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# The Election of 1800: A Cliffhanger

*Presidential candidates Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr were deadlocked in the House of Representatives with no majority for either. For seven days, as they maneuvered and schemed, the fate of the young republic hung in the ballots. John Adams had LOST re-election.*

**SETTING THE STAGE:** Only a quarter of a century after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the first election of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was carried out in an era of intensely emotional partisanship among a people deeply divided over the scope of the government's authority. But it was emotions over also the French Revolution from 1789-1815 that also deeply divided Americans. The Federalists were horrified by the violence in France and applauded Great Britain's efforts to stop it. The Jeffersonian Republicans insisted that an alliance with Great Britain would lead to a return to colonialism in America.

**THE ULTRAS:** The most extreme Federalists in the Congress called themselves "The Ultras". They strongly supported Great Britain over France. They also controlled the Congress and the Federalist Party. In response to the unrest in Europe, they passed heavy taxes to raise a provisional army against France, and attacked the press for criticizing their policies. They enacted the Alien and Sedition Acts which provided fines and jail terms for anyone who uttered or published "any false, scandalous, and malicious" statement against the United States. Jefferson saw this as a violation of the First Amendment.

**THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE:** In those days, the Constitution stipulated that each of the 138 members of the Electoral College would get to cast 2 votes for president. The Constitution also stipulated that if the candidates tied or none received the majority, the House of Representatives would elect the President. Thus, each political party nominated two candidates.

## Federalist Candidates

**President John Adams:** He had served as a delegate from Massachusetts to the Continental Congress, he aided in writing the Declaration of Independence, and he served two terms as Washington's Vice-President. He was a Federalist but did not support the extreme Ultras in his party. He refused to side with Great Britain against France and instead sent a peace envoy to France in 1800. At 65 years of age, he desperately wanted to be re-elected as president.

**Charles Pickney:** Born into Southern aristocracy in South Carolina and raised in England, he also was an advocate for American independence. He served in the Revolutionary War at the Battle of Brandywine, Germantown, and Charleston. He sat in the Constitutional Convention and served as a diplomat to France.

**John Jay:** First Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, he resigned to become the Governor of New York. He was famously known for his anti-slavery stance.

