# The First 'Rigged' Election

By James Traub
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[When Andrew Jackson lost the White House to John Quincy Adams in 1824, the accusations began to fly.]

Andrew Jackson had every reason to consider himself the victor of the presidential **election** of 1824. In a hard-fought campaign, he had won the most popular votes and electoral votes, too. But because he didn't gain an outright majority in the Electoral College, the **election** was thrown into the House of Representatives, as the Constitution stipulated.

There Jackson faced his top rivals for the White House, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams and Treasury Secretary William Crawford. With Crawford out of contention because of an incapacitating stroke, it was plain that either Jackson or Adams would carry a majority of the 24 states that then constituted the union.

The key to victory lay with the wily speaker of the House, Henry Clay of Kentucky, who also had been a candidate for president but had finished well behind. After a series of discreet and carefully indirect conversations with Adams, Clay was persuaded that he would be asked to serve as secretary of state in an Adams administration, thus improving his own future presidential prospects. Clay announced his support for Adams.

Privately, Clay also appears to have persuaded the congressional delegation of his native Kentucky, as well as those of Ohio and Missouri, to throw their support to the standard-bearer of old New England. Adams carried all three states on his way to a stunning first-ballot victory in the House of Representatives. The moment Adams named Clay as his secretary of state, an enraged Jackson began claiming that the **election** had been **rigged**.

Donald Trump, as we learned in the last of his debates with Hillary Clinton, is threatening to become the first presidential candidate in modern history to lose an **election** and call it fixed. But in the nation's early years, when democratic norms had not yet come to be regarded as holy writ, the presidential loser could, and sometimes did, make just that claim.

Mr. Trump's goal, like Jackson's, would not be to get the results overturned but rather to cripple a winner whom he regarded, or at least claimed to regard, as illegitimate -- and to position himself as the beneficiary of that failure. Jackson's subsequent crusade against Adams shows just how ruinous such an allegation can be.

The **election** of 1824 pitted America's demographic and political past against its future. Adams was the son of a famous Founder, a Federalist from the ancient Commonwealth of Massachusetts, a Puritan in the depths of his soul, a patrician who despised party politics and had few illusions about "the people."

Jackson was a new American, a poor boy from the rural South who became a successful lawyer in the frontier territory of Tennessee before joining the army. Jackson was as remote and forbidding a figure as Adams, but to voters, he was a military hero. During the War of 1812, he had slaughtered Creek Indians alongside Davy Crockett and defeated the British in the Battle of New Orleans, where his toughness won him the nickname "Old Hickory."

Adams, who had served President George Washington as ambassador to the Netherlands (a position he accepted at age 26), represented continuity with the founding generation. He was an amateur scholar (but serious enough to serve as the first Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard) and an unbending moralist who once proudly noted in his journal a political rival's crack that "he believed I considered every public measure as I should a proposition in Euclid, abstracted from any party considerations." That was precisely how Adams considered most political propositions.

Jackson ran against the status quo. "Intrigue, management and corruption," he thundered in widely reprinted letters, had destroyed the nation's fabric. "Nothing but the virtue of the people" could restore America's founding ideals.

Nor was Adams his only target. Henry Clay looked to be no less formidable a rival. And while charges of corruption would hardly stick to the irreproachable Adams, Clay, a career politician, had a reputation for secrecy and gamesmanship. Jackson once called him "the basest, meanest scoundrel that ever disgraced the image of God."

Jackson was thus the first presidential candidate to run against Washington.

The **election** of 1824 took place during a brief interval of nonpartisan politics. The Federalist Party of Alexander Hamilton and John Adams had disappeared, and the Democratic Party that Jackson himself would usher into being had not yet taken shape. President James Monroe called himself a "Democratic-Republican," as did both John Quincy Adams and Jackson.

On the issues, Adams and Clay were nationalists who championed an active federal government, while Crawford and Jackson, the Southerners, stood for states' rights. But no one salient issue emerged to define the race, which in the end turned into a contest of personal popularity.

States voted over a period of months. By the fall, it had become clear that only Jackson enjoyed national popularity. Adams had won New England, Crawford

had taken parts of the Deep South and Clay portions of the West. Jackson won 99 electoral votes, Adams 84, Crawford 41 and Clay 37.

Since the House had never before used the constitutional procedure for a presidential runoff (though it had used a system, afterward changed, to choose Thomas Jefferson over Aaron Burr in 1800), no one could predict what the outcome would be, or could say what tactics were or weren't permitted. Both Adams and Jackson courted Clay, who immensely enjoyed, and thus protracted, his role as kingmaker.

Clay and Jackson despised one another, and Clay told a friend that as between "the two evils," he preferred the priggish and self-righteous Adams to the militaristic and perhaps demagogic Jackson. Clay dispatched an emissary to sound out Adams, who offered assurances that he "harbored no hostility" toward his vanquished rival. This was not even remotely true, since Adams believed, with good reason, that Clay had secretly tried to blacken his reputation in the course of the campaign.

