

Adams Domestic Affairs

Adams Wins the Presidency: When the framers of the Constitution created the Electoral College, they imagined that the electors would simply choose the two best leaders for president and vice president. That was how the nation's first two presidential elections worked. By the third election in 1796, however, it was clear that political parties had become part of the election process.

The Republicans supported Thomas Jefferson for president that year. His support came mainly from farmers in the South and West. The Federalists supported John Adams, who appealed to lawyers, merchants, ship owners, and businesspeople in the North. When the electoral votes were counted, John Adams was elected president by just three votes. Jefferson came in second, making him vice president. The nation's new top two leaders were political leaders from opposing parties.

The Alien Acts: At first, President Adams tried to work closely with Jefferson. "Party violence," Adams found, made such efforts "useless." Meanwhile, Federalists in Congress passed four controversial laws known as the Alien and Sedition Acts. They argued that these laws were needed as protection against foreigners who might threaten the nation. In fact, the real purpose of the Alien and Sedition Acts was to make life difficult for the Federalists' rivals, the Republicans.

Three of the laws, the Alien Acts, were aimed at aliens, or noncitizens. The first law lengthened the time it took for an immigrant to become a citizen with the right to vote—from 5 to 14 years. Since most immigrants voted Republican, Jefferson saw this law as an attack on his party. The other two Alien Acts allowed the president to either jail or deport aliens who were suspected of activities that threatened the government. Although these laws were never enforced, they did frighten a number of French spies and troublemakers, who then left the country.

1. Why did Congress pass the Alien Acts, and what did they do?

2. How did Thomas Jefferson view the Alien Acts?

The Sedition Act: The fourth law, known as the Sedition Act, made sedition—encouraging rebellion against the government—a crime. Its definition of sedition included "printing, uttering, or publishing any false, scandalous and malicious [hateful] writing" against the government, Congress, or the president. Alexander Hamilton approved of this law, believing that it would punish only those who published lies intended to destroy the government.

Instead, the Sedition Act was used to punish Republican newspaper editors who insulted President Adams in print. One, for example, called him "old, querulous [whiny], bald, blind, crippled, toothless Adams." Twenty-five people were arrested under the new law. Ten of them were convicted of printing seditious opinions.

3. How did Alexander Hamilton view the Sedition Acts?

4. Analyze the political cartoon above. What is the message behind this cartoon? Who are the "Gag-Rulers"?

