AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1789

George Washington vs John Adams

A 105-minute lesson on the 1789 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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

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2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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1789: George Washington vs John Adams

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: identify two structural features of the 1789 election system that would not survive into the modern presidential system, and explain what specifically failed about each.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1789 election is the test case for the Constitution's electoral design. The framers had designed a system to elect the president without trusting either Congress, a single national electorate, or the state legislatures alone. Each state appointed electors equal to its combined House and Senate representation. Each elector cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. The top vote-getter would be president; the second would be vice president. The system assumed a non-partisan elite of electors who would deliberate independently rather than mechanically execute a party slate. That assumption held in 1789 because no parties yet existed. It would collapse within a decade. Three of the thirteen states did not participate. North Carolina and Rhode Island had not yet ratified the Constitution. New York's legislature deadlocked between its Federalist Senate and Anti-Federalist Assembly over the procedure for appointing electors, and the deadline passed. Of the ten reporting states, only Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia held genuine popular elections for electors; the rest used legislative selection. The American voting public - what little of it could legally participate - was barely involved. George Washington was the unanimous choice. All 69 electors named him on at least one of their two ballots. The runner-up, John Adams, received 34 votes; the remainder scattered among ten other candidates. The split second-ballot pattern is structurally important: electors had been deliberately strategic in their second vote, spreading the runner-up support thin enough that no challenger could plausibly tie Washington. This kind of coordination presupposed personal acquaintance and shared values among electors. Once parties formed and electors began voting as party agents, the coordination problem inverted - Jefferson and Burr tied in 1800 precisely because Democratic-Republican electors all voted both ballots for both men. Washington's inauguration on April 30, 1789 - six weeks late, because the new feder-

al government's transition machinery was itself improvised - was a precedent-setting performance. He chose the title "Mr. President" over more elaborate proposals such as "His Most Benign Highness." He took the oath outdoors, in public view from the balcony of Federal Hall. His First Inaugural Address opened with a careful framing of reluctant acceptance, casting himself as responding to a public summons rather than seeking power - the classical republican posture descended from Cincinnatus. Every subsequent president has followed the same template at some level.

Three structural problems already visible in 1789 would be addressed in the next thirty years. First, the two-ballot rule. In 1796 it elected a Federalist president (Adams) and a Democratic-Republican vice president (Jefferson). In 1800 it produced an unbroken tie between Jefferson and Burr that took 36 House ballots to resolve. The Twelfth Amendment (1804) replaced it with separate ballots for president and vice president. Second, the absence of campaigns. By 1796 organized partisan campaigning had begun; by 1800 it was unrestrained. The framers' assumption of non-partisan deliberation was obsolete within seven years. Third, the legislative-appointment model. Over the nineteenth century, every state shifted to popular election of electors, the last (South Carolina) doing so in 1860. The 1789 election was thus simultaneously the founding ratification of the constitutional system and the proof-of-concept that began breaking it.

Washington's most consequential decision was to leave. After two terms he returned to Mount Vernon, refusing a third term. His Farewell Address (1796), drafted with Hamilton, warned against political parties and foreign entanglements. The two-term tradition held until Franklin Roosevelt broke it in 1940; the Twenty-Second Amendment (1951) restored it by constitutional law. Historians treat the precedent of voluntary departure as Washington's signal contribution to the office - more decisive than any policy choice during his presidency.

20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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

Electoral College

The body of state-appointed electors who choose the president. Designed by the framers as a deliberative check on direct popular election; transformed into a partisan rubber stamp once parties formed in the 1790s.

Cincinnatus model

The classical republican ideal of a citizen-soldier who exercises power only when called by the public, then returns to private life. Washington explicitly invoked this model in his 1783 resignation and again in his 1789 acceptance.

Federalist

A supporter of ratifying the Constitution and building a stronger national government. The faction crystallized into the Federalist Party by 1796 under Hamilton and Adams.

Twelfth Amendment

Ratified 1804 in direct response to the 1800 Jefferson-Burr tie. Requires electors to cast separate ballots for president and vice president, effectively conceding that party slates would dominate elector behavior.

Two-ballot rule

The original Constitution required each elector to cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. Worked in 1789, broke in 1796, catastrophically failed in 1800. Replaced by the Twelfth Amendment (1804).

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 binding precedent for future presidents.

Anti-Federalist

An opponent of the Constitution's ratification as written, usually arguing for a Bill of Rights and limited federal power. Many later regrouped as Democratic-Republicans under Jefferson and Madison.

Twenty-Second Amendment

Ratified 1951. Limits any individual to two elected terms as president. Codified by constitutional law the Washington precedent that had held by tradition for 151 years until Franklin Roosevelt broke it in 1940.

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 framing of his acceptance of the presidency.

> *"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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

First Inaugural Address

GEORGE WASHINGTON, APRIL 30, 1789

"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.

SOURCE B

Farewell Address (warning against parties)

GEORGE WASHINGTON, SEPTEMBER 19, 1796

"I have already intimated to you the danger of parties in the state, with particular reference to the founding of them on geographical discriminations. Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally. The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism."

