

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN MAJOR POLITICAL PARTIES

Most historical literature refers to the "Party" of the Washington Administration as the Federalists with those in opposition to the policies of that Administration as Antifederalists; however, the use of these designations is, in fact, more than a little inaccurate. The term "Antifederalist" (originally applied to those who had opposed the ratification of the Constitution drafted by the Framers meeting in Convention in Philadelphia in 1787) ceased to have any real meaning as a designation of a political faction once the Constitution formally took effect on 4 March 1789, as anyone serving in the new Federal Government had to take an oath to the new Constitution before entering upon their duties: referring to members of Congress as "Antifederalist", thus, makes little- if any- sense. In addition, there were no real national Political Parties prior to the Presidential Election of 1796 (although loose coalitions between, where not pre-arranged alliances among, State-based "factions"- along the lines of those cosmopolitan vs. localist divisions in Revolutionary Era politics suggested by the historian Jackson Turner Main- would prove to be the basis of the two Parties which would emerge in 1796 and did also have some effect on the political make-up of the first four Congresses).

It is best, therefore, to treat those who served in the first four Congresses [1789-1797] as being either Administration (that is, generally allied with those around Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton and Vice President John Adams) or Opposition (those generally associated with Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson and Congressman James Madison)- with the caveat that, while there is an apparent lineal connection between these groupings and the later Federalists and Republicans, respectively, the Presidency of George Washington was an era of "factions" rather than one of "Parties" and that there were shifting sands in the political landscape of this early era in American political history. For his part, President Washington should be held to be a member of neither faction/future Party; although his political leanings would almost certainly be classified as generally more "Federalist" than "Republican", one has to think he would have been quite surprised to see himself listed in modern American History books as a dyed-in-the-wool Federalist simply because his Vice President would be as President.

By the start of the 5th Congress (which coincided with the Inauguration of John Adams as President on 4 March 1797), two national Major Political Parties had emerged from among the strong supporters of the policies of outgoing President Washington and those who had pretty much been opposed to these policies, respectively. Those who had supported the policies of the Washington Administration became known as Federalists because they supported a strong national government as a counterweight to the States; those who had been in Opposition became known as Republicans because they felt that defending the sovereignty of the States against encroachments by the Federal Government was a truer essence of the federal republic known as the United States of America; however, the Federalists, feeling that their contrary vision of what a federal republic should be was the more "republican" in spirit, derisively referred to the Republicans as "democrats" (a term which, at the time, had connotations of the mob rule associated with the then-still very recent Reign of Terror following the French Revolution of 1789). It is true that some Republicans of this era came to see identification with Democracy as a badge of honor and one often sees the term Democratic-Republicans applied to this Party in historical literature (this usage also creating a lineal relationship between these early Republicans and the Democrats of today); however, many political observers, instead, refer to the Republicans of this era as the "old", or "Jeffersonian", Republicans as a better, and more accurate, method of distinguishing them from the Republicans of today.

John Quincy Adams was elected as a Republican (in fact, all the candidates for President in 1824 were ostensibly Republicans) but, during the course of the 19th Congress [1825-1827] and on into the 20th Congress [1827-1829], the Republicans in both houses of Congress began to separate themselves into "pro-Adams/anti-Jackson" and "pro-Jackson/anti-Adams" factions- this last feeling strongly that, because of the controversial result of the 1824 Presidential Election, President Adams was not a "legitimate" holder of his office and, thus, coming to favor Senator Andrew Jackson of Tennessee, who had been defeated by Adams for the Presidency in 1824, as

the next President of the United States in the upcoming 1828 Presidential Election. It is the practice of TheGreenPapers.com to refer to the first Republican faction, simply, as Adams Republicans, while referring to the second as Jackson Republicans, though political observers have used the term Jackson Democrats for this second Republican faction of the era instead.

By the start of the 21st Congress (coinciding with the Inauguration of President Andrew Jackson on 4 March 1829), the two opposing factions within the "old" Republican Party which had become evident in the course of the two preceding Congresses had coalesced into two new Major Parties: the Democratic Republicans (the one-time Jackson Republicans) and the National Republicans (the one-time Adams Republicans). The Democratic Republicans took their name from their identification with the democracy they urged on behalf of the "common man" as well as a strong historical tie they now felt with the old "Jeffersonian" Republicans who- as noted above- had been referred to as "democrats" as a term of derision (the "Jackson" faction thus painting those who supported outgoing President John Quincy Adams as being the contemporary equivalent of the Federalists of Adams' father, President John Adams). The National Republicans, meanwhile, adapted their name from the nationalizing policies pushed by the outgoing Administration of their champion, President Adams. Note that neither faction becoming Party, however, was yet willing to completely give up their identification with the "old" Republicans of the era before the 1824 Presidential Election which had created each faction cum Party in the first place.

By the start of the 23rd Congress (which coincided with the Second Inauguration of President Andrew Jackson on 4 March 1833), the one-time Democratic Republicans were becoming more generally known as Democrats, the name itself derived from the aforementioned one-time term of derision hurled by the Federalists at the "old" (or "Jeffersonian") Republicans- with whom those who strongly supported the policies of President Jackson closely identified historically- back in 1796 and 1800. This Major Party has, of course, stayed with the name Democrats ever since. Meanwhile, by the start of the 24th Congress (4 March 1835), the one-time National Republicans were more generally known as Whigs, a name evocative of the political faction in opposition to the English Crown during the era of the Stuarts (17th Century); in addition, the Patriots of the American Revolution were often referred to- by friend and foe alike- as "Whigs" (in contradistinction to the loyalist "Tories"). These 19th Century American Whigs saw themselves as being a bulwark against the "excesses" of the Administration of "King Andrew" Jackson and his heir apparent, Vice President Martin Van Buren, hence the use of this name by this Major Party.

The Slavery issue, however, marked the death knell of the Whigs as a Major Party: the Compromise of 1850 (which first adapted the concept of "squatter sovereignty" to the problem of the extension of Slavery to the territories) was lost in the battle over the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 (which first extended this principle north of the northernmost limit of Slavery under the Missouri Compromise of 1820). In the wake of the resultant political fallout, Free Soilers and so-called "Conscience" Whigs joined forces with so-called "Free" Democrats and even denizens of the nativist American (known colloquially as the "Know-Nothing") Party to sow the seeds of a new Major Party: one soon enough to become more generally known as the Republicans, the name of this Major Party to this day. Meanwhile, other Whigs (primarily in the South) joined the Democrats, while a core of so-called "old" Whigs (principally in the Border South) vainly attempted to hold what was, by now, an "anti-Free Soil yet pro-Union" faction together as the winds of Secession and Civil War began to intensify and the end of the 1850s drew nigh (this last remnant of the Whigs would become the core of a short-lived Constitutional Union Party by the 1860 Presidential Election). The 34th Congress [1855-1857], thus, can be seen as a more or less transitional period in which the final decay and decline of the Whigs was becoming offset by the shifting sands of the contemporary antebellum political landscape swiftly producing a new "Democrats versus Republicans" Major Party alignment: one that, at least insofar as the Parties' names are concerned, continues to this very day.