

A “Common Man” for President

Connection to Current Times

Have you seen Andrew Jackson’s campaign ads on television or the Internet? Are posters declaring “JACKSON FOR PRESIDENT” popping up in your neighborhood? Have you seen the candidate himself at rallies, describing his humble beginnings? Well . . . probably not, since Andrew Jackson ran for the presidency nearly 200 years ago. Yet, in many ways, the campaigns of modern presidential candidates are surprisingly similar to the one that Jackson ran so long ago. In their speeches and campaign messages, modern candidates portray themselves as common people who will fight for their fellow citizens.

Jackson’s Humble Beginnings

When Andrew Jackson ran for the presidency in 1828, he called himself the “champion of the common man.” He felt he was the champion because he himself was a common man of humble origins. Only a few years earlier, people would probably have scoffed at such a claim. The nation’s first presidents were all wealthy men with connections in high places. They were from states that had begun as British colonies. Most of these men were well read and highly educated. They had years of experience in government. *Those* were the qualities a president should have!

By 1828, however, a wave of nationalism had swept the country. Americans had stopped copying everything Europeans did. Instead, they identified themselves as citizens belonging to a great nation: the United States. In their view, any country that could defeat Great Britain, as the United States had in the Battle of New Orleans, was great in its own right.

Andrew Jackson had led American forces at the Battle of New Orleans in the War of 1812. Jackson and his soldiers, many of them untrained frontiersmen from Kentucky, had beaten British General Edward Pakenham and his men. Newspapers trumpeted Jackson’s unbelievable victory as “Glorious News!” In the years after the war, Jackson was hailed as a hero across the nation. A song was even written to commemorate his bravery, called “The Hunters of Kentucky.” It became vastly popular, and by 1828 Jackson’s supporters were using the song to promote their candidate. Here is one stanza from the song:



Composite portrait of Andrew Jackson by David Rent Etter. The endorsements Jackson received in 1828 and the claims he made while running for president were similar to those of presidential candidates today.

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*I s'pose you've read
it in the prints,
How Pakenham
attempted
To make Old
Hickory Jackson
wince,
But soon his
schemes repented;
For we, with rifles
ready cocked,
Thought such
occasion lucky,
And soon around the
general flocked,
The hunters of
Kentucky.*



Even before serving as president, Andrew Jackson claimed a place in American history by defeating the British at New Orleans. His victories also gave his supporters an endless source of campaign slogans and propaganda.

With the help of such propaganda, or information used to spread a political message, more people supported the idea of a president from the western frontier. Jackson and his Democratic Party decided to emphasize Jackson's western roots even more. They stressed his log cabin origins and the fact that he was an “orphan boy.” Newspapers picked up on the theme. One Ohio paper endorsed Jackson for the presidency because he was not raised in a wealthy family. People liked the fact that Jackson grew up in the wild environment of the West. The Jackson campaign drove its message home with buttons, posters, and hats. Hickory sticks, rods made of hickory used to discipline children, also became wildly popular. Can you guess why? “Old Hickory” was Jackson's nickname, because people said he was tough as hickory. It no longer seemed important that Jackson had virtually no experience in government, nor that he had only a basic education.

The Common Man in Modern Times

Today, candidates for both political parties make sure to point out their humble origins to voters. Even when they have achieved remarkable personal success, they try to find something in their past that shows their relationship to the common man and woman, similar to how Andrew Jackson promoted his log cabin childhood.

Campaigning in 2008, Democrat Barack Obama introduced himself to voters as a man without connections to wealthy or powerful people. Obama's message reflected some of the same ideas as Jackson's campaign, which described

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Jackson as the “orphan boy” candidate. Obama described moving to the Chicago area not knowing a single person. In a way, the city of Chicago was much like the wild West of Jackson’s youth.

Later in his campaign, Obama stressed that he, too, was a “man of the people.” He voiced his respect for the common, working-class American, much like Andrew Jackson did. Throughout his campaign, Obama made references to the working class of the United States. In this way, he was similar to Jackson. Jackson made no secret that he despised privileges that came with being part of the upper class.

Like Obama, the 2012 Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, also described himself as a man of the people. Romney is from an upper-class background. He has achieved great personal wealth and success. Yet he still emphasized that his family originally came from a humble background. In many of his speeches, he described how his father grew up in a poor family and did not graduate from college. Romney has explained that his father started a small business from the trunk of his car and went on to become very successful because of hard work.

So, it seems that Andrew Jackson started something. It turns out he was the first of a long line of regular people who decided to run for the presidency. Jackson was also the first to claim that being outside the establishment, or the wealthy and influential groups of society, was a good thing. Today, these are claims commonly made by political candidates. Some candidates, like Obama, point to a lack of connections in their early career. Other candidates, like Romney, point to financial struggles in previous generations of their family. Even though modern candidates may benefit from a good education and political connections, they also know the importance of relating to their fellow citizens, just as Jackson did.

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After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** In what way did Andrew Jackson differ from the presidents who had come before him?
 - A.** He was highly educated.
 - B.** He was from the West.
 - C.** He had connections in high places.
 - D.** He was wealthy.

- 2.** Why might the song “The Hunters of Kentucky” be considered propaganda?
 - A.** It talks about western culture and traditions.
 - B.** It was written about a famous person.
 - C.** It describes specific historical events.
 - D.** It was used to support a certain politician.

- 3.** How did Mitt Romney try to portray himself as a “common man” during his campaign?
 - A.** He described how his father was from a poor family.
 - B.** He emphasized that he received no formal education.
 - C.** He stated that he grew up in a rural area of the United States.
 - D.** He claimed that he was a military hero.

- 4.** Think about the changes that occurred in the United States prior to Andrew Jackson’s 1828 presidential candidacy. How did these changes allow Jackson’s lack of experience, connections, and education to help him win that election?