1789

George Washington vs John Adams

A 20-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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1789

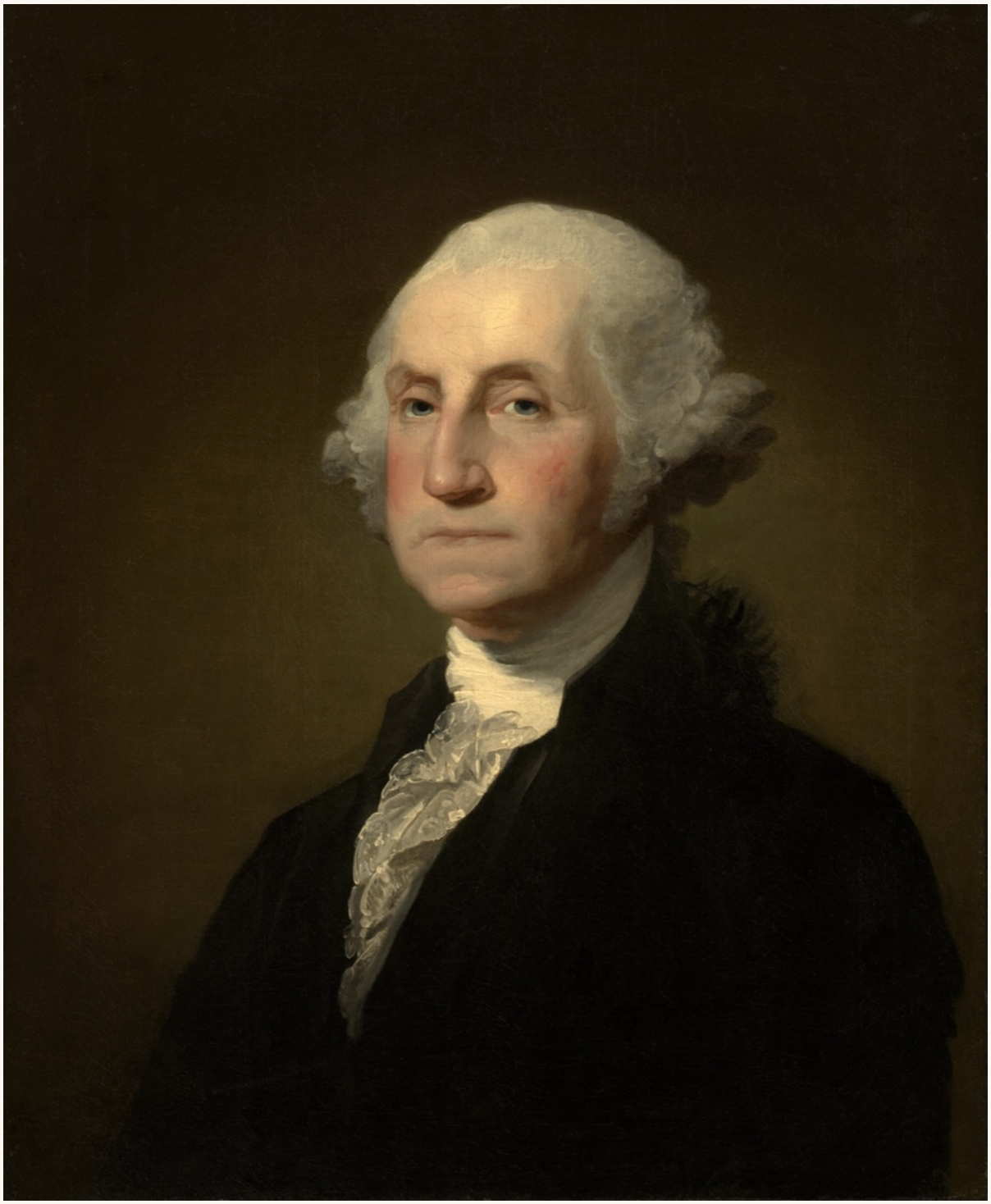
A long, long time ago, the United States chose its very first president. Look at the picture. His name was George Washington. He had been a brave soldier and a farmer who lived in a place called Virginia.

The country was brand new. The leaders had just written a special book of rules called the Constitution. The Constitution said the country needed one leader, called a president. But how would the country choose one? Nobody had ever done that before.

So each state picked a small group of grown-ups called electors. The electors then picked the president. In 1789, every single elector wrote down the same name: George Washington! He won every vote.

George Washington did not really want to be the president. He wanted to stay at home and be a farmer. But the people said the new country needed him. So he said yes.

On a sunny April day in New York City, George Washington put his hand on a big book called the Bible. He promised to do his best as president. Crowds of people cheered.



George Washington, painted by Gilbert Stuart in 1796. This portrait is the same face that appears on the U.S. one-dollar bill today.

GILBERT STUART (1755-1828), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who was the very first president of the United States? Say his name out loud.

2.

Point to one thing in the picture that tells you it was made a long time ago.

3.

How many years was George Washington the president? Use your fingers to count.

Warm-up (5 min)

Before reading: look at the man in the picture. Do you know who he is? Have you ever seen his face on a one-dollar bill?

Answer key

1.

George Washington was the first president. He started his job on April 30, 1789.

Washington was sworn in on the balcony of Federal Hall in New York City, the U.S. capital at the time.

2.

Accept any specific observation: the old-fashioned hairstyle, the formal black coat, the painted (not photographed) style, the powdered hair, the stiff white collar, the serious face. Award credit for any verbal answer tied to a specific feature.

K-2 students need a concrete prompt and a low bar. Anything they can point to and describe should earn full credit.

3.

Eight years. He served two terms of four years each, from 1789 to 1797.

Counting two terms of four years each gives a manageable 8-finger answer for K-2.