In his farewell address on September 17, 1796, President George Washington warned his countrymen of the dangers that political parties presented to the young Republic. Within just four years, many of Washington’s concerns manifested themselves during the election of 1800. This intently partisan campaign pitted the Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson, against the divided Federalist Party. The two Federalist factions were led by Alexander Hamilton (High Federalist) and the more moderate wing of the party led by sitting President John Adams.

In 1796, Washington warned that “[political parties] are likely in the course of time and things, to become potent engines, by which cunning, ambitious, and unprincipled men will be enabled to subvert the power of the people and to usurp for themselves the reins of government” (gwpapers). Washington’s worst fears regarding political parties had surfaced and Edward J. Larson does a remarkable job of detailing those issues in his book A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America’s First Presidential Campaign. Larson’s work details all of the issues that were brought to the forefront during the election and how each party blamed the other for the nation’s problems. More importantly however, is the attempt by some party leaders of the time to manipulate the Constitution and the existing election rules in order to ensure that their party won the Presidential election. Some states changed their electoral policy prior to the election in order to achieve the desired result for the state’s preferred party even if was not truly representative of the people’s desires in that state. Certain men, as they still do today, put party politics ahead of the common good or what they felt was right.
For example, when it became clear that Adams had no chance of winning re-election, Federalists in the House of Representatives made it clear that they would not cast their votes for Jefferson even if they believed that Jefferson was the better candidate. The Federalists voted time and again for Aaron Burr, the Republican nominee for Vice President, despite the fears that Hamilton, himself a Federalist, had regarding Burr. “He is as unprincipled and dangerous a man as any country can boast” (Larson 184) Hamilton warned of Burr. As the Federalists continued to hold out in ballot after ballot, Hamilton’s concerns grew. “There is no circumstance which has given me so much pain as the idea that Mr. Burr might be elevated to the presidency by the means of Federalists” (Larson 252).

Burr might be one of the best examples of those “unprincipled men” that Washington had warned about during his farewell address. Burr worked to ensure that all Republican electors voted strictly along party lines for President in hopes of producing a tie with Jefferson that would have to be settled in the House. He even worked New England Federalist electors in order to have them drop their votes so that he might actually finish ahead of Jefferson. Burr did not display any real loyalty to Jefferson or the Republican Party for that matter. Burr, who had fought so hard to win critical state elections in New York in 1800 for the Republican Party, later left the party in order to run as the Federalist candidate for governor of New York. Hamilton, who had engineered a letter writing campaign denouncing Burr as a candidate for President in 1800, also worked to prevent Burr’s gubernatorial candidacy. This ultimately led to Hamilton’s death. “Burr loves nothing but himself,” Hamilton said during his letter-writing campaign, “and will be content with nothing short of permanent power in his own hands”
Unfortunately, Burr was not the exception to the rule in 1800, but was instead part of a larger group of men that put their own interests, or that of the party, ahead of the people’s will. Luckily among the partisan politics, some men did emerge to do what was in the best interest of the country, but they were few and far between. One of those men was Delaware Federalist James Bayard, who controlled his state’s vote in the House of Representatives because he was Delaware’s lone member. At first Bayard voted with the Federalist block, but after realizing that the stalemate in the House would be unending, Bayard warned that he would cast his vote for Jefferson if the Federalists did not seek a compromise. Eventually, Federalists in Maryland and Vermont decided to abstain, allowing Republicans to get the needed majority vote in the House to get Jefferson elected on the 36th ballot conducted in mid-February of 1801. In a last act of defiance, not a single Federalist that voted, cast his ballot for Jefferson, prompting Jefferson to respond with his own partisan rhetoric, “we consider this therefore as a declaration of war on the part of [the Federalist] band” (Larson 269).

Hamilton, whose dislike of Jefferson and his ideals were well known, in the end also tried to do what he felt was best for the country by denouncing Burr in his letters to Federalists. Despite his noble act regarding Burr, Hamilton was not at his best in the months leading up to the election of 1800. Hamilton initially schemed in private to ensure Charles Cotesworth Pinckney would overtake Adams, asking for a strict Federalist vote in the north, and then hoping that electors in South Carolina would use their second votes for Pinckney, a native South Carolinian. Hamilton later confirmed the split in the Federalist party when he published a 54-page letter attacking the President’s character. It
read like an “extended tantrum in print” (Larson 218) according to Hamilton biographer Ron Chernow. The letter the damaged did to both High Federalists and moderates alike, was beyond measure. “From what I have heard of the work, it will do their whole party more harm than good” (Larson 222) explained Republican James Monroe to James Madison in a letter. Hamilton’s tactics, designed to gain control of the executive office, were extremely divisive to the party and might have also dropped Hamilton into the category of unprincipled men had it not been for his act of denouncing Burr in order to do what was best for his country - accepting the lesser of two evils in his eyes.

The information garnered in Larson’s book will be extremely useful in my American Government and my US History I courses. But in my American Government course there are a number of things that can be relayed to students starting with how electors were chosen prior to the institution of the direct primary. It will certainly be news to students that states had various methods for choosing its electors and that they could in many instances change those rules depending on how the current system or a new system would impact the coming election. For example, students would be interested to know that Pennsylvania’s Legislature and her Senate had to reach a compromise on the number of electors that the Republicans and Federalists would receive during the election of 1800 because they could not agree on a way to choose them, effectively disenfranchising the voters of this extremely influential state. Pennsylvania Governor Thomas McKean urged the two sides to reach a compromise so that the state could have a say in this critical election. Had the two sides not reached an agreement on the number of electors for each party, the state would not have participated in the election of 1800. “Failing to cast electoral votes would disgrace the state and endanger the Union” (Larson 232) explained
McKean. The two sides did eventually agree on a number, and the state’s votes were
counted, but they did not represent the will of the people in Pennsylvania.

