1789

George Washington vs John Adams

A 50-minute lesson on the 1789 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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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1789: George Washington vs John Adams

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: list two reasons it might be hard to elect a leader when nobody has done it before. Then suggest one rule you would write into the system to prevent a problem you can imagine.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1789 election was the first one held under the new U.S. Constitution, which had taken effect the year before. It was also a test: could a brand-new nation peacefully select a chief executive without copying the kings of Europe? The framers had designed an indirect election system. Each state would appoint a number of electors equal to its total representation in Congress (House plus Senate). Those electors would each cast two ballots. The person with the most electoral votes would become president; the runner-up would become vice president. In 1789, most state legislatures appointed the electors directly. Only a few states held popular elections to pick electors. There was no campaigning. There were no political parties. There was, in fact, only one serious candidate: George Washington, the retired commander of the Continental Army. Washington had returned to his Virginia farm in 1783 after winning the Revolutionary War, refusing the opportunity to become a military strongman. That decision had earned him an almost mythological reputation. By 1789, virtually everyone - Federalists who wanted a strong national government and Anti-Federalists who feared one - agreed that Washington should be the first president. Three of the thirteen states did not vote. North Carolina and Rhode Island had not yet ratified the Constitution, so they were not eligible. New York's legislature was deadlocked between its two houses on how to appoint electors and ran out the clock. The election proceeded with ten states and 69 electors. When the votes were counted, Washington's name appeared on all 69 ballots. He won unanimously - the only president in American history to do so. John Adams of Massachusetts received the second-highest total (34 votes) and became vice president. Washington took the oath of office on April 30, 1789, on the balcony of Federal Hall

		in New York City, then the nation's capital. He delivered the first inaugural address to a joint session of Congress, opening with a careful statement that he had accepted the office reluctantly and in answer to a public summons. The address set a tone: the new federal government would be republican, civilian, and modest about itself, not regal. Washington was acutely aware that everything he did would set precedent. He chose the title "Mr. President" over the more elaborate options some senators had proposed (such as "His Most Benign Highness"). He served only two terms and then voluntarily returned to private life - a decision that became an unwritten rule for the next 151 years and was eventually codified in the Twenty-Second Amendment in 1951. The 1789 election did not just choose a president. It established that the U.S. presidency would be an elected, term-limited, civilian office whose holder serves at the public's pleasure.
10 min	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

Background

Before the worksheet, review the key terms below and then read the primary source carefully. The two source-analysis questions on the worksheet (questions 6 and 7) ask you to quote from the excerpt.

Key terms

Constitution
The 1787 framework document that created the federal government. It took effect in 1788 after ratification by nine states; the first election under it was 1789.

Two-ballot rule
The original Constitution required each elector to cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. This rule caused crises in 1796 and 1800 and was replaced by the Twelfth Amendment in 1804.

Anti-Federalist
An opponent of ratifying the Constitution as written, usually arguing it gave too much power to the central government. Many became Democratic-Republicans in the 1790s.

Electoral College
The body of state-appointed electors who actually choose the president. In 1789, most electors were appointed by state legislatures rather than by popular vote.

Federalist
A supporter of ratifying the Constitution and creating a stronger national government. Hamilton and Washington were Federalists.

Precedent
An action taken for the first time that becomes an expected pattern for those who follow. Almost every Washington decision in 1789 created a precedent that lasted for generations.

First Inaugural Address

GEORGE WASHINGTON, APRIL 30, 1789

Washington gave this address before a joint session of Congress in Federal Hall, New York City. He had reluctantly accepted the office and was acutely aware that everything he did would set precedent. This sentence is his first official invocation of divine sanction for the new constitutional government.

> *"Such being the impressions under which I have, in obedience to the public summons, repaired to the present station, it would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act my fervent supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe, who presides in the councils of nations, and whose providential aids can supply every human defect, that His benediction may consecrate to the liberties and happiness of the people of the United States a Government instituted by themselves for these essential purposes."*

Washington, "First Inaugural Address" (New York, NY, April 30, 1789). Public domain.

The 1789 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did George Washington receive in 1789?

( ) A. 35
( ) B. 69
( ) C. 138
( ) D. 270

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which three states did not participate in the 1789 election?

( ) A. NC, RI, NY
( ) B. MA, CT, NH
( ) C. VA, MD, PA
( ) D. GA, SC, NC

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was George Washington considered the only realistic candidate for president in 1789? Identify two reasons specific to his pre-1789 record.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Washington's "reluctant acceptance" framing in his inaugural was a deliberate political choice. What was he trying to signal, and to whom?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Washington served two terms and then went home. Identify the precedent this created, when it was first broken, and the constitutional amendment that codified it.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

Looking at the 1789 election map, identify two regions or states that are entirely missing from the electoral map. Explain what each absence tells you about the early republic's geographic and political reach.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

69. Total available was 138 (two ballots per elector across the 10 reporting states' 69 electors).

Each of the 69 electors cast two ballots. Washington appeared on all 69 of the first-choice ballots, plus most second-choice ballots too.

QUESTION 2

NC, RI, NY. North Carolina and Rhode Island had not yet ratified the Constitution; New York's legislature could not agree on how to appoint electors in time.

NC ratified in November 1789; RI in May 1790. NY's legislative deadlock between Federalist Senate and Anti-Federalist Assembly ran past the elector-appointment deadline.

QUESTION 3

Accept any two of: (1) He led the Continental Army to victory in the Revolutionary War. (2) He voluntarily resigned his army commission in 1783, demonstrating he could be trusted with power. (3) Both Federalists and Anti-Federalists trusted him politically. (4) He presided over the Constitutional Convention in 1787.

The 1783 resignation is particularly important. Washington could have become a military strongman; his voluntary return to civilian life made him uniquely trustworthy.

QUESTION 4

Washington was signaling that he sought the office out of duty, not personal ambition. The framing connected him to the classical republican model of Cincinnatus - the citizen-soldier who serves only when called. The audience was anyone worried that the presidency might become a path to monarchy.

Late-eighteenth-century American political culture was steeped in classical Roman references. Cincinnatus was the universally recognized model for a leader who exercises power only reluctantly.

QUESTION 5

Two-term limit. It was first broken in 1940 by Franklin Roosevelt, who won a third and then a fourth term. The Twenty-Second Amendment (ratified 1951) codified a two-term limit by constitutional law.

The 1789-1940 stretch is one of the longest unbroken political traditions in American history. The amendment after FDR's death made the precedent permanent.

QUESTION 6

Accept any two of: the trans-Appalachian West (no states yet beyond the original 13); North Carolina (had not yet ratified the Constitution); Rhode Island (had not yet ratified the Constitution); New York (legislative deadlock). The absent western region tells you the U.S. was still a thirteen-state Atlantic seaboard nation; the absent NC + RI tells you the constitutional union itself was still being built.

The 1789 map is one of the most striking visual reminders that the United States was a coastal, partial union when it elected its first president. Vermont (1791) and Kentucky (1792) would join soon after.