1789

George Washington vs John Adams

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1789: George Washington vs John Adams

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1789 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1789 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: what does it mean for a country to elect its first leader under a brand-new constitution? List two questions you would want answered before casting your vote.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1789 election was the first held under the U.S. Constitution. George Washington ran effectively unopposed and received all 69 electoral votes cast — every elector named him on at least one of their two ballots. John Adams, the runner-up, became the first Vice President. Only ten of the thirteen eligible states actually voted: New York's legislature failed to appoint electors in time, and North Carolina and Rhode Island had not yet ratified the Constitution. Voters did not choose electors directly in most states; state legislatures did. The election established a precedent that the presidency would be civilian, elected, and (after Washington's self-imposed two-term limit) constrained in practice. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.
15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1789 election tells you about the First Party System era that the textbook didn't?"

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

Electors
Individuals chosen by each state (in 1789, mostly by state legislatures) to cast the actual ballots for president and vice president.

Ratification
A state convention or legislature formally adopting the new Constitution. Required nine states; the ninth (New Hampshire) ratified in June 1788.

Precedent
An action taken by a first officeholder that becomes an expected standard for those who follow. Washington's every decision in 1789 shaped the presidency permanently.

Two-ballot rule
The original Constitution required each elector to cast two ballots without specifying which one was for president. The Twelfth Amendment (1804) replaced this.

Article II
The section of the U.S. Constitution that creates the presidency and defines the office's duties, eligibility, and term.

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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did George Washington receive in 1789?

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

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Name the three states eligible to participate in 1789 that did not cast electoral votes, and give the reason each was absent.

QUESTION 3 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who became the first Vice President of the United States?

( ) A. Thomas Jefferson
( ) B. John Adams
( ) C. John Jay
( ) D. Aaron Burr

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Under the original Constitution, each elector cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. Briefly explain one problem this could create that became visible in later elections.

QUESTION 5 · MAP-READ

Looking at the 1789 election map, identify which two states are missing entirely and which region of the future country is not yet represented at all.

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify one specific phrase in the excerpt where Washington frames his acceptance of the presidency as a response to a public call rather than a personal ambition. Quote it exactly.

QUESTION 7 · SHORT-ANSWER

Washington calls on a higher power in his first official act as president. Connect this choice to the broader 1789 problem of legitimizing a brand-new constitutional government. What does invoking divine authority accomplish that purely political language might not?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

69

Washington appeared on every one of the 69 ballots cast — a unanimous result. Total electoral votes available were 138 (each elector cast two ballots).

QUESTION 2

New York (legislature deadlocked on appointing electors), North Carolina (had not yet ratified the Constitution), Rhode Island (had not yet ratified the Constitution).

NC ratified in November 1789, RI in May 1790. The election proceeded with the ten states that were both ratified and organized.

QUESTION 3

John Adams

Adams received the second-highest electoral vote total (34), making him the first Vice President. Three other figures received scattered electoral support.

QUESTION 4

Accept: the same ballot mechanism that elevated Adams could pair a president and vice president from opposing parties, or produce a tie between running mates — both problems that surfaced in 1796 and 1800 and prompted the Twelfth Amendment.

The original design assumed non-partisan elite electors. Once parties formed in the 1790s, the two-ballot-per-elector system became unworkable; the Twelfth Amendment (1804) separated presidential and vice-presidential ballots.

QUESTION 5

NC and RI are missing entirely; the entire trans-Appalachian West (no states yet beyond the original thirteen) is unrepresented.

The 1789 map shows only ten reporting jurisdictions concentrated along the Atlantic seaboard. Vermont (1791) and Kentucky (1792) would join soon after.

QUESTION 6

Accept any of: "transmitted by your order", "obedience to the public summons", or "repaired to the present station". Each frames Washington as responding to an external call (Congress, the country) rather than seeking power himself. Award full credit for any exact verbatim quote from the excerpt that conveys this responding-to-summons posture.

The reluctance-to-serve framing was central to classical republican rhetoric (the Cincinnatus model). Anchoring the comprehension question on verbatim quotation prepares students for Q7, which asks about the strategic effect of this framing rather than its location.

QUESTION 7

Accept: invoking the "Almighty Being" added a layer of legitimacy that the brand-new Constitution could not yet provide on its own. The 1789 government had no track record, no precedents, and the loyalty of the states was still uncertain. Religious framing connected the new federal government to traditions the audience already trusted.

Late-18th-century American political culture treated religious invocation as a unifying gesture across denominations. Washington — himself a Deist by training — used it strategically.

Discussion prompts

1. Washington was elected unanimously by the electors. What does a uniformly-supported first president signal about the credibility of a brand-new constitution? What might have happened if a contested election had come first?

2. Three of the thirteen states did not participate. How might the election have looked different if all thirteen had voted, and what does the absence tell you about how thinly stitched the early republic actually was?

3. In most states in 1789, voters did not choose electors directly — legislatures did. Identify one argument for that system and one against it, and explain which you find stronger and why.