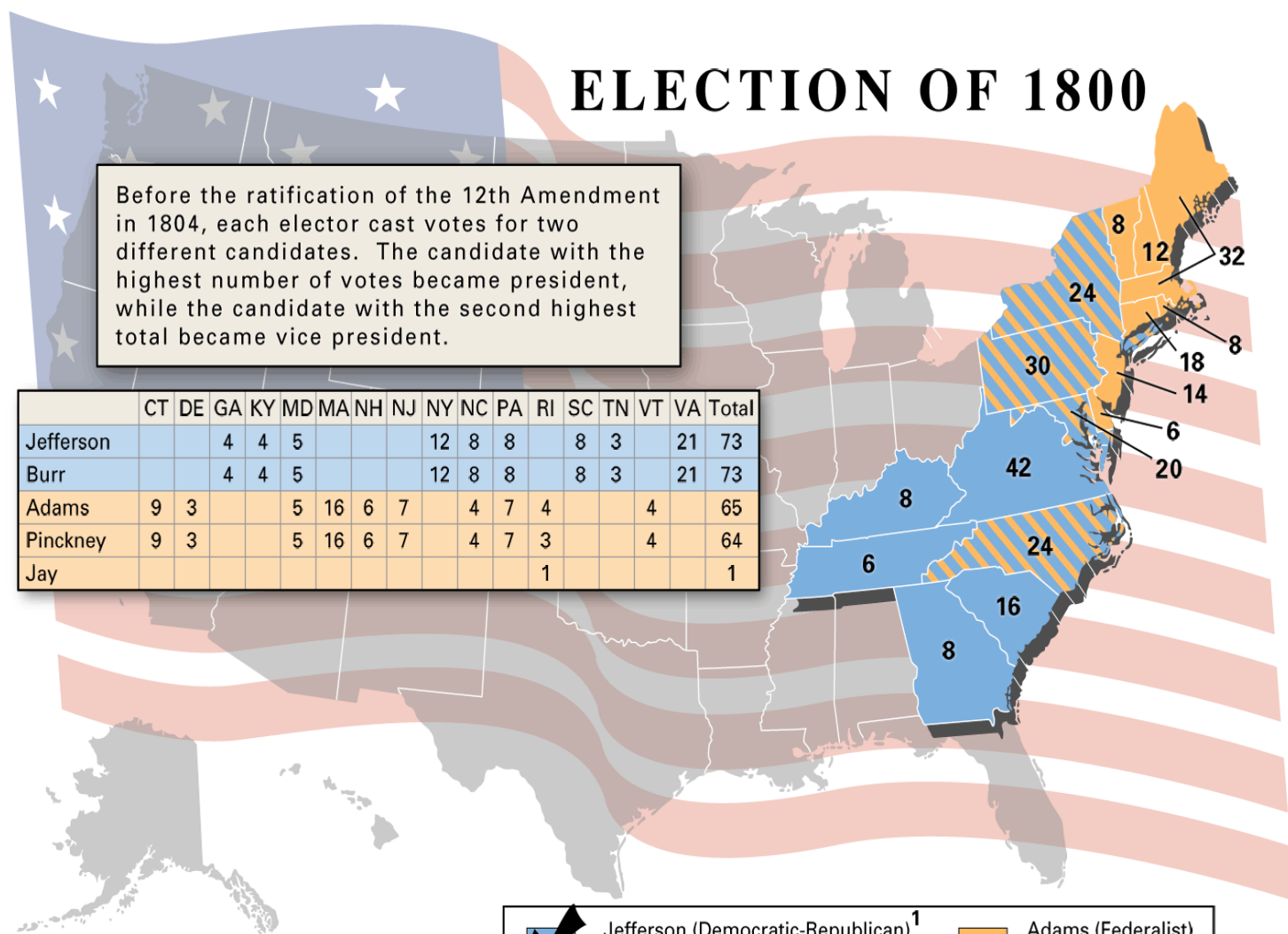
## Republican Candidates

**Thomas Jefferson:** He served in Virginia's legislature, wrote the Declaration of Independence, served in Congress, spent 5 years in France as a diplomat, was Washington's Secretary of State, and Adam's Vice-President.

**Aaron Burr:** The youngest candidate at age 44, he served in the Continental Army, and served at Valley Forge. After the war he practiced law and represented New York in the U.S. Senate.



**CAMPAIGNING:** There was no formal campaigning in 1800. They did not kiss babies, ride in parades or run ads. They didn't even make speeches. The candidates tried to remain above the fray, leaving campaigning to surrogates, particularly elected officials from within their parties. But for all its differences, much about the campaign of 1800 was recognizably modern. Politicians carefully weighed what would most likely advance their party's interests. Virginia, for instance, switched to a winner-take-all electoral format so Republicans would get every one of Virginia's 21 Electoral College votes. Massachusetts scuttled district elections in favor of having the state legislature select electors, ensuring a Federalist victory. The print media attacked the character of both men. Adams was portrayed as a monarchist who had turned his back on republicanism; he was called senile, a poor judge of character, vain and jealous. Pickney was labeled a man of "limited talents." Jefferson was accused of cowardice and of living a life of luxury at Monticello. Burr was depicted as a man without principles, a person who would do anything to get his hands on power.

**THE ELECTION:** The various presidential electors met in their respective state capitals to vote on December 3. By law, the ballots were not to be opened and counted until February 11, but the outcome would hardly be kept secret for 10 weeks. Sure enough, just nine days after the voting at large, the results were revealed. Analyze the votes below and complete the Election of 1800 questions that follow.



Before the ratification of the 12th Amendment in 1804, each elector cast votes for two different candidates. The candidate with the highest number of votes became president, while the candidate with the second highest total became vice president.

	CT	DE	GA	KY	MD	MA	NH	NJ	NY	NC	PA	RI	SC	TN	VT	VA	Total
Jefferson			4	4	5				12	8	8		8	3		21	73
Burr			4	4	5				12	8	8		8	3		21	73
Adams	9	3			5	16	6	7		4	7	4			4		65
Pinckney	9	3			5	16	6	7		4	7	3			4		64
Jay												1					1

 Jefferson (Democratic-Republican) <sup>1</sup> 73 electoral votes	 Adams (Federalist) 65 electoral votes	
Burr (Democratic-Republican) <sup>1</sup> 73 electoral votes	Pinckney (Federalist) 64 electoral votes	Jay (Federalist) 1 electoral vote

<sup>1</sup> As both Jefferson and Burr received the same number of electoral votes, the decision was referred to the House of Representatives.

