The Election of 1816

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Prior to his run for president, James Monroe had served President Madison as Secretary of State and as Secretary of War during the War of 1812, positions that during the period were seen as stepping stones to the presidency. His success as a politician came from hard work and a steady, consistent personality. Monroe was extremely popular from his position as a founding statesman and for his leadership during the War of 1812, which left his opponents little to criticize. The only major complaint against the idea of Monroe as president was that he would embody the continuation of the "Virginia Dynasty": three of the four presidents before him had been from Virginia, and he would make a fourth. With this in mind some Democrats from the northeastern states put forth Daniel Tompkins, who was popular in New York but unknown in the South, and Georgian William Crawford, who was serving as Madison's Secretary of the Treasury, as alternatives. Although some Americans preferred these alternatives, "it was hard not to admit that Monroe was the [most] qualified candidate."[1]

*William Crawford*   *Daniel Tompkins*
Images courtesy of https://commons.wikimedia.org

To decide between those vying for control of the nomination, the Democratic Party utilized a caucus system to elect a nominee. The first caucus met December 4th, 1815. This first official caucus was considered an embarrassment as few members of Congress actually attended, and a forged letter sent by a Monroe supporter falsely accused Crawford of having dropped out of the race. Another caucus was held on the 16th of March, in which about half of Congress attended, enough that a vote could be taken.[2] Monroe defeated Crawford, and Tompkins won the most votes for vice president. Immediately anti-Monroe democrats cried foul, especially in the North, where voters resented the continuation of the "Virginia Dynasty". The New York City *Commercial Advertiser* pointed out on February 16, 1816 that Monroe had received only 65 votes

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[1] Harlow Unger, *The Last Founding Father: James Monroe and a Nation's Call to Greatness (*Da Capo Press, 2010), 259.
[2] Harry Ammon, *James Monroe: The Quest for National Identity (*Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1990*), 356.*

in his favor[3], far less than an actual majority of the 158 Democratic-Republican congressmen, and on March 20, 1816 the *New York Courier* called the caucus a "great and self-appointed body of dictatorial usurpers."[4]
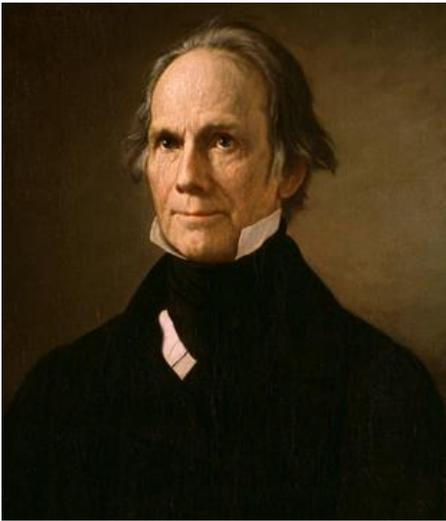
Henry Clay
Image courtesy of https://commons.wikimedia.org

Famous politician Henry Clay only nominated Monroe after a long time had passed, originally stating he could not give his nomination to any candidate. It appears that only after a large percentage of Americans had shown to support Monroe, did Clay state that he should be considered for the presidency. This is just one example of the political maneuvering of the 1816 election.

Rufus King
Image courtesy of https://commons.wikimedia.org

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[3] *Commercial Advertiser.* February 16, 1816. From Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia (accessed March 29, 2016).
[4] *New York Courier.* March 20, 1816. From Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library at the University of Virginia (accessed March 29, 2016).

The Federalist Party had been all but destroyed by the election of 1816 due to their opposition to the War of 1812. For many Americans, they were seen as unpatriotic and isolationist. Needing some candidate to rival the Democratic nominee, they chose Rufus King, a senator from New York. Rufus King represented the final bid by any Federalist for the presidency. King had studied at the top of his class at Harvard and become a successful lawyer. He had represented Massachusetts in the Continental Congress, signed the constitution, and gone on to become a senator. However, his unpopularity stemmed from the anti-war position adopted by the Federalists during the War of 1812, which made them appear unpatriotic to many voters. After a crushing defeat against Monroe, King also attempted to run for governor of New York, although he lost this election as well. Maps of that election show the overwhelming preference for the Democrats even in King's home state, although he did win a majority of the vote in urban areas such as Manhattan.[5]

In a move that to viewers of the 2016 election would seem unheard of, "neither [Monroe or King] made any campaign speeches, neither bothered issuing policy statements."[6] King, in fact, had no real attacks to make against Monroe, nor could he make any against the former president, Madison. Crawford, after initially running a rival Republican campaign against Monroe, saw that his chances of victory were slim, and that to challenge Monroe might mean the end of his own political career. Once the vote within the National Caucus reached 65 votes to 40, Crawford stepped out of the race.[7] Where the popular vote was held, actual voter turnout amounted to less than 2%. Monroe did end up naming Crawford as Secretary of the Treasury.

