1792

George Washington vs John Adams

A 50-minute lesson on the 1792 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 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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2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1792: 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**	List two reasons a young democracy might want its founder to stay in power longer than expected. Then suggest one risk of doing so.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1792 election was the second U.S. presidential election and the last in which George Washington served. It was held under the original two-ballot Constitution (the Twelfth Amendment was still twelve years away). Each of 132 electors cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. Every elector's first ballot named Washington. He won unanimously for the second time - a feat no other president has matched. The country had changed materially since 1789. The federal Constitution had been ratified by all thirteen original states. The Bill of Rights had been ratified in 1791. Two new states (Vermont in 1791, Kentucky in 1792) had joined the Union, making 15 states with 132 electoral votes. The Bank of the United States had been chartered in 1791. The first federal tax (the 1791 whiskey excise) had been collected, sparking discontent in western Pennsylvania that would erupt in the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion. The deeper change was inside Washington's administration. Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson - both Cabinet officers - had become bitter ideological opponents. Hamilton wanted a strong federal government, a national bank, manufacturing, and conciliation with Britain. Jefferson wanted a small federal government, agrarian economics, support for the French Revolution, and a strict-construction reading of Article I. Their fight inside the Cabinet had become a public split by 1792. Newspapers aligned with each side (the National Gazette for Jefferson; the Gazette of the United States for Hamilton) had begun trading partisan attacks. Washington had grown weary. He had written Madison a letter asking for help drafting a farewell address; Madison's draft (later revised for 1796) circulated. But both Hamilton and Jefferson asked him to stay. Each feared the other side would dominate without Washington as referee. Washington agreed reluctantly. He continued his practice of attending Cabinet meetings without disclosing his own policy positions, then writing private notes asking each Secretary to defend his view in writing.

		The presidential ballot was uncontested; the vice presidential contest was the first partisan election in American history. Federalist-leaning electors gave their second ballot to Vice President John Adams (77 votes). Emerging Democratic-Republican electors gave their second ballot to former Anti-Federalist Governor George Clinton of New York (50 votes). Jefferson received four votes; Aaron Burr one. Adams was re-elected vice president with a clear plurality. The geographic pattern previewed the alignment that would define the next thirty years. New England gave its electoral votes overwhelmingly to Adams; the South leaned toward Clinton (though four Southern states still gave first-ballot support to Washington). The middle states - New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania - split. The first U.S. partisan electoral coalition was visible in microscale.
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

Two-ballot rule

The original Constitution required each elector to cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. In 1792 this worked smoothly because Washington was uncontested for the top spot; the system would break in 1796 and 1800.

First Party System

The period roughly 1791-1824 in which Federalists competed against Democratic-Republicans. Most historians treat the 1792 VP race as the system's first electoral expression.

Bank of the United States

The federal national bank, chartered in 1791 on Hamilton's proposal. Held tax money, issued paper currency, and lent to businesses. Jefferson opposed it on strict-construction grounds; Washington signed the charter anyway.

Whiskey excise

The first federal direct tax on a U.S. product, levied on distilled spirits in 1791 to help pay down Revolutionary War debt. Sparked discontent in western Pennsylvania that erupted in the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion.

Strict construction

The legal doctrine that the federal government can exercise only those powers explicitly granted by the Constitution. Jefferson's position in the 1791 Bank debate; the core Democratic-Republican constitutional commitment.

Bill of Rights

The first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, ratified December 15, 1791. Guarantees individual freedoms (speech, religion, press, assembly), protections from federal overreach, and reserves undelegated powers to states or the people.

Second Inaugural Address

GEORGE WASHINGTON, MARCH 4, 1793

The shortest inaugural address in U.S. history - only 135 words. Washington delivered it before a joint session of Congress in Philadelphia, then the federal capital. The brevity reflected his reluctance to set further precedent and his weariness with public life.

> *"I am again called upon by the voice of my country to execute the functions of its Chief Magistrate. When the occasion proper for it shall arrive, I shall endeavor to express the high sense I entertain of this distinguished honor, and of the confidence which has been reposed in me by the people of united America. Previous to the execution of any official act of the President the Constitution requires an oath of office. This oath I am now about to take, and in your presence: That if it shall be found during my administration of the Government I have in any instance violated willingly or knowingly the injunctions thereof, I may (besides incurring constitutional punishment) be subject to the upbraidings of all who are now witnesses of the present solemn ceremony."*

Washington, "Second Inaugural Address" (Philadelphia, PA, March 4, 1793). Public domain.

The 1792 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did George Washington receive in 1792?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who came in second in the 1792 vice-presidential contest?

( ) A. Aaron Burr
( ) B. Thomas Jefferson
( ) C. George Clinton
( ) D. Charles C. Pinckney

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did George Washington seriously consider retiring in 1792, and what made him change his mind?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How does the 1792 VP race signal the start of the First Party System? Identify two specific features.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Washington's Second Inaugural is the shortest in U.S. history. In two sentences, explain what political message his brevity sent.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1792 election map, identify the two new states that had joined the Union since 1789, and identify the rough regional pattern of Adams vs. Clinton support.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

132. Every elector's first ballot named Washington. He won unanimously for the second time.

Electors had grown from 69 (1789) to 132 (1792) because Vermont and Kentucky joined and several existing states had grown.

QUESTION 2

George Clinton. Clinton, the former Anti-Federalist Governor of New York, received 50 electoral votes - second to John Adams's 77.

Jefferson received 4 votes (from Southern electors looking ahead to 1796); Burr received 1.

QUESTION 3

Washington was tired and wanted to retire to Mount Vernon. He had asked James Madison to help draft a farewell address. Both Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson - despite disagreeing about almost everything - asked him to stay. They each feared that without Washington as referee, the other faction would dominate. Washington agreed reluctantly.

The Hamilton-Jefferson dual plea is one of the most-cited examples of Washington's unique unifying authority in the early Republic.

QUESTION 4

Two features: (1) Federalist-leaning electors voted for Adams while emerging Democratic-Republican electors voted for Clinton - the first electoral expression of organized partisan competition. (2) Newspapers aligned with each side (National Gazette for Jefferson; Gazette of the United States for Hamilton) had begun trading partisan attacks. Although the parties were not yet formal organizations, the 1792 VP race shows organized partisan voting in action.

The First Party System dates from this election. Formal party organizations would not crystallize until 1796 (Federalists) and the late 1790s (Democratic-Republicans).

QUESTION 5

Washington was signaling that the presidency should be a modest civilian office, not a regal one. The brevity (135 words) refused to set further precedent for grandiose inaugurals and reflected his weariness with public ceremony. The audience was anyone who might have wanted the presidency to grow into a monarchical office.

Washington's Second Inaugural remains the shortest in U.S. history. Subsequent presidents have used much longer addresses to lay out their policy agenda.

QUESTION 6

New states: Vermont (joined 1791) and Kentucky (joined 1792). Adams strength: New England, especially Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire. Clinton strength: the South (especially Virginia, North Carolina) and New York. The middle states (New Jersey, Pennsylvania) split.

The 1792 geographic pattern previews the alignment that would dominate American politics through 1820: New England Federalist, Southern Democratic-Republican.