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APUSH

Period 4

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Jackson, Democracy, and the Spoils System Analysis

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Since 1789, the United States has had narrow requirements for voting: most states required men to be white and own property. This remained unchanged until the 1820, when competition between eastern states, losing population from those moving West, and Western states increased suffrage led to states removing the requirement of land ownership to vote. This, along with other factors, caused the voting population of the United States to dramatically increase before Jackson’s election.

Andrew Jackson, born in modest wealth, grew up during the Revolution, losing his family by disease during the war. After the end of war, he moved to Nashville to study law. There, he became a symbol of the West, rising to the Senate in Tennessee. Jackson left his position to lead troops against the British army, he instantly became a legendary example of American frontiersman. Even northerners respected him, calling him “Brave to rashness, generous to prodigality, a firm and trusting friend, a relentless foe, he had the qualities which make a popular leader.”2 While he remained in Florida after the war, his friends in Tennessee were preparing to promote him to the Presidency.

Jackson’s 1824 candidacy failed in Congress due to the Corrupt Bargain between Clay and Adams. This, combined with an ineffective Adams Presidency, swayed public favor towards Jackson in 1828. This election had record levels of voter participation, more than doubling from 1824. Jackson, victorious, became known as President of the Common Man. His policy goals aimed to bring equality to all white men and increase opportunities in the West and the South.

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Jackson’s first target were the high-ranking government officials in Washington. While claiming “to purge corruption, laxity, and arrogance that came with long tenure,”1, he hastily replaced many officials hired by previous administrations. He fired some with reasoning as flimsy as officials supporting John Adams.1 Despite his goals to better the government, some of his followers saw his actions as taking “spoils of the enemy”1. Jackson’s spoils system was heavily controversial but set a precedent for future elected officials to replace incumbent officials with their own followers.

Many of Jackson’s actions lasted far longer than him. With the congressional caucus losing influence, Jackson and his supporters instead held a national party convention to renominate him for the presidency in 1832. This brought the ability to elect a candidate from congressmen to common Americans. However, despite seeming effective, these conventions and the spoils system did not bring power to the people, who usually chose prominent political figures as candidates.

Through his actions over his terms, Jackson did much to increase executive power. His attitude and actions with the Spoils System, and his trigger-happy firing of his cabinet and people around him made the presidency even more powerful. He vetoed more laws than any president before him1, stopping Congress in its tracks. He made brought the Executive Branch to equal footing with the traditionally more powerful Congress.

During the century after Jackson’s presidency, his election was viewed as driven by Western farmers and laborers, who wanted to combat economic privilege and political corruption from the aristocratic North.3 After the Corrupt Bargain and Tariffs of the north, it seemed inevitable that the farmers would fight back to take back their country with one of their own leading them. However, starting from the 1950s, historians began to view Jackson and his presidency more as a result of Jackson being a “Man of the People”3, and rather because of the ideas of popular democracy and the much greater number of voters.

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I believe that the fact that Jackson was such an admired leader played a massive part in his presidency and combined with the growing power of the masses lead to the rise of Andrew Jackson. He was able to take “powerful movements among ordinary citizens,”3 for democracy to his advantage, and was able to ride the wave of populism to the Presidency. With the support of so many voters behind him, he was able to make significant changes to the system of democracy in America.