3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1792

George Washington vs John Adams

A 35-minute lesson on the 1792 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA First Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 264 total
WINNER George Washington (Independent) · 132 EV	RUNNER-UP John Adams (Federalist) · 77 EV
KEY ISSUE Maintaining national unity amid rising partisan divisions	TURNOUT 6.3%

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

1792: George Washington vs John Adams

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Imagine your teacher was the principal of your school for four years and did a really good job. Your school had to choose again. Should they pick the same person, or try someone new? Why?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1792 election was the second U.S. presidential election. Like the first one in 1789, it was a sweep. Every single elector picked George Washington again. He won unanimously for the second time. The country had changed since 1789. Vermont and Kentucky had joined the Union, bringing the total to 15 states. The capital had moved from New York City to Philadelphia and was being planned for a brand new city called Washington, in a special federal district along the Potomac River. The first Bank of the United States had been chartered in 1791. The U.S. Army had been rebuilt. Treaties with the European powers were being negotiated. But something new was happening in the background. Two of George Washington's top advisers had begun to argue. Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton wanted a strong federal government, a national bank, and friendly relations with Britain. Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson wanted a smaller federal government, support for revolutionary France, and a country built on small farmers rather than bankers. They were the seeds of America's first political parties. Washington was deeply tired by 1792. He told friends he wanted to retire and go home to his farm in Virginia. Both Hamilton and Jefferson - even though they disagreed about almost everything else - begged him to stay. They thought the country was not strong enough yet to have its first contested election. Washington reluctantly agreed. There was no real campaign. There was no party slate. Washington won every electoral vote. The interesting question that year was: who would be vice president? John Adams won with 77 votes, beating George Clinton of New York, who got 50. Federalist-leaning electors voted for Adams; emerging Democratic-Republican electors voted for Clinton. The vice presidential contest was the first real partisan competition in American history.
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 1792 Election

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electors voted for Clinton. The vice presidential contest was the first real partisan competition in American history.

Key words

Cabinet	A group of advisers chosen by the president to run different parts of the government. Washington's cabinet included Alexander Hamilton at Treasury and Thomas Jefferson at State.
Federalist	Someone who wanted a strong federal government, a national bank, and friendly relations with Britain. Hamilton and Adams were Federalists.
Democratic-Republican	Someone who wanted a smaller federal government, support for revolutionary France, and a country built on small farmers. Jefferson and Madison led this group.
Capital	The city where a country's government is based. In 1792 the U.S. capital was Philadelphia, but a new permanent capital was being planned along the Potomac River.
National bank	A bank chartered by the federal government to hold tax money, issue paper currency, and lend to businesses. Hamilton's First Bank of the United States was chartered in 1791.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did George Washington get in 1792?

( ) A. 77
( ) B. 105
( ) C. 132
( ) D. 156

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

How was the 1792 vice presidential contest different from the 1789 one?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did George Washington agree to serve a second term even though he wanted to go home?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why is 1792 considered the start of political parties in the United States?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

132. Every elector picked Washington. He won unanimously for the second time.

Total electors had grown from 69 in 1789 to 132 in 1792 because two new states (Vermont, Kentucky) had joined and several existing states had grown.

QUESTION 2

In 1789 the VP race was sleepy - John Adams won easily with no opponent. In 1792 the VP race was the first real partisan competition: Adams won 77, George Clinton got 50. Federalist-leaning electors voted Adams; emerging Democratic-Republican electors voted Clinton.

The 1792 VP race is the first electoral expression of the party split that would dominate U.S. politics for the next 30+ years.

QUESTION 3

Both Hamilton and Jefferson - despite disagreeing about almost everything else - asked Washington to stay. They feared the country was not strong enough yet to handle a contested election between their two rising factions. Washington agreed reluctantly.

Washington was the unifying figure that held both sides together. Without him in office, the partisan competition of 1796 became inevitable.

QUESTION 4

Washington's cabinet had split into two camps: Hamilton's Federalists and Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans. The 1792 VP race was the first electoral contest where the two factions ran rival candidates (Adams and Clinton). The parties were not yet formal organizations, but the partisan competition had begun.

Most historians treat 1792 as the start of the First Party System, even though the parties themselves were not yet formally organized.