3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1789

George Washington vs John Adams

A 35-minute lesson on the 1789 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA First Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 138 total
WINNER George Washington (Independent) · 69 EV	RUNNER-UP John Adams (Federalist) · 34 EV
KEY ISSUE Establishing the new federal government under the Constitution	TURNOUT 11.6%

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1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1789: George Washington vs John Adams

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: imagine your school just opened. The grown-ups have to pick the very first principal. How would they decide? What kind of person should it be?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1789 election was the very first U.S. presidential election. It was also one of the strangest. Only one person was really running: George Washington. He had been the general who led the American army to win the Revolutionary War against Britain. After the war, he had quietly gone home to his Virginia farm. Most people believed he was the only person trustworthy enough for the brand-new job of president. The country was only two years old under its new rules. The leaders had finished writing the U.S. Constitution in 1787. The Constitution said the country would have a president, but no one had ever picked one before. There were no political parties yet. There were no campaigns and no speeches. Most regular Americans did not even vote in 1789. In most states, the state legislature picked the electors, who then picked the president. There were thirteen states. But three of them did not vote in 1789. North Carolina and Rhode Island had not yet agreed to the new Constitution. New York's state lawmakers got into a fight and could not pick their electors in time. So only ten states voted. The result was a sweep. All sixty-nine electors wrote George Washington's name on their ballots. He won unanimously. John Adams, who came in second, became the first vice president. George Washington did not want to be president. He worried that running the new country might fail and ruin his good name. But he believed it was his duty to serve. On April 30, 1789, in New York City, he placed his hand on a Bible, took the oath of office, and gave a short speech to Congress. Washington served two terms as president - eight years total - and then went home to his farm. By choosing to leave, he taught Americans that the presidency was a job, not a crown. Every president since 1789 followed his example until 1940.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1789 Election

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to his farm. By choosing to leave, he taught Americans that the presidency was a job, not a crown. Every president since 1789 followed his example until 1940.

Key words

Constitution	The set of rules that says how the United States government works. It was written in 1787 and first used in 1789.
Electoral College	The group of people from each state who actually pick the president. In 1789, regular voters did not pick electors directly in most states.
Inauguration	The official ceremony when a new president promises to do the job. Washington had his on April 30, 1789, in New York City.
Unanimous	When everyone agrees. All sixty-nine electors voted for Washington, which is a unanimous vote.
Ratification	When a state officially agrees to a new law or constitution. Nine states had to ratify the Constitution before it could begin working.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many of the thirteen states voted in the 1789 election?

( ) A. 8
( ) B. 10
( ) C. 13
( ) D. 15

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did three of the thirteen states not vote in 1789?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What does the word "unanimous" mean, and why is that word used to describe the 1789 election?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

George Washington served two terms and then went home. Why does that decision still matter today?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

10. Three states did not participate: North Carolina, Rhode Island, and New York.

NC ratified the Constitution in November 1789; RI in May 1790. NY had a legislative deadlock that ran past the deadline.

QUESTION 2

North Carolina and Rhode Island had not yet ratified the Constitution. New York's legislature could not agree on how to pick its electors in time.

Ratification was a state-by-state process and not every state moved at the same speed. NY's deadlock was a procedural failure, not a refusal.

QUESTION 3

Unanimous means that everyone agrees on the same answer. All sixty-nine electors picked Washington, so the choice was unanimous.

Washington remains the only U.S. president ever to be unanimously chosen by the Electoral College.

QUESTION 4

By choosing to leave after two terms, Washington showed that the president is not a king. Every president after him followed his example until 1940 (Franklin Roosevelt). The two-term limit was later written into the Constitution as the Twenty-Second Amendment in 1951.

The two-term precedent is one of Washington's most consequential decisions. It held for 144 years before being broken, and the Twenty-Second Amendment then made it constitutional law.