In Maryland, a state that traditionally selected its electors for President in
November via district elections, the Federalists were initially expected to win a majority
of the districts. The Federalists, who probably would have won the state legislature
elections, managed to alienate voters in the October legislature elections by suggesting
that they would change the method for selecting electors once they won the October
election. They planned on changing the law so that the state legislature could appoint
electors, which would ensure that the Federalists got all 10 of Maryland’s electoral votes.
The Maryland voters, who felt the law change would disenfranchise them in the coming
Presidential election, decided instead to support Republicans in the October election. This
prevented Federalists from winning the legislature and thus changing the law. The
Federalist quest to secure a few more electoral votes in Maryland actually cost them two
or three votes for President as the state ended up splitting its electoral votes 5-5. In this
case, the desire to put party politics before the voters backfired.

In New York, usually considered a Federalist stronghold at this juncture,
Hamilton and Burr slugged it out for control in local elections for the state legislature in
New York City. Burr assembled better candidates and ran an effective grass roots
campaign which helped sweep the elections, giving Republicans control of the state
legislature. This would allow Republicans to choose the electors. Hamilton hoped to
counter the sweep by suggesting that the lame-duck legislature should ask for district
elections in order to salvage some of New York’s 12 electoral votes. By asking for this,
Hamilton was putting the his own interests of getting Pinckney elected President instead
of Adams ahead of the will of the people who had voted Republican. John Jay who was serving as governor of New York at the time, didn’t even dignify the request with a response.

The election of 1800 will also provide me with the opportunity to clarify some Constitutional issues related to elections and the executive branch, starting with Article II, Section 1, Clause 3 of the Constitution. This clause states that if more than two candidates have a majority of the votes of all electors and are tied, then the House of Representatives shall choose the President with each state getting one vote. The clause contains additional information regarding the election of the President, but in this particular case, students will focus on how this clause did not anticipate the events of the election of 1800. In this particular election, the candidates that are tied are from the same party, and Federalists used this in an attempt to delay Jefferson’s election.

As a follow up to the lesson on Article II, I will delve into the passage of the 12th Amendment to the Constitution which was passed in 1803 and ratified in 1804 as a direct result of the election of 1800. “Electors shall meet in their respective states and vote by ballot for President and Vice-President … they shall name in their ballots the person voted for as President, and in distinct ballots the person voted for as Vice-President, and they shall make distinct lists of all persons voted for as President, and of all persons voted for as Vice-President” (us constitution). Students will understand that the election of 1800 was the impetus for how elections are conducted now with Presidents and Vice Presidents running as a ticket, with one being the candidate for President and the other a candidate for Vice President. Another important issue that is dealt with by the 12th Amendment is what happens if the House of Representatives can not reach an agreement
on who should be President, which was almost the case in the election of 1800. Many Federalists sought to hold out until Adams’ term ended so the Senate - then controlled by the Federalists - could choose a temporary president - presumably a Federalist. The 12th Amendment put a plan in place for just such a case. “If the House of Representatives shall not choose a President whenever the right of choice shall devolve upon them … then the Vice-President shall act as President, as in the case of the death or other Constitutional disability of the President” (us constitution).

Another part of the book that would be beneficial to the American government class would be chapter six entitled A New Kind of Campaign. Prior to the election of 1800, much of the campaigning in elections was done by surrogates, but in this particular election, Adams became the first President to make tour stops and speak to the public, and he was well received throughout Maryland, Pennsylvania and other stops along the way. These campaign stops were a precursor to modern-day politics, as Adams reminded the public of his Revolutionary credentials and what his administration had accomplished - a very novel idea for the time.

A Magnificent Catastrophe by Edward J. Larson was extremely insightful, and met all my expectations. It clarified what happened in the election of 1800, and why people lost favor with Adams, and the major issues related to the election. It also clarified how the different states chose electors and how that could be manipulated. It provided magnificent insight into the characters of Adams, Jefferson, Burr and Hamilton. Finally, it explained what happened during the all important balloting in the House of Representatives.
Bibliography


George Washington's Farewell Address To the People of the United States

FRIENDS AND FELLOW-CITIZENS:

The name of American, which belongs to you, in your national capacity, must always exalt the just pride of Patriotism, more than any appellation derived from local discriminations. With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners, habits, and political principles. No Senate tradition has been more steadfastly maintained than the annual reading of President George Washington’s 1796 Farewell Address. In this letter to “Friends and Citizens,” Washington warned that the forces of geographical sectionalism, political factionalism, and interference by foreign powers in the nation’s domestic affairs threatened the stability of the Republic. He urged Americans to subordinate sectional jealousies to common national interests. Early in 1888—the centennial year of the Constitution’s ratification—the Senate recalled the ceremony of 1862 and had its presiding officer read the Address on February 22. Within a few years, the Senate made the practice an annual event. George Washington Warned Against Political Infighting in His Farewell Address. As he stepped down from the presidency, Washington urged Americans to always place the interests of the nation over their political and regional affiliations. Author: Sarah Pruitt. A Farewell Address to the Nation. President George Washington (seated) with Alexander Hamilton. Ed Vebell/Getty Images. Four years before Washington actually left office, when he had considered retiring after his first term, he had asked James Madison to draft a farewell address. It was published in the Daily American Advertiser, a Philadelphia newspaper, on September 19, 1796, and later reprinted in papers throughout the country. The letter included three main principles: 1. Importance of Unity.