constitution of 1824 was modeled after the U. S. Constitution. Differences between centralists and federalists and a struggling economy created an unstable government. Santa Anna was the strongest early president assuming dictatorial powers and surviving even though Texas and northern provinces were lost to the United States. In Haiti, independence destroyed the sugar industry and the British Caribbean islands experienced numerous revolts leading to the abolition of slavery and the subsequent decline of the sugar industry, though not independence from Great Britain until the 1920s. A revolt in 1837 by Upper and Lower Canada led to the union of the two regions to make the French-speaking population a minority.

Before 1800, only white, male, property owners could vote in most states, and political power was concentrated in the hands of a few aristocratic leaders. As new western states came into the Union suffrage expanded. By 1820 most of the older states had dropped property qualifications and by 1840, 90 percent of adult white males could vote. While white males were increasing their opportunities for participation, women and African Americans were barred from voting. Still, nowhere else in the world was the right to vote so widely held.

The 1824 election marked an end to the political truce of the Era of Good Feelings. Four candidates ran for the presidency. John Quincy Adams won as a result of what Andrew Jackson called a “corrupt bargain.” The Adams presidency was overshadowed by the knowledge Jackson would challenge the president in 1928 and win.

A more popular form of politics was emerging. New state organizations were built on the increased political participation. New techniques of mass campaigning encouraged increases in participation. The new mass politics fulfilled community impulses, instilling pride and a sense of belonging. Political pageantry strengthened these feelings and offered exciting entertainment as politics became a feature of everyday life.

In the 1828 election Jackson triumphed as his supporters portrayed the contest as a struggle between democracy and aristocracy. His victory showed the strength of the new popular democratic culture and a national party made up of a coalition of the North, South, and West.

**THE JACKSON PRESIDENCY**  
Andrew Jackson's election ushered in a new era in American politics, often called the "Age of the Common Man." His inauguration brought out a mob of well-wishers whose behavior reflected the exuberance of democracy in action.” He was a strong executive who largely ignored his cabinet. Jackson strengthened the presidency at the expense of the legislature and judiciary. He used the veto more frequently than had all of his predecessors combined. His most famous veto of the Maysville Road Bill of 1830 was a defeat for western rival Henry Clay.
INTERNAL IMPROVEMENTS: BUILDING AN INFRASTRUCTURE  A transportation revolution between 1800 and 1840 encouraged growth and mobility of people and goods. It also fostered the growing commercial spirit. Government support was critical. The National Road funded by the federal government helped open the West to expansion.

Water transport was quicker and less expensive than travel by land, but few east-west lines existed before the Erie Canal was built with New York State funds. The canal connected Buffalo on Lake Erie with Albany along the Hudson River, which in turn flowed into New York harbor and the Atlantic Ocean. Constructing the canal was a vast engineering challenge and required a massive labor force, many of whom were contract laborers from Ireland. As a result of the canal, farmers in the West became part of a national market and towns along the canal grew rapidly. A canal boom followed. By making upstream travel viable, steamboats also helped to stimulate trade along western rivers. The most remarkable innovation was the railroad. Technical problems like the absence of a standard gauge had to be overcome. But by the 1850s consolidation of rail lines facilitated standardization.

Another consequence of the transportation revolution was that farmers could now sell in previously unreachable markets. Government policy encouraged commercial agriculture by keeping land cheap. Regional specialization enabled farmers to concentrate on growing a single crop. It also, however, forced farmers to become dependent on distant markets and credit. Innovations in farm tools greatly increased productivity. As a result of this transportation revolution, Americans had much greater mobility and could now produce for a national market. The transportation revolution also fostered a risk-taking mentality that promoted invention and innovation. Americans increasingly looked away from the East toward the heartland, fostering national pride and identity.

JACKSON AND HIS OPPONENTS: THE RISE OF THE WHIGS In part due to constitutional ambiguity, sectional interests, and the states’ rights issue, political controversies arose. Jackson's responses to these issues stimulated the rise of an opposition politics party, the Whigs.

The largest issue was tariffs. The 1828 “Tariff of Abominations” elicited a strong reaction from South Carolina. Southerners argued that the tariff was an unconstitutional effort to enrich the North at Southern expense. Calhoun wrote a defense of the doctrine of nullification whereby states could refuse to enforce laws they deemed unconstitutional. South Carolina nullified the 1833 tariff and threatened to secede. Jackson considered it treason and obtained from Congress a bill to enable the federal government to collect the tariff at gunpoint if necessary. Henry Clay engineered a compromise tariff that ended the threat of civil war.

Jackson embraced the policy of Indian cession of their lands and removal west of the Mississippi River. The five civilized tribes of the South were most affected. Even though the Cherokee had adopted white ways and accepted white culture, Jackson pressed for removal. He defied the Supreme Court when it ruled in favor of the Cherokee Indians in their efforts to prevent Georgia from pushing them out along the brutal “Trail of Tears.”
Chartered in 1816, the Second Bank of the United States was a quasi-private institution. It had encouraged the growth of strong and stable financial interests and curbed less stable and irresponsible ones by acting as a currency stabilizer. Eastern merchants found it a useful institution, but western farmers and speculators (like Jackson) feared it represented a moneyed elite. When Clay and Webster pushed for early rechartering, Jackson saw it as a personal attack and vowed to kill the Bank. Jackson’s veto message denounced the Bank as the institution of a privileged elite. In the election of 1832 Jackson soundly defeated Henry Clay whom Democrats portrayed as the defender of the Bank and privilege. After his victory, Jackson withdrew federal deposits and placed them in “pet” banks. Critics denounced the move, but Jackson claimed that he alone was the direct representative of the people and could act regardless of Congressional opinion.