To understand the election of 1816, it is important to first understand the historical context of elections at this time. The popular vote, which some complain is underutilized today in 2016, was even less developed in the days of Monroe. Only 10 of the 19 states present at the time of the election cast a popular vote, and voter turnout in those states amounted to less than two percent, meaning that the electoral vote and congress system was even more influential in elections than today. Monroe handily won the popular vote in the states where it was held, taking in 68% of the vote. In terms of electoral votes, he crushed rival candidate Rufus King with 183 of the 221 electoral votes.[8] In Virginia, Monroe won with more than 90% of the electoral vote, winning many counties (including Albemarle) with no opposition.[9]

[5] "Presidential Election Results by County (1816)." United States Presidential Election 1816. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1816#/media/File:PresidentialCounty1816.gif (accessed March 17, 2016)
[6] Unger, *The Last Founding Father*, 260.
[7] Noble Cunningham, *The Presidency of James Monroe* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 18.
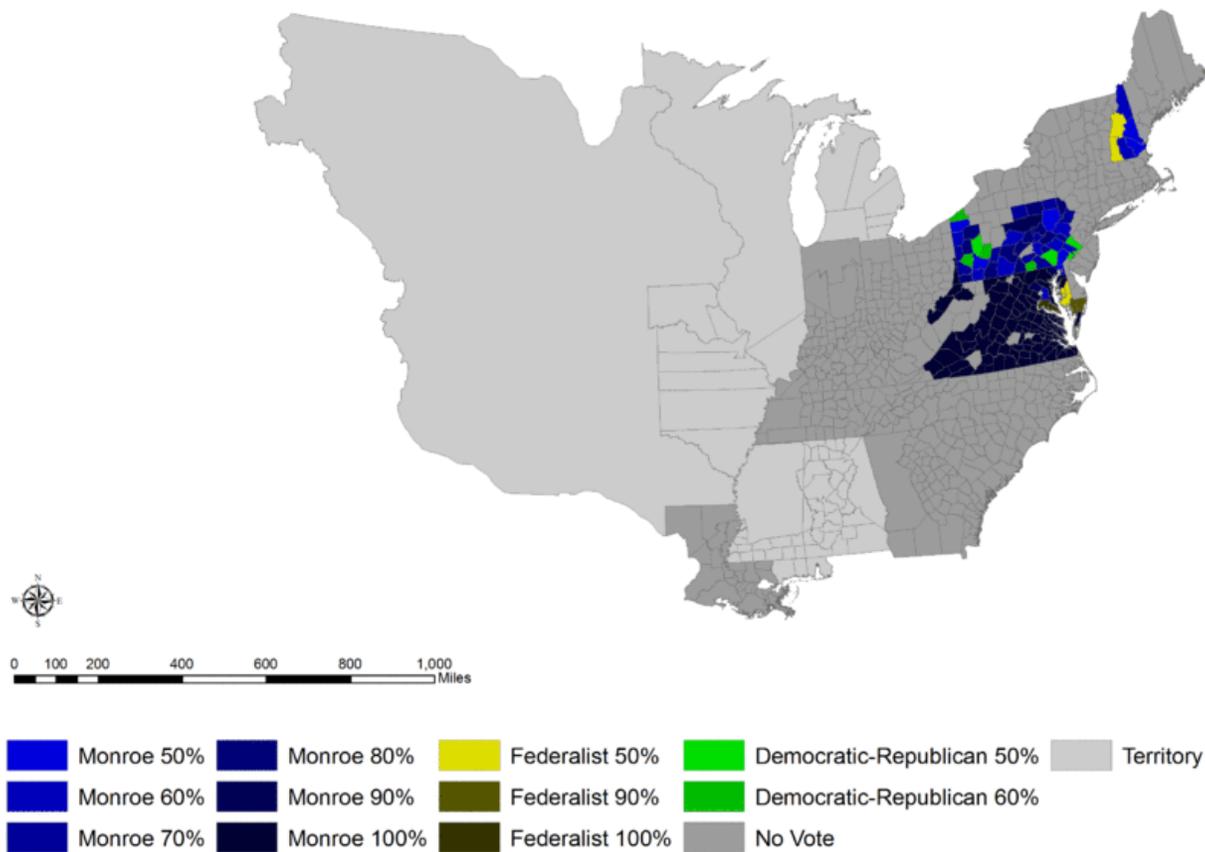[8] Ibid, 19.
[9] "Minnesota Population Center." National Historical Geographic Information System: Version 2.0. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota 2011. *http://www.nhgis.org* (accessed March 17, 2016).

