
Reviewed by Spencer McBride, Department of History, Louisiana State University

In 1796, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson vied for the American presidency in the country’s first contested presidential election. Yet, historians frequently give that contest second billing to the dramatic rematch between these two founders four years later. This is in part because the election of 1800 featured a large-scale smear campaign against Thomas Jefferson, disputes among Federalists about abandoning Adams for Charles Pinckney, and astute political maneuvering by Aaron Burr that delivered New York to the Republicans. Though 1800 appears to be the more provocative of the two elections, it is not necessarily the most significant where the creation of the American political system and the defining of the American presidency are concerned. In The First Presidential Contest, Jeffrey L. Pasley illuminates the partisanship surrounding early presidential politics and reveals the election of 1796 as a significant catalyst in the development of the American democracy.

The primary importance of the election of 1796 to the history of American politics in general (and the American presidency in particular) is that the contest became “a revealing rough draft of what came later” (13). The Federalist and Republican parties of the 1790s were hardly the institutionalized parties we expect today. Even so, it would be a mistake to dismiss their efforts in the 1796 campaign as somehow rudimentary. “The real importance of parties in the time of the Founders is as rather loose but intense communities of political ideology, emotion, and action...,” Pasley argues. “Party affiliation was not a matter of membership or private choice, but an all-encompassing cultural stance” (6). Accordingly, Pasley frames the first presidential contest as a major battle in the country’s earliest “culture war” (224-226).

Federalist attacks on Jefferson and his politics were not wholly organic. They derived from talking points that Alexander Hamilton and his loyal followers carefully crafted. Federalists used Jefferson’s embrace of the radical Enlightenment to depict the author of the Declaration of Independence as too soft and effeminate to protect the country from external threats. They emphasized Jefferson’s rumored deism as a scare tactic, inferring that a Jefferson presidency would endanger American religious life. And they capitalized on Jefferson’s support for the French Revolution by invoking images of Jacobins instituting an American “Reign of Terror” should the Virginian ascend to the office of the chief executive. While these tactics were most immediately concerned with blocking the election of Jefferson, they had the long-term effect of dividing the American polity in a liberal-conservative dichotomy. “The Federalist attacks of 1796 wrapped their caricature of Jefferson in a powerful conservative critique of French revolutionary radicalism, the Enlightenment, and post-Christian morals,” Pasley argues. He concludes that “The basic images of liberalism and conservatism in American politics have never strayed very far from this original Federalist template” (11). Republican counterattacks contributed to the creation of this partisan model as well, particularly inasmuch as they repudiated the Federalist protection of social hierarchy and deference to wealthy elites to frame Adams as a monarchist opposed to the spread of liberty. These were not personal attacks on Adams so much as they were criticisms of the Federalist program to which the Vice-President had proved all too willing to sign his name (275-277).

The presidency was both a pragmatic and a symbolic position in the 1790s, just as it is in the twenty-first century. Americans cast votes for a candidate not only in a show of support for the policies he or she promises to enact, but also for the political and cultural values he or she claims to espouse. One of the most significant implications of The First Presidential Contest is the way in which Pasley demonstrates the dual function of the first presidential contest. The election of 1796 was not only a seminal moment in the ongoing debate over what the presidency should be and who should ideally occupy the office, it was also one of the earliest contests upon which the first American political parties cut their ideological and strategic teeth.

The First Presidential Contest is an enjoyable read in large part because of Pasley’s fluid prose style, in which he seamlessly weaves his political narrative with fresh historical analysis. It is also a provocative interpretation of early American democracy that is likely to generate debate among historians and
political scientists alike. By shifting the spotlight from 1800 to 1796, Pasley forces his readers to rethink the partisanship of American presidential elections and the development of the presidency well into the eighteenth century.