

PENNSYLVANIA AND THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF 1800: REPUBLICAN ACCEPTANCE OF THE 8-7 COMPROMISE

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IN THE crucial presidential race of 1800, the state of Pennsylvania—a state with enough electoral votes to give tremendous impetus to either party's drive for victory—neutralized its great potential power and virtually abrogated its privilege of helping to choose a president by splitting its vote. While it is true that this unusual phenomenon came about largely because of Federalist willingness to give John Adams no electoral advantage if in turn Thomas Jefferson would receive no benefit from the state, leading Democratic-Republicans accepted this arrangement because they based their actions on inaccurate information about the progress of the electoral count in other states and on incorrect—and in one case foolish—predictions of what would happen in other regions of the infant republic.

Throughout the nation, both parties saw the presidential contest as the ultimate test of strength, the climax of almost a decade of savage political warfare. The Federalist faction, its ranks seriously depleted, felt that this was perhaps the last opportunity to prevent the victory of American Jacobinism. In contrast, Democratic-Republicans believed that triumphant Federalism would signal alliance with England, political repression and the end of responsible popular government. Both parties covetously eyed the large bloc of Pennsylvania electoral votes as indispensable to their faction's cause, a prize worth any exertion to achieve.

A method for choosing presidential electors was not in effect in Pennsylvania when the election of the state legislature of 1800 had taken place in October 1799. The election had given Jeffersonians control of the assembly, but Federalists still maintained a slim edge in the state senate.¹ When the new legislature met in Lancaster, it was obvious that the rival parties would not reach

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¹The party split in the state senate was 13 Federalists and 11 Democratic-Republicans.

agreement on how the voters of the state would select presidential electors. Confident because of their recent victory in the gubernatorial election of 1799, Democratic-Republicans favored choosing all fifteen electors on a statewide general ticket, a method party leaders believed would deprive the rival Federalists of any electoral votes and carry the whole state for Jefferson. The Federalists, whose strong majorities earlier in the decade had caused them to champion general elections, in 1800 sought to salvage some electoral votes for Adams by reversing themselves and advocating selection by districts.² Moreover, the districts proposed by the Federalist legislators were not the regular congressional districts but were instead drawn to give Federalist votes maximum effect. With each plan unsatisfactory to one of the parties and a compromise at that time repugnant to all, the legislature adjourned in 1800 with the two sides deadlocked and the state technically unable to cast any votes in the coming presidential election.³

Angered by what he believed was outrageous conduct on the part of the state legislature and concerned about the waning time for reaching any agreement, Governor Thomas McKean, hoping to break the deadlock, called the state legislature into special session in November 1800. At once a new problem arose. Since it was too late for the voters of the state to cast ballots either on a general ticket or by districts, it was obvious that if Pennsylvania was to have any presidential electors at all in 1800 the state legislature would have to name them. Immediately the battle shifted from the question of how the voters of Pennsylvania were to select the state's electors to the method the state legislature should use in choosing those electors. With a healthy majority in the assembly, Democratic-Republicans favored selection by a joint

² Selections by districts would certainly have given Federalists at least part of the state's fifteen electoral votes. In the 1799 gubernatorial election, Thomas McKean, while amassing a majority of the statewide total for the Republicans, actually carried only twelve of the twenty-six counties of Pennsylvania. Raymond Walters, Jr., *Alexander James Dallas, Lawyer-Politician-Financier, 1759-1817* (Philadelphia, 1943), p. 90.

