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# It's Like Déjà vu All Over Again: Seismic Changes in the American Experiment

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The nature of the American experiment in government is that change must be a part of the system. Election years are prime opportunities for change, evidenced in part by 1828 and the most recent election in 2016. The presidential election of 1828 pitted the stuffy, intellectual elitist John Quincy Adams versus the brash, volatile Andrew Jackson. The campaign and election of Jackson could be seen to be a clear example of a watershed moment in American history. Such watershed moments that occur more frequently than is realized. As historian James McPherson said in reference to 1828:

Other presidential elections have proved to be pivotal moments in American history: 1800, when the losing incumbent peacefully yielded power to the winner; 1860, when the losers refused to yield and precipitated a war that ended giving America a new lease on life and a new birth of freedom; 1932, when the relationship between government and socioeconomic order was forever altered; and perhaps 2008, when the barrier of race that has divided Americans for centuries was breached.<sup>1</sup>

While the previously cited elections might not seem like a large number from a sample size, they demonstrate that dramatic shifts in American democracy happen much more frequently than we are led to believe. When the popular misconception that the kind of shift seen in 2016 has never occurred before is perpetuated, it stalls our public conversation. The extreme reactions that characterized the 2016 election can be softened with a more thorough appreciation for change in the American experience. It is through that appreciation that the nation can pursue a more perfect union in a constructive manner together.

The study of history has the potential to create the kind of context and understanding of a current situation that no other discipline can match. The presidential election of 2016 is one of those moments that requires a historical foundation to gain a fuller understanding of what occurred. Throughout the election cycle, pundits from across the political spectrum referred to

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<sup>1</sup> Parsons, *The Birth of Modern Politics*, xviii.

the battle between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton as something that we as a nation had never seen in our history. The combative campaign ate up news cycles, driven by a population craving the grimy, personal details of every part of the circus. It seemed, and we were told, that hostilities between the two parties and their followers were at an all-time high. There could be no mistaking, the country was at a crossroads, a watershed moment that could dictate the future for generations of Americans. Another key watershed moment, with an election that eerily mirrors that of 2016, occurred in 1828.

The presidential election of 1828 has been referred to as the birthplace of true democracy, as Americans from around the country threw off the shackles of aristocratic Federalism and finally elected someone who was not a member of the nation's elite. Lynn Hudson Parsons creates a powerful narrative of the events surrounding the election in his work, *The Birth of Modern Politics*. For the first elections in American history, there had been very little campaigning, but that changed in 1828. Following the contentious election of 1824, which Andrew Jackson labeled to be "the corrupt bargain", where after no electoral college majority was reached, the election was decided by the House of Representatives and suspiciously given to John Quincy Adams, the fiery Tennessean was determined to chart a winning course in 1828. While Jackson is often thought of as a purely wild man, at this point in his career he was a keen political tactician and worked to develop a party structure around him that still exists today. Parsons writes, "In the presidential election campaign of 1828 can be found the elements, sometimes rudimentary, of most elections to come: coordinated media, fund-raising, organized rallies, opinion polling, campaign paraphernalia, ethnic voting blocs, image making, even opposition research, smear tactics, and dirty tricks. Most, but not all, of these innovations were

introduced by the Jacksonians...”.<sup>2</sup> It was the Jacksonians who recognized during the campaign itself that there was a seismic shifting in the American experiment, and it was they who benefited from the shift. One clear example of this shift was in the role of journalism.

In the early stages of the United States, nearly every paper that was produced was funded by a certain political party with the goal of communicating their platform to the larger public. This presented itself as an incredible opportunity to Jackson. Three powerhouse newspapers dominated the industry: *The United States Telegraph*, the *Richmond Enquirer*, and the *Albany Argus*.<sup>3</sup> While these three stood at the top of what Parsons calls “a remarkably organized journalistic pyramid”, there were dozens of papers throughout the relatively small nation that spread Jackson’s message to those near and far. Daniel Walker Howe, in his sweeping narrative *What Hath God Wrought*, details the communications revolution that was unfolding. As Howe describes, “...Jackson’s leading newspaper editor, the ardently proslavery Missourian Duff Green, knew how to exploit the communications revolution: He distributed his *United States Telegraph* through the mails using the franking privilege of Jackson’s congressmen”.<sup>4</sup> The franking privilege refers to the right of congressmen or women to send mail to their constituents without having to pay postage. Jackson’s political machinery took advantage of this privilege to communicate his message to the voting population better than any of his opponents. His message included the kind of personal mud-slinging that nearly all Americans condemn in elections but eat up nonetheless. The Jacksonians focused on the charge that Adams was a key part in the corrupt bargain of 1824, while also painting him as a fancy aristocrat who had lived

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<sup>2</sup> Parsons, *The Birth of Modern Politics*, 133.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>4</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 282

with his wife before they were married.<sup>5</sup> The most outlandish charge levied against Adams was that the current president was once a pimp while serving as a minister in Russia, exchanging sexual favors for political ones.<sup>6</sup> While journalistic expansion was revolutionary in its own way, another key aspect of the election was the expanded electorate.