But the signal had been sent and received. At a meeting on Jan. 9, 1825, in Adams's home on F Street in Washington, D.C., the two men held "a long conversation explanatory of the past and prospective of the future," as Adams wrote in his diary, with uncharacteristic circumlocution.

Whether or not Adams offered Clay a quid, the wished-for quo wasn't long in coming. Adams hadn't received a single popular vote in Kentucky, and the state legislature had passed a resolution overwhelmingly supporting Jackson. But on Jan. 24, the state's congressional caucus announced that it would go with Adams.

Even men who knew that Clay preferred Adams, and that Adams welcomed the prospect of Clay in his cabinet, understood that the two men had conspired to suborn the will of the people of Kentucky. It was the most morally compromised act of John Quincy Adams's career -- indeed, almost the only one.

Jackson had campaigned against corruption without furnishing any evidence of it. Now news of the "corrupt bargain" swept the country, thanks in no small part to Jackson's enthusiastic fanning of the flames. In early 1826, he and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, Adams's vice president but already his rival, lent $5,000 to the editors of the United States Telegraph, a new Washington daily, and recruited a slashing proslavery polemicist to serve as editor.

The paper hammered away virtually every day at the "bargain, intrigue and management" that had elevated Adams and Clay to power. The following spring, Jackson established a group of supporters whom he called the Central

Corresponding Committee to block "falsehoods and calumny, by the publication of truth." It was the first political war room.

What made Jackson America's first truly democratic leader was not his vague expressions of faith in "the people" but his immense success in conscripting voters into active engagement with his political campaign. Jackson built a national party machine to support his candidacy. Adams, meanwhile, was governing in the spirit of his hero, George Washington. He refused to use patronage to reward his friends or punish his enemies, even as Jackson's allies castigated him for allegedly doing so.

Adams made no attempt to conciliate his rivals. He had spent years formulating his big-government philosophy, and he took the opportunity of his first message to Congress to lay it out, calling for new departments, a national university, federally sponsored research and an ambitious program of "internal improvements" -- roads, bridges, canals. When Clay advised him to propose nothing that Congress was likely to reject, Adams replied loftily that he would "look to a practicability of a longer range than a simple session of Congress."

Jackson could also take some credit for Adams's failures, for his relentless attacks had robbed Adams of the legitimacy he would have enjoyed as a living link to the Founders and the nation's foremost public servant. Adams's rivals in Congress, including the cunning Martin Van Buren of New York, knew that they could attack the president with impunity.

For some time, Jackson had been proclaiming that he had contemptuously spurned Clay when the latter had sought to reach the same devious bargain with him that he had ultimately made with Adams. By 1826, Jackson had been forced to admit that this was false; Clay had never so much as met with him during this period. Clay exulted that the tide had finally turned.

He was wrong: The "corrupt bargain" had so deeply ingrained itself in the national consciousness that facts to the contrary could have no effect. In the 1826 by-**election**, the Jacksonians gained a majority in the House and began to act as the governing party.

In 1828, Andrew Jackson was elected president with 56% of the popular vote and two-thirds of the electoral vote. Three times as many Americans voted as had in 1824. It was the beginning of the "Jacksonian Revolution," a period that, according to the historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., saw the rise of new classes of men, Eastern laborers as well as Western pioneers, who challenged the existing order and demanded a political system that worked on their behalf. Schlesinger's Jackson is the great-grandfather of modern liberalism (a patrimony that the small-government Jackson would have furiously forsworn).

Jackson's demagogic four-year campaign against Adams helped to wreck the presidency of one of America's most gifted statesmen. At the same time, however, Jackson embodied a new turn in American democracy, deftly channeling the new spirit of political engagement. By the 1820s, democracy itself had become too elemental a force to be checked or to need the promotion of any one man.

Today, American democracy is more vulnerable in important respects than it was in the early days of the republic. Though our institutions are vastly more mature than they were almost two centuries ago, our habits of mind are more brittle. In 1824, we were still a very new country, fired by the raw energies of youth. Even a half-century ago, the America of John F. Kennedy was expansive and forward-looking in its view of itself and the world.

But the spirit of enthusiasm, the almost blind optimism about the future, that made America so exceptional has curdled recently into a sour distrust. Many Americans are all too ready to believe the worst not only of their leaders but of one another. Standards of civility and mutual respect have given way to angry accusations of deception and bad faith.

Democracy, after all, is not just a set of practices but a culture. It lives not only in such formal mechanisms as party and ballot but in the instincts and expectations of citizens. Objective circumstances -- jobs, war, competition from abroad -- shape that political culture, but so do the words and deeds of leaders.