³ For the battle over the election law see: Baltimore *Federal Gazette*, June 27, 1800; Walters, *Dallas*, p. 95; Harry Marlin Tinkcom, *The Republicans and Federalists in Pennsylvania, 1790-1801: A Study in National Stimulus and Local Response* (Harrisburg, 1950), p. 248. Republicans made much capital of the fact that the Federalist plan was introduced by John Woods, brother-in-law of James Ross whom McKean had defeated for the governorship. See: Baltimore *Federal Gazette*, June 27, 1800; Thomas McKean to Jefferson, December 15, 1800, in McKean Papers, HSP.

vote of the two houses. Federalists, who held a small majority in the state senate that would be overwhelmed by a joint vote, proposed concurrent selection as the proper method of naming electors, a process which would probably give Federalists seven of the state's fifteen electoral votes. Once again the two sides were deadlocked and a frustrated Governor McKean complained to Jefferson that the thirteen Federalist senators who refused to budge were controverting the will of three-fifths of the people of Pennsylvania. John Beckley, as chairman of the Republican Committee of Correspondence for the City and County of Philadelphia, organized the circulation of petitions calling for selection by a joint vote of the two houses of the state legislature. As of November 7, the industrious Beckley had collected 2,448 names in Philadelphia city alone. Even so, as late as November 28, Alexander James Dallas, Pennsylvania Secretary of State and a key Democratic-Republican party leader in the state, wrote mournfully, "I have abandoned the hope for a vote in Pennsylvania."⁴

Tremendous pressure was put on the thirteen Federalist senators to give way. Jeffersonians cajoled and threatened while Federalists sought to give them support in their unpopular stand. In Philadelphia, Thomas Fitzsimons, William Lewis and William Rawle formed a self-appointed three-man committee to insure the thirteen would remain firm.⁵

Finally the obstinacy of the Federalist senators forced a compromise whereby Pennsylvania's electors would be eight Republicans and seven Federalists.⁶ This was immensely satisfactory to the Federalists who probably would not have won seven electors if their district method of selection had been adopted. Hence, in virtually neutralizing a state where the majority of the voters obviously favored Jefferson, Federalists crowed of victory.

Many have wondered why the Democratic-Republican legislators accepted such a bad bargain. Yet the answer is not hard to find: they were persuaded to approve the compromise by party leader

⁴ Walters, *Dallas*, p. 95; McKean to Jefferson, December 15, 1800; John Beckley to Dallas, November 7, 1800, in Dallas Papers, HSP; Dallas to McKean, November 28, 1800, in McKean Papers, HSP.

⁵ McKean to Jefferson, December 15, 1800.

⁶ Late in November a conference committee made up of members of both houses conceived of a plan whereby each house would choose eight electoral candidates and then come together to select fifteen of the sixteen by joint ballot. This was in effect a variation of the Federalist plan. Walters, *Dallas*, p. 97.

Dallas. On December 1, 1800, Dallas wrote to Governor McKean, informing him that he had advised the Jeffersonian legislators to "take the single vote offered by the Senate."

Dallas had felt compelled to accept the compromise proposal because, due to spotty reports and erroneous interpretations of those reports, he had incorrectly predicted the results of the electoral count in other regions. The party leader believed that one electoral vote margin from Pennsylvania would put Jefferson into a tie with Charles Cotesworth Pinckney for the presidency of the United States. He wrote to McKean :

The vote of Rhode-Island is against the Republicans. If the Federalists are true to their two Candidates, the votes, without Pennsylvania, will be 66 for Pinckney, 65 for Jefferson, & 58 for Adams. I have advised our friends to take the single vote offered by the Senate, which will make a tie between Mr. Jefferson and Mr. Pinckney.

Dallas further predicted that the United States House of Representatives would not break the resulting tie between Jefferson and Pinckney and that the Senate would select an interim president to serve for one year.⁷

Obviously Dallas's calculations were inaccurate—the actual electoral total without Pennsylvania would stand at 65 for Jefferson, 58 for Adams and 57 for Pinckney—but where did he err? Very simply, Dallas had miscalculated as to which way South Carolina would vote and had forgotten to account for the fact that the Federalists—with certainly more foresight than their rivals—would not permit their agreed-upon candidates for president and vice-president to emerge tied in electoral votes and would thus discard a vote for Pinckney. As it turned out, Rhode Island was the state which provided this "throwaway" vote, casting one electoral ballot for New York Governor John Jay.

