

The american political system 1790-1840 research paper examples

[Sociology](#), [Slavery](#)



During the Early American Republic from the 1790s to the 1830s, the first two political party systems were divided along regional, ethnics and social class lines, particularly the commercial and industrial interests led by the Federalists and Whigs in the Northeast versus the Southern planters who controlled the Democratic Party. Both parties competed for the allegiance of the majority of white small farmers and the new Western states in what was increasingly becoming a more democratic political system, at least for white males. This rivalry between slaveholding property, small landowners and nascent capitalists existed even when the Constitution was being drafted, and all members of the elite at that time had the recent example of Shay's Rebellion in 1786 as a reminder of discontent among the small white farmers. Thomas Jefferson and most of his successors in the presidency up to 1860 were Southern slave owners and not at all sympathetic to the policies of the Federalists and Whigs to industrialize the country, pass protective tariffs or create a central banking system. Despite the moderate remarks he made in his 1801 inaugural address, he was completely opposed to all these plans until the day he died on July 4, 1826, and even stated that he would continue to oppose them even beyond the grave. This was also true of his slaveholding successors like Andrew Jackson. In contrast to the nationalism, centralization and support for manufacturing and industry supported by Alexander Hamilton and (later) Henry Clay, they envisioned an America that would remain mostly rural and pastoral, lacking big cities, factories, banks, and speculators in paper money and stocks.

Despite the more democratic rhetoric of modern times, almost none of the provisions of the 1787 Constitution were democratic, apart from the direct

election of the House of Representatives every two years. Even there, by the restricted franchise laws set by the states at that time, women, white men without property, and blacks and other minorities were not allowed to vote at all. Perhaps the most anti-democratic feature of all, however, was that the Constitution permitted slavery in the states where it already existed and even allowed the African slave trade to remain open for twenty years. As Thomas Jefferson indicated in his Notes on Virginia (1787), he never considered blacks as equal to whites but rather their natural inferiors, and never imagined that they would become citizens of the United States (Shi and Marer 2009). Even if slavery were abolished in the future, he insisted that all free blacks would have to return to Africa, and even helped establish the republic of Liberia for that purpose.

Small farmers and frontiersman of the West were hostile to both the planter and mercantile elites on the East Coast. Even at that time, the westerners were influenced by radically democratic and populist ideas that made them very distrustful of the coastal gentry and merchants, and also caused them to overwhelmingly oppose the new Constitution of 1787. Small farmers had rebelled in the colonial period and during the American Revolution, while Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts in 1786, during a period of economic depression, badly frightened the wealthy and propertied elites in every state (Shi and Marer 2009). They knew that the Constitution was being written by their political enemies and also thought that it gave too much power to the executive and Senate, which were not elected by popular vote originally. Ratification of the Constitution proved very difficult and in the end it would not have been approved at all had James Madison and Alexander Hamilton

not agreed to add a Bill of Rights. Western farmers and the frontier and backcountry regions of every state strongly opposed it as an elitist and undemocratic document, while most “gentleman of property” in the North and South worked hard for ratification (Main 7). White small farmers were the backbone of the Antifederalists in every part of the country and later of the Democratic Party coalitions from the 1790s onward. Jefferson and other Democratic Republicans—as they came to be called in the 1790s—also favored this ideology of democracy in the U. S. being based on small-property owners (Main 221).

Alexander Hamilton was always opposed to this version of democracy, and looked to Great Britain as an economic model and trading partner, and as Treasury Secretary, he had the federal government assume all debts from the Revolutionary War, which he argued would promote trade and manufacturing, called for a protective tariff for industry and a new Bank of the United States modeled on the Bank of England (Kaplan 91). Jefferson battled Hamilton’s Federalists on all these issues throughout the 1790s and was finally elected president in 1800. Even though his tone was moderate and forgiving in his 1801 inaugural address, that did nothing to alter the very real sectional and class differences in the U. S., either then or for decades to come. In reality, ‘we’ were definitely not all Federalists and Republicans, or Whigs and Democrats (Shi and Marer 2009).

Henry Clay gave his famous speech in support of the American System to the House of Representatives in 1824, although Alexander Hamilton had used the same term decades before. It rested “on the idea of harmonizing all the segments of the economy for their mutual benefit and of doing so by active

support from an intervening national government” (Baxter 27). This was similar in content to his speech on the Election, the Court and Improvements the year before (Shi and Marer 2009). Clay was a Border State man from Kentucky, and therefore in a position to arrange compromises between the two hostile sections, and claim that the American System would benefit commerce, agriculture and industry. He came to embrace the ideas of protectionists like Matthew Carey and Hezekiah Niles, and openly rejected the free trade, limited government, and laissez faire philosophy of Adam Smith (Baxter 28). Clay demanded federal measures to “ promote American industry and eliminate foreign competition”, and praised the new standardized mass production methods for rifles, revolvers, agricultural equipment and sewing machines (Hounshell 15). His support of government funding for canals, harbors and railroads was also very popular in the West and Mid-Atlantic states, while the South was strongly opposed. Andrew Jackson, on the other hand, who was elected president in 1828, favored a “ judicious tariff” in order to attract votes in the North, but on the whole he and his vice president Martin Van Buren were advocates of states’ rights, limited government, and hostile to the Bank of the United States or federally-funded public works (Baxter 111).

Thomas Jefferson was able to form a Democratic coalition with the Western farmers that lasted into the 1850s, when it broke up over the issue of slavery expansion to the West. Almost all of the time in 1800-60, Southern slave owners and their allies controlled the White House and exerted enough power in the Senate to block the plans of the Federalists and Whigs. These major political and economic differences were based on regions—North,

South and West—as well as rivalries between regional elites and their supporters. Western farmers did succeed in obtaining more democracy at the state and local levels than originally envisioned in 1787, although this was mostly democracy for whites only. Divisions over slavery deepened, especially as it disappeared in the North but continued to expand in the South, and it became clear that in the end one region or the other would end up dominating the conflict. Even in 1787, though, the outlines of future civil war were already quite visible, and the outcome would ultimately depend on who won the West. Slavery continued and expanded over the next seven decades, and had the Union broken up as early as 1787 this might not have happened although there is no way of knowing how events might have developed.

WORKS CITED

Baxter, Maurice G. *Henry Clay and the American System*. University Press of Kentucky, 2004.

Hounshell, David A. *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800-1932*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

Kaplan, Lawrence S. *Alexander Hamilton: Ambivalent Anglophile*. Scholarly Resources, Inc, 2002.

Main, Jackson Turner. *The Antifederalists: Critics of the Constitution, 1781-1788*. University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Shi, David and Holly Marer. *For the Record: A Documentary History of America from First Contact through Reconstruction*, 4th Edition. NY: Norton, 2009.

Van Cleve, George W. *A Slaveholders' Union: Slavery, Politics, and the*

<https://assignbuster.com/the-american-political-system-1790-1840-research-paper-examples/>

Constitution in the Early American Republic. University of Chicago Press, 2010.