

# Contrasting Principles of Jeffersonian Democracy with Jacksonian Democracy

*Two era's of political philosophy – that of Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson – dominated the orientation of political thought in early American history. Their views and influences greatly shaped the political orientation of the nation well beyond their presidency. Events they set in motion may be viewed as either democratic or anti-democratic in nature.*

## Jeffersonian Democracy (president 1801-1809)

In its core ideals it is characterized by the following elements, which the Jeffersonians expressed in their speeches and legislation:

- The core political value of America is representative democracy; citizens have a civic duty to aid the state and resist corruption, especially monarchism and aristocracy.
- Grouping into ideologically-similar groups is advantageous (Jefferson is considered the founder of the modern political party)
- The yeoman farmer best exemplifies civic virtue and independence from corrupting city influences; government policy should be for his benefit. Financiers, bankers and industrialists make cities the cesspools of corruption, and should be avoided.
- Americans had a duty to spread what Jefferson called the "Empire of Liberty" to the world, but (in agreement with George Washington) should avoid "entangling alliances."
- The national government is a dangerous necessity to be instituted for the common benefit, protection, and security of the people, nation or community; it should be watched closely and circumscribed in its powers. (Most Anti-Federalists from 1787-1788 joined the Jeffersonians.)
- The wall of separation between church and state is the best method to keep religion free from intervention by the federal government, government free of religious disputes, and religion free from corruption by government.
- The federal government must not violate the rights of individuals. The Bill of Rights is a central theme to protect this.
- The federal government must not violate the rights of the states. The Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of 1798 (written secretly by Jefferson and James Madison) proclaim these principles.
  - ↪ These resolutions were written in favor of state rights, arguing the Constitution was an agreement between the states.
  - ↪ Supported idea that the federal government had no right to exercise powers not specifically delegated to it and that if the federal government assumed such powers, acts under them would be void. So, states could (should) decide the constitutionality of laws passed by Congress.
- Freedom of speech and the press is the best method to prevent the tyranny of the people by their own government.
  - ↪ The Federalists' violation of this idea through the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 became a major issue. The Acts authorized the president to deport any resident alien, extended to 14 years the residency requirement prior to citizenship, and made it a crime to publish purposely false information against the government or officials.
- A standing army and navy are dangerous to liberty and should be avoided; much better to curb aggressive behavior was the use economic coercion such as the embargo.
- The United States Constitution was written in order to ensure the freedom of the people. However, Jefferson himself believed that any Constitution must be refreshed by each new generation from time to time.
  - ↪ "No society can make a perpetual constitution or even a perpetual law. The earth belongs always to the living generation [the dead have neither powers nor rights over it] ... Every Constitution, then and every law, naturally expires at the end of 19 years. If it be enforced longer, it is an act of force and not of right." (sourced from a letter from Jefferson to Madison from Paris, 6 September 1789)
- All men have the right to be informed, and thus, to have a say in the government.
  - ↪ The protection and expansion of human liberty was one of the chief goals of the Jeffersonians.
  - ↪ They also reformed their respective state systems of education.
  - ↪ They believed that their citizens had the right and should be educated no matter their circumstance or status in life.

## Jacksonian Democracy (president 1829-1837)

The political philosophy of President Jackson was generally built on several principles:

- Jackson reinvented how politics was done.
  - ↪ He viewed the president as the head of the national party; fighting for a mandate from the people to govern in particular ways on particular issues; depending upon a circle of advisors to help guide the affairs of the country; mastering popular media of the age in order to transmit a consistent message at a consistent pace; using the veto as a political, not just constitutional, weapon; facing difficult confirmation battles in a Washington that is at once politically and personally charged.
  - ↪ All these are departures from how the presidency and government were seen by previous presidents. Before Jackson it was possible to think of America without putting the people at the center of politics; after him, such a thing was inconceivable.
- Expanded Suffrage. The Jacksonians believed that voting rights should be extended to all white men, regardless of whether they owned property or not. He sought to engage the citizenry.
- Manifest Destiny was the belief that white Americans had a destiny to settle the American West and to expand control over all of North America from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific at the expense of the indigenous population.
  - ↪ The 'Free Soil Jacksonians', notably Martin Van Buren, however, argued for limitations on expansion to avoid the expansion of slavery within the Union. The Whigs generally opposed Manifest Destiny and expansion, saying the nation should build up its cities.
- Patronage / Spoils System: Patronage was the policy of placing political supporters into appointed offices. Many Jacksonians held the view that rotating political appointees in and out of office was not only the right but also the duty of winners in political contests.
  - ↪ Patronage was theorized to be good because it would encourage political participation by the common man and because it would make a politician more accountable for poor government service by his appointees.
  - ↪ Jacksonians also held that long tenure in the civil service was corrupting, so civil servants should be rotated out of office at regular intervals. However, it did lead to the hiring of incompetent and sometimes corrupt officials in the place of competent ones from the other party.
- Strict Constructionism. Like the Jeffersonian's who strongly believed in the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, Jacksonians initially favored a federal government of limited powers.
  - ↪ Jackson said that he would guard against "all encroachments upon the legitimate sphere of State sovereignty". This is not to say that Jackson was a states' rights extremist; the Nullification Crisis would find Jackson fighting against what he perceived as state encroachments on the proper sphere of federal influence. This position was one basis for the Jacksonians' opposition to the Second National Bank.
  - ↪ As the Jacksonians consolidated power, they more often advocated expanding federal power and Presidential power in particular.
- Laissez-faire Economics. Jacksonians generally favored a hands-off approach to the economy.
  - ↪ The Jacksonians opposed government granted monopolies to banks, especially the national bank, 'the Second Bank of the United States'. Jackson fought to end the government monopoly to the Bank. Jackson was able to gain popular support because the Bank money manipulations and inflation had created a recession, and it had inflated land prices, benefiting big land owners and stopping economic development. Jackson eventually closed the bank.

***Review Questions – Jackson/Jefferson contrast***

1. Do you believe President Jackson was a Federalist or anti-Federalist?  
Why (cite evidence or explain reasoning)
  
2. Do you believe President Jackson was a Moral Relativist [right or wrong depends on the situation] or a Moral Absolutist [things are always right or wrong]?  
Why (cite evidence or explain reasoning)
  
3. When it comes to perspectives on the Constitution, do you believe President Jackson advocated for a loose or strict interpretation of the Constitution? [loose – adapt constitution to current times; strict – the constitution is unchanging]  
Why (cite evidence or explain reasoning)

4-10. Identify four main points of agreement and contrast/disagreement between Jefferson and Jackson

Jefferson and Jackson agree on...

Jefferson and Jackson differ on...

1

1

2

2

3

3

4

4

11. What else do you believe is the most significant differences in the beliefs of Jackson and Jefferson?