

Tennessee Politics in the early Nineteenth Century

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Essential question: How did Tennessee politics evolve between 1820 and 1850?

In the frontier period, Tennessee politics were dominated by factions controlled by John Sevier and William Blount. As Sevier grew older, his faction became less powerful and eventually disappeared. Blount's faction was revived under the leadership of John Overton.¹ Eventually, Andrew Erwin would develop his own faction to oppose Overton. The ascendancy of Erwin and Overton was indicative of the shift in political and economic power from East Tennessee to Middle Tennessee that occurred with the rise of plantation agriculture in the state. Erwin's faction included William Carroll, John Bell and Newton Cannon and would eventually become the Whig Party. Overton's group included Andrew Jackson, Sam Houston and James K. Polk and would become the Democrats.²

Erwin's faction successfully ran William Carroll for governor in 1821. Carroll was a popular choice having served with Jackson in the Creek War and the Battle of New Orleans. Jackson would have supported Carroll if his opponent had not been a neighbor and friend of Jackson. Carroll won anyway and served as Tennessee's governor from 1821-1835 except for the years 1827-1829.³ Carroll made many improvements in Tennessee's criminal justice system, including revising the criminal code, building a new penitentiary that focused on reforming prisoners instead of just punishing them, and building an insane asylum for the mental ill. Though conditions in the asylum were abysmal by today's standards, it did

¹ Paul Bergeron, Stephen Ash and Jeanette Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 91-94

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

represent an improvement from the prior system in which the mentally ill were imprisoned with criminals.⁴

The Overton faction responded to their defeat in the 1823 governor's race by looking to advance Andrew Jackson's career. Their first step was to have Jackson selected by the legislature to serve as one of Tennessee's Senators. Jackson did little during his time in the Senate, viewing it as a way of gaining exposure for his presidential campaign in 1824. Though Jackson won the popular vote in 1824, did not become president because he failed to win enough electoral votes. Jackson's election as president in 1828 led to the ascendancy of the Democratic Party in national politics, but not in his home state of Tennessee. One of Jackson's actions as president was the destruction of the National Bank. This angered many prominent Tennessee businessmen who in turn set out to elect anti-Jackson candidates to state and national office. Eventually these men became Tennessee's Whig Party, though they did not always agree with or follow the party's national platform.⁵

When Jackson's second term was over, he endorsed his vice-president Martin Van Buren as the Democratic candidate in 1832. Tennessee's Whigs put forth Hugh Lawson White as an opponent. Governor Carroll supported Van Buren though he lacked Jackson's popularity. Though the Whig strategy of running three regional candidates assured Van Buren's victory, White and his anti-Jackson party won in Tennessee. In 1834, Whig John Bell defeated James K. Polk in the race to be Speaker of the House of Representatives, though Polk would gain the position in 1835. The 1835 Tennessee's governor race also represented a challenge to Jackson.⁶ The Whigs ran Newton Cannon against long-time Governor William

⁴ Robert Oliver, "Tennessee Lunatic Asylum," Tennessee Encyclopedia. 2018. <https://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/entries/tennessee-lunatic-asylum/> 2 July 2021.

⁵ Bergeron, Ash and Keith, *Tennesseans and Their History*, 94-95.

⁶ Ibid.

Carroll. Carroll's support of Van Buren hurt his chances and he was defeated by Cannon. Cannon served as governor until he was defeated by James K. Polk in 1839.⁷ Tennessee Democrats cheered Polk's victory, but it would be short lived. James C. Jones was selected by the Whigs to oppose Polk in 1841. Building on the popularity of William Henry Harrison's image as a common man born in a log cabin, Jones campaigned by telling stories and generally entertaining voters.⁸ Polk, an intellectual not known for his winning personality, was frustrated by Jones' appeal to voters. Jones defeated Polk in 1841 and Polk lost the governor's race again in 1843, before becoming the Democrat's dark horse presidential candidate in 1844.

Polk campaigned on a platform of Manifest Destiny and promised to annex both Oregon and Texas. John Tyler beat Polk to the punch and annexed Texas before his term ended. Tennessee Senator Ephraim Foster voted against Texas annexation which cost him the governor's race in 1845.⁹ However Democrat Aaron Brown was defeated by Whig Neill S. Brown in 1847. Tennessee's Whigs would hold on to power until 1849 when Democrat William Trousdale was elected governor. In Tennessee, as in the nation, Democrats dominated politics in the 1850s. This would not change into the ascendancy of the Republican party beginning with Andrew Johnson's appointment as military governor in 1862 by Abraham Lincoln.¹⁰

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 101-103.

⁹ Ibid., 104-105.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Student Activity

Summarize each prominent politician's accomplishments in the boxes below.

John Bell	Andrew Jackson
Newton Cannon	James K. Polk
William Carroll	Ephraim Foster
James C. Jones	Hugh Lawson White