

Every election counts

Every four years, the presidential election seems to bring out the best and worst in people and candidates. Those who disagree on policy or the general direction of the country become more entrenched and inflexible.

Elections are important, and peaceful transfer of power is a cornerstone of our democracy. My wife openly mocks me when I mist up anytime a new president is sworn in, but the fact that votes are counted and an oath is taken without bloodshed or by force, it moves me.

There is little doubt that no matter where you land on the political spectrum, all the vitriolic attacks accompanying this election have bordered on the ridiculous and have accelerated the country's deep mistrust of the electoral process. Being the history nerd that I am, though, I'd have to say that while the current tilt between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (and perhaps Gary Johnson, who might make it to the debate stage) has devolved, it's not the worst our shores have witnessed.

The election of 1828 is largely seen as the dirtiest campaign in our country's history. It had its roots in the controversial election of 1824.

Big time tilt in 1824

It is hard to imagine two cabinet members, a Speaker of the U.S. House, and a current war hero all lining up on a general election ballot to seek the highest office in the land, but that is what happened in the fall of 1824.

William Crawford of Georgia, the secretary of the treasury, was an early favorite until a severe illness knocked him out of contention.

Secretary of State John Quincy Adams of Massachusetts, son of former president John Adams, was a public servant but his aloof mannerisms limited his influence outside of the region.

U.S. Speaker of the House Henry Clay, a skilled speaker and lawyer, was a consummate insider.

Andrew Jackson, from Tennessee, was extremely popular after his leadership in the 1815 victory over the British at the Battle of New Orleans.

So close was the election that not a single candidate obtained the necessary electoral votes to win. Jackson had the highest number and a clear lead in the popular vote, followed by Adams. The election was thrown to the U.S. House of Representatives to pick a winner.

Speaker Clay threw his support behind Adams, was named secretary of state, and Andrew Jackson charged that the fix was in and it was a "corrupt bargain."

Dirtiest campaign in history

Jackson's fury and campaigning against John Quincy Adams began the moment that the president took office in 1825.

Not wanting to repeat 1824, Jackson (otherwise known as Old Hickory) expanded his southern and rural base by aligning with New York power broker Martin Van Buren to make Adams unlikable.

The 1828 election campaign was one of the dirtiest in America's history. Both parties spread false and exaggerated rumors about the opposition.

Jackson's men charged that Adams obtained the presidency in 1824 through crooked dealings with House Speaker Clay. They painted the incumbent president as a decadent aristocrat, who had procured prostitutes for the czar while serving as U.S. minister to Russia and misuse of taxpayer money on "gambling" equipment for the White House (the truth being that it was a billiard table and a chess set).

To the Adams camp, a Jackson presidency seemed preposterous. They called him ignorant, woefully inexperienced at foreign affairs, and reckless in his personal and public behavior. They spread rumors about his fitness to serve as commander in chief — the heart of Jackson's pedigree



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and reputation — and by the end accused "Old Hickory" of adultery, gambling, slave-trading, theft and murder. They also accused his wife of bigamy.

Jackson won the presidency by a landslide, receiving 56 percent of the popular vote and more than double the electoral votes Adams did.

The hatred between the two men lasted for the rest of their lives. Jackson did not pay the customary visit to Adams prior to taking office and Adams did not attend the inauguration — not even after the death of Jackson's wife prior to the swearing in.

Lessons to be learned in 2016

There are more similarities between 1828 and 2016 than I would like to admit. There seem to be few limitations to personal attacks between the two leading candidates and little discussion of policy.

Democracy is messy and contentious. It is also the best system in the world. Almost two centuries have passed in between two singular nasty campaigns. Don't let this one dissuade you from voicing your opinion. Petulant pundits should not drive you from voting this November.

America is great, even when challenged by division and rancor. Elections matter. Cast your vote for the candidates and issues that you feel are best for you, the nursery and greenhouse industry and for the country.

You are the only one who can silence your vote and your opinion, so make sure your voice is heard! ©