Perhaps Dallas's error in the case of South Carolina is understandable. The South Carolina legislature did not meet to choose the state's electors until at least three days *after* Dallas had advised Democratic-Republican legislators in Pennsylvania to accept the Federalist compromise. While South Carolina was not the last state to choose electors, it was the last *doubtful* state to assemble

⁷ *Dallas to McKean*, December 1, 1800, in McKean Papers, HSP.

for that purpose, for it was not known which national party had control of the legislature until the day it convened. In 1796 South Carolina had cast its electoral votes for Jefferson and native son, Thomas Pinckney (Federalist vice-presidential candidate), and there were persistent reports—some of which Dallas must have been privy to—that the state would once again divide its allegiance between the two national parties by choosing electors who would cast ballots for Jefferson and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. Other northern Republicans, among them Aaron Burr, believed that South Carolina would favor Jefferson and Pinckney, and Dallas persuaded himself that such would be the case.⁸

Rhode Island is another story. Dallas had reported to McKean that the vote in Rhode Island had gone against the Jeffersonians.⁹ Yet he failed to take into account the fact that one of these votes—or one from any other “safe” New England state—would be denied to Pinckney to prevent the dreaded tie.

The chart below illustrates the significance of Dallas’s miscalculations:

State	Number Electoral Votes	Actual Total 1800		Dallas's Calculations	
		Fed.	Rep.	Fed.	Rep.
Vermont	4	4		4	
New Hampshire	6	6		6	
Connecticut	9	9		9	
Rhode Island	4	4 JA 3 CCP 1 JJ		4	
Massachusetts	16	16		16	
New York	12		12		12
New Jersey	7	7		7	
Pennsylvania	15	7	8	7	8
Delaware	3	3		3	
Maryland	10	5	5	5	5
Kentucky	4		4		4
Tennessee	3		3		3
Virginia	21		21		21
North Carolina	12	4	8	4	8
South Carolina	8		8	8 CCP	8 TJ
Georgia	4		4		4
Totals	138	65 JA 64 CCP 1 JJ	73 TJ 73 AB	73 CCP 65 JA	73 TJ 65 AB

⁸ For Burr's opinion of the South Carolina vote, see Aaron Burr to Pierpont Edwards, November 29, 1800, in Burr Papers, New York Public Library.

⁹ Dallas to McKean, December 1, 1800.

Hence, Dallas, because he based his calculations on incomplete evidence, attributed more significance to the compromise in Pennsylvania than it actually deserved. Believing that Pennsylvania alone could save Jefferson from defeat, he pushed for Democratic-Republican approval of a compromise that merely negated Pennsylvania's electoral vote. Acting on the information at his disposal, however, Dallas's behavior is understandable if not knowledgeable.

There is ample evidence that many Philadelphia Republicans were sharply critical of their party's legislators coming to such terms with the Federalist foe. Jeffersonian legislators defended themselves by using Dallas's interpretation of events in other regions of the republic. William Penrose, a Republican legislator who shared Dallas's belief about the electoral count, wrote:

Some of our friends may think we were wrong in conceding so much to the Senate, but when they reflect one moment, on the importance of a single Vote, which may secure to us our President, I am confident they will approve our Conduct. We have labored so hard to effect it. . . . The stage has just arrived and brought my Colleague Mr. Linnard. I have not seen him, but am informed, his Report is, that our republican friends in the City are outrageous at our Conduct. If so I am sorry for it, but believe if our presidential Election depended upon a single Vote and we had refused to give it there would have been greater Cause for Censure.¹⁰

It is important to note that this rather unusual set of circumstances came about not only because of the lack of modern methods of communication but—more significantly—because of the absence of central organization in the emerging political parties of the late eighteenth century. It must be remembered that, while political factions had appeared in some regions as early as a decade before the crucial election of 1800, centralized party management and organization had not as yet reached a very sophisticated level and national parties were still but loosely-allied local and regional political conglomerates. Otherwise the potentially disastrous tie between Jefferson and Burr would never have occurred. More to the point of this analysis, state party leaders such as Alexander James Dallas would not have been obliged to make such critical decisions virtually in the dark.

¹⁰ William Penrose to Dallas [December 1] 1800, in Dallas Papers, HSP.