1816 Actual

MA	22
RI	4
CT	9
NJ	8
DE	3
MD	8
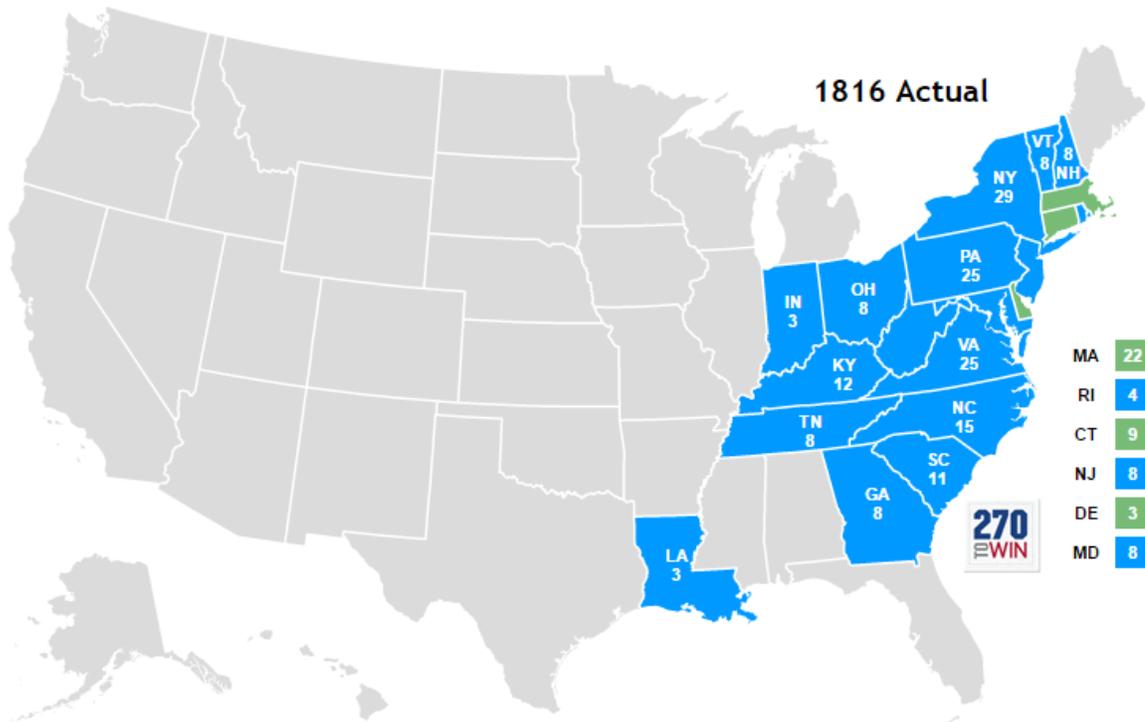
Map courtesy of http://www.270towin.com/1816_Election/

Presidential Election Results by County (1816)

Monroe 50%	Monroe 80%	Federalist 50%	Democratic-Republican 50%	Territory
Monroe 60%	Monroe 90%	Federalist 90%	Democratic-Republican 60%	
Monroe 70%	Monroe 100%	Federalist 100%	No Vote	

Map courtesy of http://www.nhgis.org

Some academics have argued that the most historically significant result of the 1816 election was a change in the caucus system of nominating presidential candidates. Monroe's supporters, despite victory, argued that the caucus system had nearly lost him the election, and had complicated the system when he held an obvious majority in the party. Pro-Monroe newspapers argued that states should instead nominate candidates. Anti-Monroe papers also advocated abolishing the influence of the Caucus. On December 20th, 1816, a new amendment was passed which divided each state into equal districts, which would then choose electors to determine future presidential candidates.

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