During the 1790s, two parties began to form around differences of opinion within Washington’s cabinet. Federalists, behind Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, supported a strong central government that could promote manufacturing and commerce. Supporters of Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, who began to call themselves Democratic-Republicans, believed in small central government and an agricultural society.

After the Constitution was ratified, there were no political parties. George Washington was elected without opposition.

The election of 1800 was a critical moment in American democracy — the first peaceful exchange of power between two parties.

By 1820, the Federalists could no longer field a Presidential candidate. James Monroe won re-election without opposition, and the “Era of Good Feelings” began.

In 1824, four men ran for President, all calling themselves Democratic-Republicans. Andrew Jackson won the most votes, but no candidate won a majority of the electoral vote. The election went to the House of Representatives, which chose John Quincy Adams.

By 1828, supporters of Andrew Jackson had begun calling themselves Democrats. They wanted small government, and they opposed trade protection, national banks, and paper money. Supporters of John Quincy Adams, calling themselves National Republicans, wanted a strong central government that would support internal improvements and promote commerce.

Political parties have shifted many times in 220 years of national politics. Even when parties have kept the same names for long periods, their issues, principles, demographics, and regional support all change over time.

This chart shows the evolution of political party systems in the U.S. since 1789. Each “party system” is a roughly defined time period in which two major political parties, each with fairly consistent supporters and beliefs, dominated the political scene.

Presidential candidates are also listed for each party, with the winning candidate in bold:

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