1796

John Adams vs Thomas Jefferson

A 50-minute lesson on the 1796 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 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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1796: John Adams vs Thomas Jefferson

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**	Identify two political conditions in 1796 that would have made an organized partisan contest likely once Washington left office, and one structural feature of the Constitution that made the result unpredictable.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1796 election was the first contested U.S. presidential election. George Washington declined to seek a third term and published his Farewell Address on September 19, 1796. Two months of partisan campaigning followed - the first such period in American history. The Federalist candidate was Vice President John Adams of Massachusetts, 61 years old. Adams had served as a delegate to the Continental Congress, helped negotiate the 1783 Treaty of Paris, and served eight years as Washington's vice president. He was experienced, abrasive, and politically isolated within his own party. Alexander Hamilton, the Federalist Party's organizing genius, distrusted Adams and worked secretly through the campaign to elevate vice presidential candidate Thomas Pinckney to the top spot. Hamilton's scheming would nearly cost Adams the election. The Democratic-Republican candidate was former Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, 53 years old. Jefferson had written the Declaration of Independence, served as governor of Virginia, represented the U.S. in France from 1785 to 1789, and led the opposition to Hamilton's financial program from inside Washington's Cabinet. The Democratic-Republican Party had crystallized around Jefferson and Madison's opposition to Federalist policies during Washington's second term. The campaign was conducted entirely through newspapers and pamphlets. There were no campaign speeches by the candidates themselves. Partisan editors (Benjamin Franklin Bache for Democratic-Republicans; Noah Webster for Federalists, among others) traded harsh accusations. Federalists charged Jefferson with atheism, Jacobin sympathies, and support for French radicalism. Democratic-Republicans charged Adams with monarchism, aristocratic tendencies, and pro-British bias. The two major foreign-policy issues were the French Revolution and the 1794 Jay Treaty with Britain. The Treaty had resolved some lingering disputes from the Revolutionary War but was deeply unpopular in Democratic-Republican areas because it

		appeared to favor Britain over revolutionary France. The treaty fight had crystallized partisan alignments. The electoral count was 71 Adams to 68 Jefferson - a three-vote margin. Hamilton's scheme to elevate Pinckney backfired: enough New England Federalists withheld their second ballots from Pinckney that he finished third (59 votes) rather than first. The result was decided by South Carolina, where Federalist electors split unexpectedly. Under the original Constitution, each elector cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. Adams's 71 made him president; Jefferson's 68 made him vice president. The split-party administration would prove unworkable: Jefferson, as VP, would actively oppose Adams's Federalist agenda for four years. The 1796 result demonstrated that the original two-ballot rule could produce constitutionally legitimate but politically incoherent outcomes once organized parties existed. The Twelfth Amendment (ratified 1804) would replace it with separate ballots for president and vice president.
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

Farewell Address

Washington's September 19, 1796, published letter declining a third term. Drafted with Hamilton from a 1792 Madison original. Warned against political parties and entangling foreign alliances.

Two-ballot rule

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. Replaced by the Twelfth Amendment (1804).

Jacobin

A radical French revolutionary, especially of the 1793-94 Reign of Terror period. Federalists used "Jacobin" as a partisan epithet for Democratic-Republicans, suggesting they supported French radicalism.

Jay Treaty

The 1794 treaty between the U.S. and Britain, negotiated by Chief Justice John Jay, resolving lingering Revolutionary War disputes. Deeply unpopular in Democratic-Republican areas; crystallized partisan alignments.

Hamilton-Adams feud

The bitter rivalry between Alexander Hamilton and John Adams that split the Federalist Party. Hamilton actively schemed in 1796 and 1800 to elevate rival Federalist candidates above Adams.

Pinckney scheme

Hamilton's 1796 plan to have Federalist electors give equal support to Thomas Pinckney and John Adams, hoping Pinckney would receive enough Southern votes to finish first. Backfired when New England electors withheld their Pinckney votes.

