

The Sectional Crisis and the "Corrupt Bargain" of 1824

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Victory in the War of 1812, western expansion, the market revolution, political dominance by the Democratic-Republicans, and an upsurge in political participation by White men all contributed to an "Era of Good Feelings" in the United States. But underneath the surface, Americans remained divided along economic, racial, and gender lines. Most importantly, the question of admitting Missouri into the Union as a slave state threatened to divide the United States along sectional lines.

This tutorial examines the divisions that affected American politics and, by the mid-1820s, threatened to paralyze the system altogether. The challenge that faced American politicians during this period was to devise a political system around which Americans could organize in support of specific ideals and platforms, rather than organize according to section.

Our discussion breaks down as follows:

1. The Missouri Crisis

Another stage of western expansion occurred when the settlers of Missouri petitioned Congress for statehood. The Missouri Territory had been organized out of the massive Louisiana Purchase that Thomas Jefferson orchestrated in 1803. By 1818, tens of thousands of settlers had flocked to the territory, bringing over 10,000 enslaved people with them. When the status of Missouri was taken up by the U.S. House of Representatives in early 1819, its admission to the Union would be no easy matter, since it brought to the surface a violent debate over whether slavery could expand into a new state.

American politicians had sought to avoid the issue of slavery ever since the 1787 Constitutional Convention, when delegates arrived at the **Three-Fifths Compromise**.



TERM TO KNOW

Three-Fifths Compromise

The counting of each enslaved person as three-fifths of a White person when determining population for the purposes of representation and taxation in Congress.

In short, the compromise ensured that the free population of a state, along with 60 percent of its enslaved population, would be counted when determining the number of that state's members in the House of

Representatives. A concession to southern slave states—which featured large enslaved populations—the Three-Fifths Compromise inflated the political influence of southern states in the House of Representatives and in the Electoral College. From the perspective of representatives from northern states—where racial slavery had gradually ended—the admission of Missouri as a slave state would threaten the tenuous balance between free and slave states in the Senate. Northern politicians were particularly concerned that the South’s interests in protecting slavery would result in the creation of a southern voting bloc in Congress that would overwhelm northern, “free” states.



DID YOU KNOW

In the aftermath of the American Revolution, many northern states implemented plans for gradual emancipation. By the 1820s, racial slavery was absent in the North.

The debate over representation shifted quickly to the morality of slavery itself when New York representative James Tallmadge—a Democratic-Republican who opposed slavery—attempted to introduce a provision to the Missouri statehood bill known as the **Tallmadge Amendment**. The amendment proposed the admission of Missouri as a free state, on the condition that the introduction of additional enslaved persons to Missouri be prohibited and that the children of enslaved women already in Missouri be emancipated at age 25.



TERM TO KNOW

Tallmadge Amendment

An amendment (that did not pass) proposed by Representative James Tallmadge in 1819. It called for Missouri to be admitted as a free state and for the gradual emancipation of all enslaved people within the state.

The amendment sparked two years’ worth of controversy, during which time the unity of the Democratic-Republican party ruptured along sectional lines.

Northern representatives supported the Tallmadge Amendment, denouncing slavery as immoral and against the nation’s founding principles of equality and liberty. Southerners in Congress rejected the amendment as an attempt to gradually abolish slavery—not just in Missouri but throughout the Union—by violating the property rights of slaveholders, and their freedom to take their property wherever they wished.

Despite opposition from southern representatives, the Tallmadge Amendment passed the House of Representatives. The amendment died in the Senate, however, leaving the fate of Missouri up in the air amidst threats of party division and calls of disunion.

2. The Missouri Compromise

Democratic-Republican Party leadership—most notably President James Monroe, Representative **Henry Clay** of Kentucky, and Senator Jesse Thomas of Illinois—interpreted the Tallmadge amendment as a threat to party unity. They worked behind the scenes to ensure that Missouri was admitted to the Union as a slave state.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Henry Clay

American statesman who advocated for the American System and brokered the Missouri Compromise and oversaw the House of Representatives during the Election of 1824.

