1792

George Washington vs John Adams

A 75-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%

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

1792: 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 1792 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1792 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two political reasons a young constitutional democracy might want a single dominant founding figure to remain in power. For each, suggest one specific institutional weakness that figure's continued presence might mask.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1792 election was the second U.S. presidential election. It was held under the original two-ballot Constitution (the Twelfth Amendment was twelve years away) and produced two distinct outcomes: George Washington won the presidency unanimously for the second time, and John Adams was re-elected vice president in the first partisan contest in American history. The 132-elector unanimous Washington result obscured how much the country had changed in three years. The Bill of Rights had been ratified December 1791 - resolving the Anti-Federalist demand for explicit individual-rights guarantees that had nearly blocked ratification of the Constitution itself. Vermont (1791) and Kentucky (1792) had joined the Union as the 14th and 15th states, demonstrating that the federal Union could grow. Hamilton's 1791 Report on Manufactures and Report on the Bank had laid out a coherent economic-development agenda. The First Bank of the United States, chartered February 1791, had begun operations. Federal tax collection - particularly the controversial March 1791 whiskey excise - had brought the federal government into direct contact with ordinary citizens in ways the Articles of Confederation had not. The institutional question of 1792 was whether the new constitutional order could survive a contested presidential election. Most participants doubted it could. Washington had grown weary of public service and had asked James Madison in May 1792 to help draft a farewell address. Madison did so; the draft (later revised by Hamilton and used in 1796) circulated among Cabinet officers. Both Treasury Secretary Hamilton and Secretary of State Jefferson, despite their open ideological warfare inside the Cabinet, asked Washington to stay. Each believed that without Washington as referee, the other side would capture the government. Washington

agreed reluctantly and gave his shortest-ever inaugural address (135 words) in March 1793.

The vice presidential contest was a different story. By 1792 the Cabinet split had produced two distinct partisan coalitions. Federalists - led by Hamilton, supported by Adams, Jay, and most of the New England commercial class - favored a strong federal government, a national bank, manufacturing, and conciliation with Britain. Democratic-Republicans - led by Jefferson and Madison, supported by Southern planters and Pennsylvania artisans - favored state authority, agrarian economics, support for revolutionary France, and a strict-construction reading of Article I. The parties were not yet formal organizations, but their newspapers (the National Gazette for the Democratic-Republicans; the Gazette of the United States for the Federalists) had begun coordinating partisan attacks throughout 1792.

In the VP contest, Federalist-leaning electors gave their second ballot to incumbent Vice President John Adams (77 votes). Democratic-Republican electors gave their second ballot to former Anti-Federalist Governor George Clinton of New York (50 votes). Jefferson received 4 votes from Southern electors looking ahead; Burr received 1. Adams won decisively, but the partisan structure of the result was unmistakable. The 1792 VP race is now treated by political scientists as the first electoral expression of the First Party System.

The geographic pattern previewed the next thirty years of American politics. New England voted overwhelmingly for Adams. The South leaned toward Clinton, though Washington's personal popularity kept four Southern states in his column on the first ballot. The middle states - New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania - split, with Clinton's home state of New York giving him the largest bloc of his support. The Federalist-vs-Democratic-Republican coalitions that would crystallize fully in 1796 were already visible in microscale. 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 1792 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

Two-ballot rule

The original Constitution required each elector to cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. Worked in 1789 and 1792 because Washington was uncontested for the top spot; failed in 1796 (Adams-Jefferson split-party) and 1800 (Jefferson-Burr tie). Replaced by the Twelfth Amendment in 1804.

Report on the Bank

Hamilton's December 1790 proposal for a federal national bank. The Bank of the United States, chartered February 1791, held tax money, issued paper currency, and lent to businesses. Jefferson opposed it on strict-construction grounds, sparking the first constitutional debate between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans.

Bill of Rights

The first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, ratified December 15, 1791. Guaranteed individual freedoms (speech, religion, press, assembly), protections against federal overreach (search, seizure, due process, jury trial), and reserved undelegated powers to states or the people. Resolved the Anti-Federalist demand that had nearly blocked Constitutional ratification.

Madison-Jefferson alliance

The political collaboration between James Madison (House) and Thomas Jefferson (Cabinet) that organized opposition to the Hamilton agenda from inside the Washington administration. The alliance is the institutional origin of the Democratic-Republican Party.

First Party System

The period roughly 1791-1824 in which Federalists competed against Democratic-Republicans. Most historians treat the 1792 VP race as the first electoral expression of the system, even though formal party organizations did not yet exist.

Whiskey excise

The first federal direct tax on a U.S. product, levied on distilled spirits in March 1791 to help pay Revolutionary War debt. Sparked western Pennsylvania discontent that erupted in the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion. Symbol of the new federal government's reach into ordinary citizens' lives.