In response to the removal of federal funds, the Bank called in commercial loans, causing a recession. Jackson’s opponents founded an opposition party—the Whigs. The new party lost the 1836 election to Martin Van Buren. The death of the Bank led to a period of feverish speculation, followed by the inevitable Panic of 1837. The depression that resulted led to great hardship and gave the newly formed Whig Party its opportunity.

THE SECOND AMERICAN PARTY SYSTEM By the 1830s, the second American party system had evolved. It was based on mass national appeal. The differences between Whigs and Democrats reflected emerging class and cultural differences. Democrats drew strength from small farmers and urban workers who opposed the rapid social and economic changes that led to commercial agriculture and factory work. Democrats had identified themselves as the party of Jefferson and democracy.” Whigs drew strength from those groups favoring government intervention in economic and social affairs and who had benefited from commercial agriculture and industrialization. Many Whigs were members of evangelical reforming denominations.

In the election of 1840 Whigs portrayed their candidate, William Henry Harrison, as a humble man happy to live in a log cabin. Whigs won a sweeping electoral victory in a campaign with 80 percent voter turnout, but their triumph was short-lived. Harrison died a month after his inauguration and Vice-President John Tyler assumed office. A former Democrat, Tyler had broken with Jackson for personal reasons. Tyler vetoed a series of bills calling for a new Bank of the United States, tariffs, and internal improvements.

AMERICAN ARTS AND LETTERS Steam-powered presses and the telegraph helped facilitate a communications revolution. Newspapers and pamphlets proliferated while the telegraph imparted a new timeliness to information. An intellectual movement was stimulated by eastern societies and journals. A distinctly American culture was being created by writers such as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and especially Ralph Waldo Emerson. Artists such as Albert Bierstedt and George Caleb Bingham drew upon dramatic themes from the American landscape and lifestyles. Architects rarely worried about creating a legacy for the future. While neoclassical remained the style for public buildings, balloon frame construction enabled Americans to build homes at a rapid clip.

CONCLUSION At first glance it would seem that the new national feeling had swept aside localism. But sectional forces threatened political unity.
Lecture Suggestions

1. Most students have the vaguest of ideas of what “democracy” means and what it meant in the early nineteenth century. A lecture that draws distinctions between political democracy (equal participation) and social democracy (equal status) is important. Note that a discussion of economic democracy requires the instructor to draw distinctions between equality of opportunity (which was clearly increasing for white males) and equality of attainment (which was clearly decreasing). Note also that at the time when America was becoming more democratic for white males, it was becoming less democratic for non-whites and females. This might be a good time to discuss Indian removal, the greater emphasis on race as a defense of slavery, and the emergence of domesticity.

2. Make the connection between the Era of Good Feelings (discussed in the previous chapter) and the rise of Jackson. Note how the absence of political parties left the nation vulnerable to class and sectional tensions. Focus on how Jackson unified diverse elements of the nation (either as his supporters or as his opponents).

3. Rather than going through blow-by-blow the events of the Jackson presidency, focus on specific themes. For example, the text gives ample coverage to the development of a strong presidency. A lecture on Jackson and the birth of the modern presidency can tie together a wide variety of issues.

4. Lecture on the distinctions between Whigs and Democrats. Make a chart on the board that shows the two parties’ economic programs and economic constituencies; cultural programs and cultural constituencies. Link the material on the role of government in developing a national economy to the second party system.

Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to say that America in the early 1800s was becoming a democratic society? Democratic in what sense? Democratic for whom?

2. Jackson is spoken of as being the first “modern” president. What does this mean? In what way did he transform the office of president?

3. The issue of government support for internal improvements was among the most divisive of the era. Why was this so? Who benefited from the transportation revolution? Who lost ground?

4. What were the key differences between Whigs and Democrats? What did each party stand for? Who were their supporters? What is the link between the party’s programs and party supporters?
5. Which geographic areas gave Jackson his greatest support? Why did he get support in those places?

6. In what ways did American arts and letters reflect the democratic spirit of the age?

Out of Class Activity

If your school is in a state that was in the Union during the second party system, students could explore the relationship between economic, cultural, and political characteristics. Students could prepare a map of the state (or another state if your current state was not in the Union in 1840). Using county-level data, they could highlight the areas that were pro-Whig or pro-Democratic. They could then look for where large numbers of immigrants or Catholics were found. They could look for where large levels of commercial activity were found. In so doing they could start to see the relationship between politics and socio-economic attributes.

If You’re Going to Read One Book on the Subject


Audio Visual Aids

“Andrew Jackson’s Hermitage” Hosted by E. G. Marshall, the film tours Jackson’s home and provides an understanding of the kind of man Jackson was and describes important events in his life. (Color, 22 minutes, 1975)

“Walden Pond” Recreates the personality and beliefs of Henry David Thoreau. Focuses on his experiences at Walden Pond. Uses dramatization, narrations, and readings from Thoreau’s essays. (Color, 15 minutes, 1975)