Washington, "Farewell Address" (Philadelphia, PA, September 19, 1796). Public domain.

The 1789 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Washington's First Inaugural) that frames his acceptance of the presidency as reluctant rather than ambitious. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Washington's Farewell Address) that names political parties as a threat to constitutional government. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources position Washington as a guardian of the new constitutional order, but they emphasize different threats. Identify the specific threat each source addresses.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A was delivered on April 30, 1789. Source B was published on September 19, 1796. What does the seven-year gap tell you about how Washington's view of the new federal government evolved during his presidency?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B warns specifically against parties founded on "geographical discriminations." Identify one specific 1789-1796 development that would have made this warning concrete to Washington's contemporary audience.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The classical republican ideal Washington invokes in Source A - accepting power only in response to a public call - is associated with which historical figure?

( ) A. Julius Caesar
( ) B. Cincinnatus
( ) C. Pericles
( ) D. Brutus

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Washington's voluntary retirement after two terms held by tradition until 1940 and was codified by which constitutional amendment in 1951?

( ) A. Sixteenth
( ) B. Twentieth
( ) C. Twenty-Second
( ) D. Twenty-Fifth

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was Washington's non-partisan civilian framework a realistic foundation, an idealized standard, or both? Identify one specific piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Washington's First Inaugural Address (Source A, 1789) frames acceptance of the presidency as reluctant obedience to a public summons. His Farewell Address (Source B, 1796) warns that political parties pose a "frightful despotism" to the new republic. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1789-1800 period, evaluate the extent to which Washington's vision of non-partisan civilian governance was a realistic foundation for the United States or an idealized standard that the country's actual political development could not sustain. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the realistic-vs-idealized axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the 1789 unanimous election, the absence of parties in 1789, the rise of the Federalist/Democratic-Republican split by 1796, the Twelfth Amendment, the 1800 Jefferson-Burr tie. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent - realistic vs. idealized - rather than treating Washington's framework as obviously naive OR obviously sound. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "in obedience to the public summons", "repaired to the present station". Each phrase frames acceptance as response to external call rather than personal ambition. The exam expectation at AP level is verbatim quotation.

Late-eighteenth-century republican rhetoric treated reluctance to serve as a credential. Washington had perfected this posture across two decades of public life by 1789.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally", "the alternate domination of one faction over another", "a frightful despotism". The phrase "frightful despotism" is the most explicit naming of the threat.

Washington's Farewell Address remains the most quoted warning against partisanship in American political history. The phrase "frightful despotism" is the strongest formulation.

QUESTION 3

Source A addresses the threat of illegitimacy - the worry that a brand-new constitutional government will not be accepted as authoritative without strong personal credibility behind it. Source B addresses the threat of partisan capture - the worry that, once accepted, the system will fracture along ideological and geographic lines and reproduce the factional politics Washington saw as fatal to republics.

The two addresses define Washington's arc as president: he came in fearing the system would not be taken seriously, and left fearing that it would be torn apart by the partisan competition the framers had not designed for.

QUESTION 4

By 1796 Washington had watched the Federalist and Democratic-Republican factions consolidate into proto-parties. Hamilton's and Jefferson's policy fights inside his cabinet had become public partisan warfare. The 1789 framing of reluctant civilian service had given way by 1796 to active concern that the partisan structure he had hoped to suppress was the system that would actually run the country. The two addresses bookend Washington's evolution from constitutional optimist to constitutional realist.

The 1791 First Bank fight, the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion, and the 1796 emergence of party tickets are the milestones inside this seven-year window.

QUESTION 5

Accept any of: the 1791 Bank of the United States fight (Hamilton's plan versus Jefferson's Virginia opposition); the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion (Western Pennsylvania farmers versus federal excise tax); the 1796 emergence of regionally aligned Federalist and Democratic-Republican electoral tickets. All three reveal how geographically anchored ideological divisions were already producing the partisan threat Washington warned against.

The Bank fight in particular sorted Virginians (against) and New Englanders (for) along the exact geographic lines Washington warned about. He had watched this happen inside his own cabinet.

QUESTION 6

Cincinnatus.

The reference is to Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus, the Roman general who twice accepted appointment as dictator to handle a crisis and then returned to his farm. Washington consciously modeled both his 1783 commission resignation and his 1797 retirement on this template. The Society of the Cincinnati, founded by Washington and his officers in 1783, took its name from the same figure.

QUESTION 7

Twenty-Second.

Franklin Roosevelt broke the two-term tradition in 1940 (re-elected to a third term) and 1944 (a fourth, though he died in April 1945). The Twenty-Second Amendment was proposed by Congress in 1947 and ratified in 1951.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the realistic-vs-idealized axis, (2) avoid treating Washington's framework as obviously naive OR obviously sound, (3) signal at least one specific piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. Full credit at the worksheet level requires only a clear position with two pieces of source evidence. The LEQ rubric on the next page evaluates the full essay.