Anti-Federalist

An opponent of the Constitution as written, usually arguing for a Bill of Rights and limited federal power. Many former Anti-Federalists became Democratic-Republicans after 1791. George Clinton, the 1792 VP runner-up, had been a leading Anti-Federalist.

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. The brevity reflected his reluctance to set further precedent for grandiose presidential ceremony and his weariness with public life. He had spent the months between November 1792 and March 1793 trying to mediate between Hamilton and Jefferson in his Cabinet.

> *"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 (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 1792?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who finished second in the 1792 vice-presidential contest?

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

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific 1791-1792 federal-government actions that brought the new Constitution into direct contact with ordinary citizens' lives.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did both Hamilton and Jefferson - bitter ideological opponents - both ask Washington to seek a second term?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the phrase in the Second Inaugural where Washington frames his acceptance of a second term as response to a public call. Quote it verbatim.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Washington's 135-word inaugural is the shortest in U.S. history. In two sentences, explain what political message the brevity sent and to whom.

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1792 election map, identify the two new states that had joined the Union since 1789, the regional pattern of Adams vs. Clinton support, and which middle state's split was structurally important.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

132. Every elector's first ballot named Washington. Unanimously elected for the second time.

Electors had grown from 69 (1789) to 132 (1792) because Vermont and Kentucky joined as 14th and 15th states and several existing states had grown via the 1790 census.

QUESTION 2

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

Jefferson received 4 (Southern strategic votes); Burr received 1. Clinton was the Democratic-Republican consensus candidate.

QUESTION 3

Accept any three of: (1) The 1791 charter of the First Bank of the United States. (2) The March 1791 whiskey excise tax. (3) The December 1791 ratification of the Bill of Rights. (4) The 1790 federal assumption of state Revolutionary War debts. (5) The 1791 Report on Manufactures laying out federal industrial policy. (6) The 1790 first U.S. census. (7) The 1792 federal Coinage Act establishing the U.S. Mint. (8) The 1792 Postal Service Act establishing the U.S. Post Office.

The 1791-92 period is the most legislatively active in early U.S. history. The federal government built its operational infrastructure rapidly under Hamilton's direction.

QUESTION 4

Both Hamilton and Jefferson believed the country was not yet stable enough to handle a contested election between rival ideological factions. Each also feared that the other side would capture the government without Washington's neutralizing personal authority. Both men therefore set aside their open ideological warfare to ask the same favor of the same president. Washington agreed reluctantly, citing the need to keep the Union together long enough for institutional precedents to take hold.

The Hamilton-Jefferson dual plea is one of the most-cited examples of Washington's unique unifying authority. The fact that he was indispensable in 1792 is itself an indictment of the early republic's structural fragility.

QUESTION 5

Accept: "I am again called upon by the voice of my country to execute the functions of its Chief Magistrate." The phrase frames acceptance of a second term as response to public call rather than personal ambition.

The framing mirrors his 1789 inaugural opening. The reluctance-to-serve posture, descended from the classical Cincinnatus model, was central to Washington's republican credibility.

QUESTION 6

Washington was signaling that the presidency should be a modest civilian office rather than a regal one. The brevity refused to set precedent for grandiose presidential ceremony. The audience was both the political establishment (Federalists tempted to expand the office, Democratic-Republicans worried about its growth) and the broader public (showing that even an indispensable founder treated the office as merely an office). The contrast with later inaugurals - which became ideological platforms - is structurally important.

Washington's Second Inaugural remains the shortest in U.S. history at 135 words. Every subsequent inaugural has used much longer addresses to lay out policy agendas.

QUESTION 7

New states: Vermont (joined 1791) and Kentucky (joined 1792). Adams strength: New England (especially Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire). Clinton strength: the South (Virginia, North Carolina) and his home state of New York. New York was structurally important because Clinton's 12 electoral votes there - which would have gone to Adams in any other Northern state - revealed the New York Federalist-Democratic-Republican split that would dominate state politics through the 1820s.

New York's structural importance to both parties was visible already in 1792. The Burr-Hamilton-Clinton triangle in NY politics would shape national outcomes in 1800 and 1804.

Discussion prompts

1. Washington's 1792 unanimous reelection masked the growing partisan crisis his administration was experiencing. Identify two specific 1791-1792 developments that made the eventual partisan competition inevitable, and one specific Washington-era institutional design that delayed it.

2. The 1792 VP race is now treated as the first partisan election in U.S. history, even though no formal parties existed. What does this tell you about how political parties form? Identify two structural features of organized partisanship that were visible in 1792 even before formal party machinery existed.