The Spoils System
Was it good or bad for American politics?

When Andrew Jackson took office as President of the United States, his policy of replacing government officials with Jackson supports was quite controversial. After one of these supporters justified Jackson’s policy by stating “to the victor belong the spoils”, this policy became known as the spoils system. Many Jackson supporters believed that rotating political appointments in and out of office was not only the right, but the duty, of winners of political elections. Jackson opponents believed that replacing offices with his own supporters was a huge abuse of power.

Jackson saw this ‘spoils system’ as clearing out the old, corrupt political families and replacing them with fresh new ideas. Jackson believed that appointing his own supporters as his new staff not only awarded those who supported him but also allowed him to rid his administration of any supporters of Jackson’s opponents. Jackson also believed this spoils system would help encourage the “common man” to participate in politics and make politicians more accountable.

He believed the “common man” should participate in the governing of the country, not just the powerful and wealthy. Many of the supporters he appointed represented the “common man” rather than the elite. These men weren't just symbolic of the “common man;” they helped connect Washington D.C. to it’s citizens. This helped people, especially in the distant west, feel involved in the nation’s government. Besides, who wants a presidential administration full of political enemies?

Despite his good intentions, Andrew Jackson received a lot of criticism for his spoils system. His opponents argued that oftentimes, the individuals that Jackson appointed were unskilled or even incapable at their new post. Occasionally, even corrupt individuals could be placed in offices they would ultimately abuse. The spoils system also created scandals as politically motivated supports of one candidate worked hard to find (and sometimes make up) offensive stories about the other candidate and their supporters. Overall, opponents of Jackson worried that Jackson emphasized party loyalty above all other qualifications (like skills or experience).