3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1796

John Adams vs Thomas Jefferson

A 35-minute lesson on the 1796 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA First Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 138 total
WINNER John Adams (Federalist) · 71 EV	RUNNER-UP Thomas Jefferson (Democratic-Republican) · 68 EV
KEY ISSUE Foreign policy toward revolutionary France and Britain; Federalism vs. states' rights	TURNOUT 20.1%

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

1796: John Adams vs Thomas Jefferson

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Imagine your school principal retired and two teachers - who disagreed about everything - both wanted the job. How would you decide between them?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1796 election was the first contested presidential race in U.S. history. George Washington had decided not to run for a third term. He published a Farewell Address in September 1796 warning about political parties and entangling foreign alliances, and then went home to Mount Vernon. The two main candidates were John Adams, the sitting vice president and a Federalist, and Thomas Jefferson, the former Secretary of State and a Democratic-Republican. Each man had a long resume. Adams had been a leader of the Continental Congress, had helped negotiate the 1783 Treaty of Paris ending the Revolution, and had been a careful administrator. Jefferson had written the Declaration of Independence, served as governor of Virginia, and represented the U.S. in France during the early years of the French Revolution. The two parties were forming around real disagreements. Federalists wanted a strong national government, a national bank, manufacturing, and conciliation with Britain. Democratic-Republicans wanted state authority, support for revolutionary France, and a country built on small independent farmers. The 1789 French Revolution had made foreign policy a partisan issue: Federalists worried about French radicalism; Democratic-Republicans celebrated French overthrow of monarchy. There were no big in-person rallies in 1796. The candidates did not give campaign speeches. The campaign happened entirely through newspapers and pamphlets, which traded harsh accusations. Federalist newspapers called Jefferson a dangerous radical. Democratic-Republican newspapers called Adams a secret monarchist. When the electoral votes were counted, John Adams won 71 to Jefferson's 68 - one of the closest results in U.S. history. The result was decided by South Carolina, where Federalist electors split unexpectedly. Under the original Constitution, each elector cast two ballots without saying which was for president and which for vice president. The candidate with the second-highest total automatically became vice president. So Adams, a Federalist, became president and Jefferson, a Democratic-Republican, became vice president. The two men disagreed about almost everything but had to work together for four years. This split-party administration is one reason the Twelfth Amendment - which sepa-

		rates presidential and vice presidential ballots - was added to the Constitution in 1804.
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 1796 Election

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Key words

Federalist Party	The political party of Washington, Adams, and Hamilton. Wanted a strong national government, a national bank, and friendly relations with Britain.
Democratic-Republican Party	The political party of Jefferson and Madison. Wanted a smaller national government, support for revolutionary France, and rule by small farmers.
Farewell Address	Washington's September 1796 published letter announcing he would not run again. Warned future Americans against political parties and foreign alliances.
Two-ballot rule	The original Constitution required each elector to cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. The runner-up automatically became vice president.
Treaty of Paris	The 1783 agreement that formally ended the American Revolutionary War. John Adams had been one of its negotiators.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did John Adams win in 1796?

( ) A. 59
( ) B. 68
( ) C. 71
( ) D. 84

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why is the 1796 election called "the first contested presidential election" in U.S. history?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Adams and Jefferson disagree about how the country should work?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Adams (a Federalist) and Jefferson (a Democratic-Republican) end up as president and vice president together?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

71. Adams won 71 electoral votes; Jefferson won 68 - a margin of three.

One of the closest results in U.S. presidential history. South Carolina's Federalist electors unexpectedly split, costing Adams a wider margin.

QUESTION 2

It was the first election in which two organized political factions ran rival candidates. George Washington had been unopposed in 1789 and 1792. In 1796, with Washington retired, Federalists (Adams) and Democratic-Republicans (Jefferson) competed directly through partisan newspapers and pamphlets.

The 1796 cycle marks the start of true partisan competition in U.S. presidential politics.

QUESTION 3

Adams was a Federalist. He wanted a strong national government, a national bank, manufacturing, and conciliation with Britain. Jefferson was a Democratic-Republican. He wanted a smaller national government, support for revolutionary France, and a country built on small farmers. The two disagreed about almost every major issue.

The 1796 platform divide was largely about (1) the role of the federal government, (2) commercial vs. agrarian economics, and (3) Britain vs. France in foreign policy.

QUESTION 4

The original Constitution required each elector to cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. The candidate with the most votes became president; the runner-up became vice president. In 1796, Adams won 71 votes (so president) and Jefferson came second with 68 (so vice president). The two-ballot rule had not anticipated organized parties.

The split-party administration that resulted is one reason the Twelfth Amendment was added in 1804 - it requires separate ballots for president and vice president.