# The Results of the Election of 1800

Jefferson and Burr each received 73 Electoral College votes, Adams 65, and Pickney 64. The House of Representatives would have to select the president between the two Republicans. Adams thus became the first president to fall victim to the notorious clause in Constitution that allowed slaves to be counted as 3/5 of a person for representation. If that had not been included, Adams would have won.

In the House, each state would cast a single vote. If each of the 16 states voted and none abstained, 9 states would be needed to elect a president. Republicans controlled eight delegations – NY, NJ, PA, VA, NC, GA, KY and TN. The Federalists held six: NH, NC, RI, CT, DE and SC. And two were deadlocked: MD and VT. The Congress had until noon on March 4 to decide.

The Federalists caucused to discuss their options. Surprisingly, Hamilton urged the delegates to back his old opponent Jefferson whom he believed had more experience and he felt was more trustworthy. Hamilton also tried to make a deal with Jefferson: if he got him the Federalist votes, Jefferson had to promise to keep the National Bank. Jefferson declined and the Federalists ended up backing Burr.

The House reconvened on Wednesday, February 11 during a crippling snowstorm to vote. Voting began the moment the House was gavelled into session. When the roll call was complete, Jefferson carried 8 states, Burr six, and two deadlocked states had cast uncommitted ballots. Jefferson still needed one more vote for a majority. Congress voted again and again with no clear winner. By Saturday evening, the House had cast 35 votes and the deadlock seemed unbreakable.

For weeks the press had warned of drastic consequences if Republicans were denied the presidency. Now that danger seemed palpable. A shaken President Adams maintained that “a civil war was expected”. There was talk that Virginia would secede if Jefferson were not elected. Some Republicans declared they would convene another constitutional convention to restructure the federal government so that it reflected the “democratic spirit of America”. It was rumored that a mob had stormed the arsenal in Philadelphia and was preparing to march on Washington to drive the defeated Federalists from power. Jefferson told Adams that many Republicans were prepared to use force to prevent the Federalists “legislative usurpation” of the presidency.

Due to these threats, James Bayard, the delegate from DE promised to change his vote if Jefferson would change his mind and agree to keep the National Bank. Jefferson saw this as a path to victory and agreed. Delaware decided to abstain and Maryland decided to support Jefferson. On February 17<sup>th</sup>, the 36<sup>th</sup> and final vote was taken in the House and Jefferson won the presidency 10 to 4 with 2 states abstaining (SC and DE). Ever an honorable man, Jefferson kept his promise and not only tolerated the national bank, but also kept most of the Federalist employees of the bank.

In the days that followed the House battle, Jefferson wrote letters to several surviving signers of the Declaration of Independence to explain what he believed his election had meant. It guaranteed the triumph of the American Revolution, he said, ensuring the realization of the new “chapter in the history of man” that had been promised by Thomas Paine in 1776. In the years that followed, his thoughts often returned to the election's significance. In 1819, at age 76, he would characterize it as the “revolution of 1800” and he rejoiced that it had been conducted peacefully by the rational and peaceful instruments of reform - the suffrage of the people.

1. How do the two parties differ in their foreign policy concerning Great Britain and France?
2. Who are the "Ultras"? What actions do they take that angers Jefferson?
3. In 1800 there were \_\_\_\_\_ members in the Electoral College, which meant that \_\_\_\_\_ were needed to win the presidency. Remember: each member got 2 votes back then!
4. If the candidates tied or no one won a majority of the electoral votes, the \_\_\_\_\_ would decide who would become president. Is this still true today? \_\_\_\_\_
5. How did elected officials in each party compete for Electoral College votes?
6. Which 3 states had the highest population in 1800, thereby having the highest electoral votes?
7. Which 2 states had the smallest population in 1800, thereby having the lowest electoral votes?
8. Where was the Federalist Party the strongest? \_\_\_\_\_  
Where was the Republican Party the strongest? \_\_\_\_\_  
Why do you think votes were concentrated in particular regions like they were?
9. Why did the House of Representatives have to select the winner of the election?
10. How did the 3/5 Compromise Clause affect the outcome of the election?
11. In the House, each state got \_\_\_\_\_ vote for president, so \_\_\_\_\_ were needed for a victory.
12. The House voted \_\_\_\_\_ and still could not decide on a winner.  
Why was this seen as a "constitutional crisis"?
13. Who finally changed their vote? Why?
14. Who won the election?
15. Why did Jefferson later call this episode "the revolution of 1800" when there was no violence?
16. How did the 12<sup>th</sup> amendment change the rules of presidential elections?