

# **John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and the Birth of Party Politics in America**

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## What the unit does

In this unit students will learn how the Federalist and Republican Parties, represented by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were founded, what they believed, and their struggle for the hearts and minds of the American people. Students will also learn how, despite their very different views, members of these two parties shared an idealistic vision and belief in the future of the United States, that in the end transcended vicious party rivalries.

## Purpose

The presidential elections of 2000 and 2004 have demonstrated that the electorate is fiercely divided. How can the country hope to survive if so many of its people disagree on so many issues? In truth the nation has always found itself divided on important issues of the day: trade, slavery, civil rights, Vietnam, abortion, etc. Despite these political divisions the United States has grown and prospered—how? The answer to this question is fundamental to students' understanding of American history. The people of the United States may disagree on some fundamental issues, but they find common ground in the country's founding ideals: republican government, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech. These commonly held beliefs have prevailed despite factional politics and a bloody Civil War, and have enabled the people to look past their differences to the promise of what America can be.

Studying the relationship of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson is an excellent way for students to understand this unifying dynamic in American political history. Adams and Jefferson worked together to help unite thirteen colonies and founded a nation based on commonly held beliefs. They then parted ways on fundamental political disagreements, and in later life were reunited by their commonly held beliefs.

## Introduction

Much has been made of the two Americas that came out to vote in the 2000 and 2004 Presidential elections. One America covers the southern and Midwestern portions of the country. It is religious, conservative and votes Republican. The other includes the Northeast and Pacific coasts. It is secular, liberal, and votes for the Democratic Party. The two Americas are so different in their political beliefs that the media has color-coded them as blue states and red states. After George W. Bush's narrow victory in 2004, some citizens of the blue states seriously contemplated moving to Canada and giving up United States citizenship. These events, viewed without historic perspective, are troublesome. How can a nation survive and prosper when vast sections of its populace hold diametrically opposed political views? Fortunately some knowledge of the past can answer this question. After all, the country was founded by men with very different ideas about what type of nation the United States should become, and the nation they forged survived and prospered despite these different visions.

The first American political parties, the Federalists and Republicans, were the embodiment of these different visions for the nation. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, as the first and second elected American presidents from declared parties, provide an excellent window into the birth of partisan politics in the United States. The two began

their political careers as friends and allies, but their different political visions eventually destroyed their relationship. Fortunately, after both men had retired from public life, they began a correspondence which lasted for years and rekindled their friendship, proving that though Americans had—and have—very different views of what sort a nation the United States should be, they have been able to work through these differences and build a strong and united country.