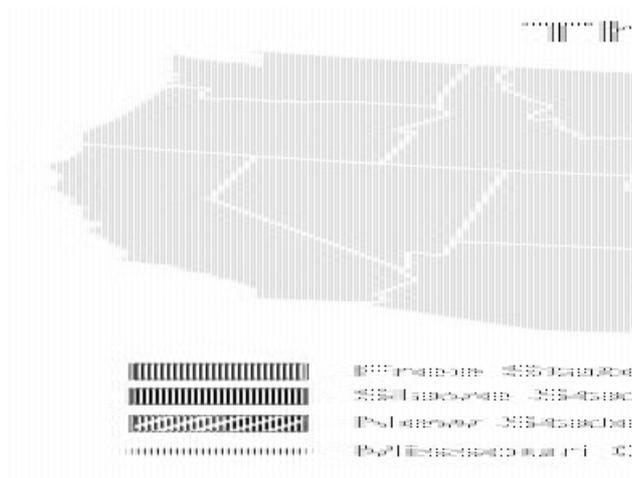


DID YOU KNOW

Senator Jesse Thomas of Illinois, who proposed the Missouri Compromise in the Senate, owned “indentured” workers, which was a euphemism that Illinois employed to get around the anti-slavery provision in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787.

What came to be known as the **Missouri Compromise** consisted of three parts:

1. Maine, which up to this point had been part of Massachusetts, would enter the Union as a free state.
2. Missouri would be admitted to the Union as a slave state.
3. To prevent similar conflicts each time a territory applied for statehood, a line coinciding with the southern border of Missouri (at latitude $36^{\circ} 30'$) was drawn across the remainder of the Louisiana Purchase. Slavery could exist south of the line but was forbidden north of it (with the exception of Missouri).



TERM TO KNOW

Missouri Compromise

An agreement reached in Congress in 1820 that allowed Missouri to enter the Union as a slave state, brought Maine into the Union as a free state, and prohibited slavery in the Louisiana Purchase north of $36^{\circ} 30'$ latitude.

Although the compromise quelled the issue of Missouri statehood, it did not quell the debate over slavery in the United States, especially in the western territories. Such a debate led many, including Thomas Jefferson, to fear for the future of the republic.

Thomas Jefferson expressed such concern in a letter to John Holmes on April 22, 1820, shortly after the Missouri Compromise was enacted. A selection from his letter is provided below:

Thomas Jefferson, Letter to John Holmes

“This momentous question [over slavery in Missouri], like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed indeed for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper....

I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves, by the generation of '76, to acquire self-government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be that I live not to

weep over it....”



THINK ABOUT IT

How would you characterize Jefferson’s reaction to the Missouri crisis? What do you think he means by writing that the Missouri Compromise is “a reprieve only, not a final sentence?”



DID YOU KNOW

The original state constitution of Missouri protected slavery and prohibited free African Americans from settling in the state.

3. A New Style of Politics

The expansion of the franchise among White men—combined with the political paralysis and sectional divides that the Democratic-Republicans experienced during the Missouri crisis—contributed to a new style of political party organization. This process was most evident in New York, under the leadership of Senator **Martin Van Buren**.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Martin Van Buren

Senator from New York who spearheaded a new style of political party organization in the early 19th century.

Van Buren was indicative of the new form of American democracy that was taking hold by the early 19th century. Rather than an intellectual or a member of the elite, which typically characterized the Founding Fathers (and the first six presidents), Van Buren came from a modest background and was the son of a tavern keeper. In addition, unlike George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, whom Americans celebrated for their virtue or intellect, Van Buren’s significance lay in his skill as a political operative.

During the 1820s, Van Buren’s Democratic-Republican faction, known as “Bucktails,” gained political power by cultivating the loyalty of a majority, rather than by catering to an elite family or renowned figure.



DID YOU KNOW

“Factions” were groups within the larger Democratic-Republican Party. Van Buren’s faction was known as “Bucktails” because members wore a deer’s tail on their hats when attending political meetings.

One of the Bucktails’ most significant political achievements in New York came in organizing a convention to revise the state constitution in 1821. Here, the Bucktails successfully pushed through an amendment that did away with the property qualification for voting, giving all White men in the state the right to vote.

At the same time that the Bucktails catered to White voters by eliminating the property qualification, they played to White voters’ racist sentiments by enacting a significant property qualification for Black voters, who had to have a net worth of \$250 to be eligible to vote.

The Bucktails also altered the process involved with appointing local officials such as sheriffs and county clerks. Under the original constitution, a Council of Appointments selected these officials. The Bucktails replaced this process with a system of direct elections, which meant thousands of jobs immediately became available to candidates who had the support of the majority. In practice, Van Buren’s faction could nominate

and support candidates for these offices, based on their loyalty to the party.