It is important to remember that during the early elections in the United States, suffrage was not universal to all white men. There were a number of other qualifications that were deemed necessary to vote before the 1828 election. After the 1824 election, many of the states in the Union altered their constitutions to allow for universal white male suffrage.<sup>7</sup> With this expansion of the electorate, there were thousands of new voters for 1828. Howe depicts the new voters well, writing, “If Jackson was the candidate of the ‘common man,’ as he was so often described, it was specifically the common *white* man, and one not bothered by slavery or the abuses of Freemasonry. The Jacksonians cultivated an anti-elitist image.”<sup>8</sup> This specific bloc of voters focused on Jackson’s egalitarian message, his military heroics, and his anti-aristocratic beliefs. The Jacksonian machine recognized this anti-establishment uproar, and took full advantage. Especially in the South, the party machine worked to turn out new voters at an incredible pace. Parsons documents the activity, writing, “Hickory Clubs sprouted in a number of towns; hickory trees were planted, usually followed by a rally of enthusiasts brandishing hickory poles. In the South, knowing that crowds would be there in advance, the Jacksonians scheduled their meetings where men were already gathered for militia musters or court

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<sup>5</sup> Reynolds, *Waking Giant*, 74-75

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Remini, *John Quincy Adams*, 127.

<sup>8</sup> Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 282

meetings.”<sup>9</sup> In the throngs of rural America, anti-aristocratic sentiment ran high, spurred on by Jackson’s pledge to “sweep the Augean Stable.”<sup>10</sup> Jackson became their champion.

In 2016, the United States was amid a new communication revolution, with the newspapers at the short end of the stick this time. While social media usage in elections was revolutionized in political campaigns by Barack Obama and his team in 2004 and 2008, the way that Donald Trump manipulated the medium in 2016 was something never seen. Twitter in particular allowed for Mr. Trump to take the gloves off and pursue the kind of campaign that he wanted. Brian Ott, a communications professor at Texas Tech University, has developed a three-part explanation that helps explain Trump’s proficiency with the medium. Ott argues that Twitter demands simplicity, promotes impulsivity, and fosters incivility.<sup>11</sup> The limit on characters in a tweet mandates simplicity, which prevents a complex message to be properly distributed. Very little effort is required to craft and send a tweet, which increases the impulsivity of the medium. Thanks to the informal and depersonalized nature of Twitter, the medium foments incivility.<sup>12</sup> It does not take a social scientist or a psychologist to recognize that Trump, especially during the election cycle, fit the three criteria developed by Ott. Just as Jackson took advantage of the spreading medium of the newspaper, Trump has taken advantage of Twitter and the increasing polarization of American society.

As Jackson and his campaign recognized and exploited the expanded electorate in 1828, Trump and his team focused on what essentially a repeat of the Jacksonian base of the voting public in 2016. The rural white vote was, in part, what propelled him to the highest office in the

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<sup>9</sup> Parsons, *The Birth of Modern Politics*, 138.

<sup>10</sup> Parsons, *The Birth of Modern Politics*, 140.

<sup>11</sup> Ott, "The age of Twitter: Donald J. Trump and the politics of debasement", 60-62.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

land. Trump's ability to turn out these voters might have been the straw that broke the camel's back in the election. Following the election, NPR published an article documenting the breakdown of the voting bloc in terms of location and race. The results are striking. Trump generated 62% of the rural vote compared to Hillary Clinton's 34%. Trump's percentage is a 9% increase from the 2008 election.<sup>13</sup> This demonstrates that the rural vote increased considerably for Trump, which I assert is a credit to the frustration that existed in the United States, a frustration that Trump tapped into through his use of Twitter. These numbers increase even more when one focuses on white rural voters. PewResearch published a study that found among rural white women, Trump had a victory margin of 62% to 34% and among rural white males, his margin was 72% to 24%.<sup>14</sup> While these numbers are not shocking to anyone, the increase from years past indicates that a greater number of rural whites turned out than in previous elections. I assert that such an increase is due to Trump, like Jackson, and his ability to communicate his message through the effective medium of the time. Both men rode their newly accessed base all the way to the White House. But what of the reaction once they got there?

