In 1795, John Adams encouraged his eldest son to develop “the Spirit of a Stoick — a determined Spirit to bear any neglect, any Affront from your Countrymen without resentment.”

John Quincy should expect rejection from voters because in the United States even the “wise and learned” were often “as wrong as the Mob.”

John and John Quincy Adams were elected president of the United States, the only father and son to do so until the elections of George H.W. and George W. Bush. Significantly, however, of America’s first seven presidents only John and John Quincy served a single term.

In “The Problem of Democracy: The Presidents Adams Confront the Cult of Personality,” Nancy Isenberg and Andrew Burstein, both of whom are professors of American history at Louisiana State University and prolific authors, acknowledge that the Adamses were cantankerous and contrarian.

They maintain, however, that they are not crypto-monarchists, retrograde thinkers or obstinate enemies of democracy.

Writing with an eye toward contemporary American politics, Isenberg and Burstein assert, “unequivocally,” that our “mostly unloved” second and sixth presidents were prescient, in associating “the cult of personality with manufactured partisanship — masses of committed people surrendering their capacity for critical thinking to an unwavering party orthodoxy.”

“The Problem of Democracy” is an informative, often moving, account of the intimate relationship between John and John Quincy Adams. It serves as well as a meditation on the distinctions between
representative and popular democracies.

More than two centuries ago, Isenberg and Burstein remind us, John Adams perceived that elections — the most powerful instrument of democracy — depended on theater.

Candidates, he wrote, tended to be arrogant pretenders, crass peddlers or both. “A Man must be his own Trumpeter. ... He must dress, have a Retinue, and Equipage ... set about Works to Spread his Name, make the Mob stare and gape, and perpetuate his Fame.”

Sensing that they themselves were unlikely to be noticed, John Adams added, the masses tended to identify with and obey kings, queens and associated “greats,” accepting rank, distinction and social prominence as traits that had been earned and therefore deserved. Elections, he implied, did not have to be rigged to go awry.

Paradoxically, although fame corrupted judgment (and behavior), the “show” was increasingly inextricable from parties and politics.

More apprehensive of aristocracy than monarchy, the senior Adams was also determined to limit the political power of economic elites. “In every society where property exists,” he insisted, “there will ever be a struggle between rich and poor.”

To promote equal laws, and prevent the rich from “fleecing the poor,” Adams wanted to “ostracize” the affluent in the Senate and have members of the House represent the interests of the masses. It hadn’t worked out that way, John Quincy reminded his father.

By turns a Federalist, a Democrat and a Whig, John Quincy Adams subsequently disavowed party affiliation and did not participate in a presidential campaign after he failed to be re-elected in 1828. More than sour grapes, his behavior was motivated by a conviction that political parties used military heroes, demagoguery, torch-light parades, song, symbols and the art “of party drilling” to undermine rational appeals.

For Southern Democrats, party served as a tool to “purchase support for slavery from the freemen of the North.”

Endorsing his father’s signature political philosophy, John Quincy Adams defined democracy as “oxygen or vital air” but combustible in combination with other elements. “The party to which I would wish to belong,” he wrote, would be a Constitutional party, in which the power of social classes was adequately and appropriately checked and balanced.

Isenberg and Burstein mention the Adamses’ faults, but they deserve a few more innings. John
Adams, for example, signed the Alien and Sedition Acts into law.

John Quincy Adams, who deserves considerable credit for forcing the House of Representatives (where he served as “Old Man Eloquent” in the 1830s and ‘40s) to address the evils of slavery, was, if anything, even more politically tone deaf than his father.

That said, Isenberg and Burstein make a compelling case that the Adamses’ ideas, policies and leadership deserve our attention. As a guide to, if not a model for, addressing the flaws in our democratic processes, including the power of parties and the role celebrity plays in our political culture.

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