In this way, Van Buren helped create the foundations of a political machine, one in which his faction maintained key alliances with other New York politicians, and rewarded the loyalty of disciplined party members. Not only did it help transform New York politics, Van Buren's tactics introduced a new term to American political nomenclature: the **spoils system**.



TERM TO KNOW

Spoils System

A staple of machine politics, in which a political figure rewards allies and party members with political appointments.

Van Buren also had larger plans. Like many of his colleagues in Congress, he was concerned with how quickly the political system fell along sectional lines during the Missouri crisis, and he believed that a new party system could prevent such conflict in the future. Whereas the Founding Fathers interpreted political parties as factions that catered to specific interests, Van Buren believed that parties could be used as tools in favor of the public interest. Competition among party members could provide voters with a choice. Likewise, parties could create coalitions that transcended section, thus preventing a breakdown in the political system as had almost occurred during the Missouri crisis.



BRAINSTORM

In his book *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1846*, historian Daniel Walker Howe uses the following sentence to summarize Martin Van Buren's political tactics: "His career represented not the triumph of the common man over aristocracy but the invention of machine politics." Based on your reading of this and previous tutorials on American politics, do you agree or disagree with Howe's claim? What evidence would you use to support your response?

4. The Electoral Crisis of 1824

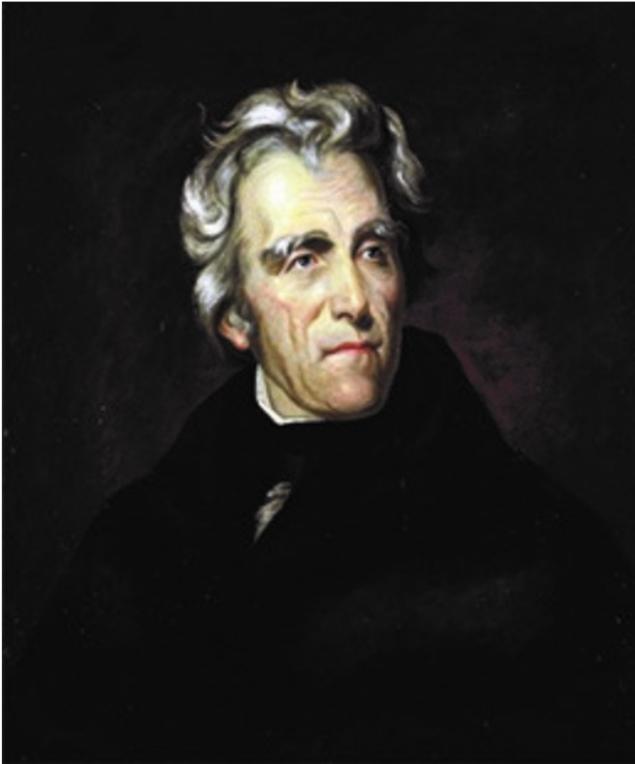
The fact that the American political system became paralyzed once again during the presidential election of 1824 reinforced Van Buren's concerns. The election of 1824 showed that a one-party system (the Democratic-Republicans) was no longer sustainable. At a time when the people were taking a keener interest in politics, the election also revealed frustrations with the Electoral College, which the Founders had implemented to suppress the will of the people.

The gradual disappearance of property qualifications for voting among White men contributed to tens of thousands of new voters in the 1824 election. With the arrival of these new voters, the traditional system of having members of Congress form a caucus to determine who would run for president no longer worked. These voters had local and sectional interests, and they voted on them accordingly. For the first time in American history, the popular vote mattered in a presidential election.