The reaction to Andrew Jackson's election in 1828 was decidedly two sided. His supporters saw his rise to the White House as the true democratization of the United States, at least in terms of the 1828 electorate. A segment of the country rejoiced at Jackson's election, in a similar manner to Trump's election in 2016. The mantra of "taking our country back" resounded in the response of the victors in each election. In 1828, it was the Democrats celebrating what they believed to be the emergence of a truly democratic process, with more voters taking part in the election than ever before and the election of a non-aristocratic man who would challenge the

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<sup>13</sup> Kurtzleben, "Rural Voters Played A Big Part In Helping Trump Defeat Clinton".

<sup>14</sup> Morin, "Behind Trump's win in rural white America: Women joined men in backing him".

status quo in Washington, D.C. In 2016, it was the Republicans claiming more than just an electoral victory. The rise of Trump, for his supporters, signaled an end to business as usual in Washington, and a true victory for the working-class person. In both cases, however, there was another reaction to the election, one focused on what seemed to be an irreversible shift in American democracy.

In the case of Jackson, one of the intellectual giants in the United States who found him to be wholly inadequate to assume the office of the presidency. John Quincy Adams had spent much of the campaign focusing on Jackson's shortcomings, both professionally and personally. The man who engaged in duels, shot his own soldiers, and could fly off the handle at a moment's notice was dramatically unqualified for the presidency. Adams held this belief long after the election, writing that Jackson was "a murderer, and adulterer, and a profoundly pious Presbyterian, who, in the last days of his life belied and slandered me before the world."<sup>15</sup> Adams was not alone in this belief. Thomas Jefferson, in 1824 as Jackson ran for the first time, said, "I feel much alarmed at the prospect of seeing General Jackson President. He is one of the most unfit men I know of for such a place. His passions are terrible. He is a dangerous man."<sup>16</sup> Such a view was common among the Washington elite, with Daniel Webster remarking, "Nobody knows what he will do ... The city is full of speculation."<sup>17</sup> What followed were eight of the most formational years in the history of democracy in the United States. Parsons writes, "Contrary to Adams' prediction, Jackson's presidency did not 'go to wreck and ruin' ... When he stepped down in March 1837 both the presidency and American politics had been permanently

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<sup>15</sup> Parsons, *The Birth of Modern Politics*, 197.

<sup>16</sup> Reynolds, *Waking Giant*, 82.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

changed.”<sup>18</sup> As a nation, and as a people, the United States finds itself in that position once again.

It is no secret that there has been a dramatic and severe reaction to Donald Trump’s election in some quarters of the United States. It would be a disservice to list them all here. One can easily get a copy of the *New York Times*, *Politico*, or any other number of publications and find articles and op-eds decrying the perceived decimation of democracy in the United States. In a far too perfect example, the professor who correctly predicted Trump’s election, is now publishing a book predicting the impeachment of Trump, declaring he wrote it “to explain how Trump threatens the institutions and traditions that have made America safe and free for 230 years, and I’ll make it clear why a Republican Congress might impeach a president of its own party.”<sup>19</sup> While this might seem like a trivial example of a post-election response, I believe it corresponds to the thinking of a segment of the country. The exact sentiment could have been uttered about the Jackson presidency, one intent on focusing on what could go wrong in the administration. When a seismic shift occurs, the extreme reactions to retreat and view the election as a death sentence for the nation do real harm to our public discourse. If the election was the earthquake, there will continue to be a number of aftershocks. Just because the republic survived Jackson in the White House does not mean he was a good president. It is up to the concerned citizens of the nation to remain committed to working towards a more perfect union and holding the elected leader accountable. In 1828, following a crushing defeat at the hands of a man he considered to be unfit for the office, John Quincy Adams did not view the election as the nail in the coffin of American democracy. He remained committed to pursuing the common

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<sup>18</sup> Parsons, *The Birth of Modern Politics*, 190.

<sup>19</sup> Dove, “Prediction prof: Trump will be Impeached”.

good. John Quincy Adams was elected to Congress in 1830, and it is his work there that is most remembered today, specifically with the abolition movement. With a more complete vision for elections in the United States, we can see that the 2016 election was not a never before seen event, but another key part of the continued grand experiment of American democracy.

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