Inaugural Address

JOHN ADAMS, MARCH 4, 1797

Adams took the oath in Philadelphia, the federal capital. The address was conciliatory in tone, partly to defuse partisan tension. Adams included a remarkable passage of self-doubt, asking whether the country might prefer a different leader - the only U.S. inaugural ever to do so explicitly.

> *"On this subject it might become me better to be silent or to speak with diffidence; but as something may be expected, the occasion, I hope, will be admitted as an apology if I venture to say that if a preference, upon principle, of a free republican government, formed upon long and serious reflection, after a diligent and impartial inquiry after truth; if an attachment to the Constitution of the United States, and a conscientious determination to support it until it shall be altered by the judgments and wishes of the people, expressed in the mode prescribed in it; if a respectful attention to the constitutions of the individual States... can entitle me to your suffrages, I shall consider it as the highest possible honor."*

Adams, "Inaugural Address" (Philadelphia, PA, March 4, 1797). Public domain.

The 1796 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did John Adams win in 1796?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which 1794 federal treaty crystallized partisan alignments by appearing to favor Britain over France?

( ) A. Treaty of Paris
( ) B. Jay Treaty
( ) C. Treaty of Greenville
( ) D. Pinckney Treaty

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Alexander Hamilton try to influence the 1796 result, and why did his scheme backfire?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Adams (Federalist) and Jefferson (Democratic-Republican) end up as president and vice president together? What problems did this cause?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1796 election map, identify which states Adams carried and which Jefferson carried. What regional pattern emerges?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

71. Adams won 71 electoral votes; Jefferson won 68; Pinckney 59; Burr 30; others scattered.

The three-vote Adams-Jefferson margin remains one of the closest in U.S. history. Hamilton's Pinckney scheme nearly produced a Federalist president other than Adams.

QUESTION 2

Jay Treaty. The 1794 treaty resolved some Revolutionary War disputes with Britain but was deeply unpopular in Democratic-Republican areas because it appeared to favor Britain over revolutionary France.

The Jay Treaty fight crystallized partisan alignments and made foreign policy the dominant issue in 1796.

QUESTION 3

It was the first election in which two organized political factions ran rival candidates with sustained partisan campaigning. Washington had been unopposed in 1789 and 1792. With Washington retired, Federalists (Adams) and Democratic-Republicans (Jefferson) competed for the open seat through partisan newspapers, pamphlets, and organized voter mobilization.

The contested character of 1796 is what makes it the structural pivot of the early Republic. From this point on, every presidential election would be a partisan contest.

QUESTION 4

Hamilton wanted to elevate vice presidential candidate Thomas Pinckney to the top Federalist spot, distrusting Adams as unreliable. His scheme was for Federalist electors to give equal support to both Adams and Pinckney, hoping enough Southern votes for Pinckney would put him first. The scheme backfired: New England Federalist electors, sensing the plot, withheld their second ballots from Pinckney. Pinckney finished third (59 votes) instead of first.

The Hamilton scheme nearly cost Adams the election. It also poisoned Hamilton's relationship with Adams permanently and split the Federalist Party in ways that would prove fatal in 1800.

QUESTION 5

Under the original Constitution, each elector cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. The candidate with the most votes became president; the runner-up became vice president. Adams (71) became president and Jefferson (68) became vice president. The problem was that Adams and Jefferson disagreed about almost every major issue. Jefferson, as vice president, actively organized Democratic-Republican opposition to Adams's Federalist agenda. The split-party administration was politically incoherent. The Twelfth Amendment (1804) replaced the two-ballot rule with separate ballots for president and vice president.

The 1796 result is the textbook example of how the original two-ballot rule could not handle organized partisan competition.

QUESTION 6

Adams strength: New England (Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont). Jefferson strength: the South (Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky) plus Pennsylvania. The middle states split (New York went to Adams; New Jersey to Adams; Maryland split). Regional pattern: commercial seaboard North vs. agrarian South.

The 1796 geographic pattern previews the alignment that would dominate U.S. politics through 1820. It is the visible foundation of the First Party System.