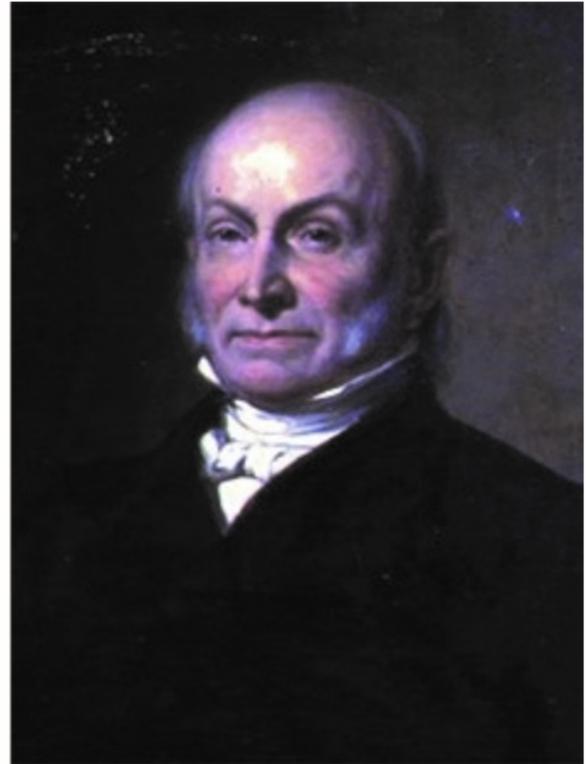
➔ **EXAMPLE** For the 1824 election, electors for the Electoral College were chosen by popular vote in 18 states, while the six remaining states used the older system in which state legislatures chose electors.

With the caucus system under attack, the presidential election of 1824 featured four presidential candidates, all of whom ran as Democratic-Republicans, and most of whom could claim only sectional support. The crowded field included:

- William H. Crawford (Georgia), a slaveholder whom the Congressional caucus nominated for the presidency; for the most part, he represented southern Democratic-Republicans on a limited government, states' rights platform.
- Henry Clay (Kentucky), the Speaker of the House of Representatives who had support from much of the western states; he favored an active federal government committed to internal improvements, such as roads and canals, to bolster national economic development and settlement of the West.
- John Quincy Adams (Massachusetts), the son of the second president, John Adams, whose support was concentrated in the Northeast.
- Andrew Jackson (Tennessee), who could claim national support and recognition because of the popularity that followed his military conduct during the War of 1812, especially at the Battle of New Orleans.



(a)



(b)

The two most popular presidential candidates in the election of 1824 were Andrew Jackson (a), who won the popular vote but failed to secure the requisite number of votes in the Electoral College, and John Quincy Adams (b), who emerged victorious after a contentious vote in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Jackson won the popular vote, receiving over 153,000 votes. The Electoral College was another matter, however. Given the number of candidates in the field, no one received a majority of the electoral votes (see map below).

Crawford.

Andrew Jackson and his supporters cried foul. To them, the election of Adams reeked of anti-democratic corruption. So too did the appointment of Clay as secretary of state. All said, the affair seemed a "**corrupt bargain**," in which Clay and Adams exchanged votes for a public appointment while ignoring the popular vote.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Andrew Jackson

7th president of the United States headed the Democratic Party and symbolized the democratic impulses of the early 19th century.



TERM TO KNOW

"Corrupt Bargain"

The term that Andrew Jackson's supporters applied to John Quincy Adams's election in 1824, which had occurred through the machinations of Henry Clay in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Such a bargain seemed to embody everything that an emerging American democracy, based on the will of the people and majority rule, was now against. Everywhere, Jackson's supporters vowed revenge against the anti-majoritarian result of 1824.



REFLECT

It's clear that Andrew Jackson's supporters criticized the outcome of the 1824 election. But place yourself in the position of someone who supported John Quincy Adams. How would you have defended the election's outcome?



SUMMARY

The Missouri crisis and the electoral crisis of 1824 revealed that American politicians had to respond to the sectional and democratic shifts that permeated the United States following the War of 1812. Party leaders, such as Martin Van Buren, recognized the need for a new political system that could prevent future divisions between North and South. The labeling of the election of 1824 as a "corrupt bargain," meanwhile, revealed that politicians might have to accommodate democratic impulses that were spreading throughout the nation. By the end of the decade, it would become clear that both trends lay the foundation for the emergence of a new national figure: Andrew Jackson.

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TERMS TO KNOW

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The political system of rewarding friends and supporters with political appointments.

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Martin Van Buren

Senator from New York who spearheaded a new style of political party organization in the early 19th century.



DATES TO KNOW

1787

The Three-Fifths Compromise is negotiated at the Constitutional Convention.

1803

The United States purchases the Louisiana territory from France in the Louisiana Purchase.

1819

Missouri petitions for statehood; the Tallmadge Amendment introduced.

1820

The Missouri Compromise is negotiated in Congress.

1824

The "Era of Good Feelings" ends; The Election of 1824 is decided in the House of Representatives; John Quincy Adams is elected president; Andrew Jackson decries a "Corrupt Bargain".