CLASSROOM EDITION · GRADES 9 — 12

1796

John Adams vs Thomas Jefferson

A 75-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%

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

1796: John Adams vs Thomas Jefferson

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 1796 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1796 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural features of the 1796 election that would make a contested presidential race plausible for the first time, and one structural feature of the Constitution that could produce a politically incoherent result.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1796 election is the institutional inception of the First Party System. It was the first contested U.S. presidential race and the first to produce a constitutionally legitimate but politically incoherent administration: Federalist president John Adams and Democratic-Republican vice president Thomas Jefferson would govern together as ideological opponents for four years. The immediate cause was George Washington's decision not to seek a third term. He published his Farewell Address on September 19, 1796. The address, drafted with Hamilton from a 1792 Madison original, warned future Americans against political parties ("the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally") and entangling foreign alliances. Two months of partisan campaigning followed - the first such period in American history. The Federalist nominee was Vice President John Adams of Massachusetts, 61 years old. Adams had been a delegate to the Continental Congress, had helped negotiate the 1783 Treaty of Paris, and had 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 and Adams's personal antagonist, worked secretly through the campaign to elevate Federalist vice presidential candidate Thomas Pinckney of South Carolina to the top spot. Hamilton's scheme: Federalist electors would give equal support to both Adams and Pinckney; enough Southern votes for Pinckney would push him above Adams in the electoral count. The Democratic-Republican nominee 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. Aaron Burr of New York served as the Democratic-Republican vice presidential candidate.

The campaign was conducted entirely through newspapers and pamphlets. There were no campaign speeches by the candidates themselves; the candidate-as-private-citizen norm would last until 1840. Partisan editors traded harsh accusations through dozens of papers in major cities. Federalists charged Jefferson with atheism (he was a deist), Jacobin sympathies, and support for French radicalism. Democratic-Republicans charged Adams with monarchism, aristocratic tendencies, and pro-British bias. The Aurora (Benjamin Franklin Bache's Philadelphia Democratic-Republican paper) and the Gazette of the United States (the Federalist paper) became the lead partisan voices.

The two dominant policy issues were the French Revolution and the 1794 Jay Treaty with Britain. The Jay Treaty, negotiated by Chief Justice John Jay, had resolved some lingering Revolutionary War disputes but was deeply unpopular in Democratic-Republican areas because it appeared to favor Britain over revolutionary France. The treaty fight in 1795 had crystallized partisan alignments. The 1793 French declaration of war against Britain, the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion, and the 1793 Genet Affair (a French ambassador attempting to recruit American privateers against Britain) had all sharpened the foreign-policy split.

The electoral count produced a three-vote margin: Adams 71, Jefferson 68, Pinckney 59, Burr 30, with the remainder scattered. Hamilton's Pinckney scheme had backfired catastrophically. New England Federalist electors, sensing the plot, withheld their second ballots from Pinckney; instead of finishing first, Pinckney finished third. The result was decided by South Carolina, where Federalist electors unexpectedly split (Pinckney's home state gave him 8 electoral votes but gave Jefferson 8 as well rather than Adams).

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's 71 made him president; Jefferson's 68 made him vice president. The split-party administration proved politically incoherent: Jefferson, as vice president, actively organized Democratic-Republican opposition to Adams's Federalist agenda for four years. The Twelfth Amendment, ratified June 15, 1804, replaced the two-ballot rule with separate ballots for president and vice president, ending the split-party scenario. 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 1796 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

First Party System

The period roughly 1791-1824 in which Federalists competed against Democratic-Republicans. The 1796 election is the system's first contested presidential race.

Jay Treaty

The 1794 treaty between the U.S. and Britain, negotiated by Chief Justice John Jay, resolving Revolutionary War disputes. Deeply unpopular in Democratic-Republican areas; the 1795 treaty fight crystallized partisan alignments.

Pinckney scheme

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

Genet Affair

The 1793 incident in which the French ambassador Edmond-Charles Genet tried to recruit American privateers against Britain in violation of U.S. neutrality. Sharpened the foreign-policy split between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans.

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. Worked in 1789 and 1792; produced split-party result in 1796 and tie in 1800. Replaced by the Twelfth Amendment (1804).

XYZ Affair

The 1798 diplomatic incident in which French agents (designated X, Y, Z in published documents) demanded bribes from U.S. envoys before negotiations. Triggered the Quasi-War with France and made Adams briefly the most popular politician in America.

Inaugural Address

JOHN ADAMS, MARCH 4, 1797

Adams took the oath in the chamber of the House of Representatives in Philadelphia. The address was strikingly conciliatory for the first contested-election victor. Adams included a passage of explicit self-doubt about whether the country might have preferred a different leader - the only U.S. inaugural address ever to do so directly. The choice was strategic: Adams faced a Democratic-Republican vice president (Jefferson) and a Senate where his own party's margin was thin.

> *"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 (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 John Adams win in 1796?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which Federalist vice-presidential candidate did Hamilton secretly try to elevate above Adams in the 1796 electoral count?

( ) A. Thomas Pinckney
( ) B. John Jay
( ) C. Rufus King
( ) D. Charles Cotesworth Pinckney

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific 1793-1796 developments that crystallized the partisan split between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans before the 1796 election.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the original two-ballot rule produce the 1796 split-party administration? Identify the specific constitutional feature responsible.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Adams says in his inaugural that he would consider the office "the highest possible honor" if his commitment to constitutional government "can entitle me to your suffrages." What political message was he sending?

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Adams's inaugural is the only U.S. inaugural to include explicit self-doubt about whether the country might prefer a different leader. Why did he make that rhetorical choice?

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1796 election map, identify the regional pattern of Adams vs. Jefferson support. Which middle state's split was decisive, and why?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

71. Adams 71; Jefferson 68; Pinckney 59; Burr 30; others scattered. The three-vote Adams-Jefferson margin is one of the closest in U.S. history.

Hamilton's Pinckney scheme nearly produced a Federalist president other than Adams. New England Federalist electors' refusal to support Pinckney saved Adams.

QUESTION 2

Thomas Pinckney of South Carolina. Hamilton hoped Federalist electors would give equal support to both Adams and Pinckney; Southern votes for Pinckney as a native son would push him above Adams.

The scheme is the most-cited example of Hamilton's factional disloyalty inside his own party. It would repeat in 1800 and contribute to the Federalist collapse.

QUESTION 3

Accept any three of: (1) The 1793 French declaration of war against Britain and Spain, forcing the U.S. to choose neutrality or alignment. (2) The 1793 Genet Affair (French ambassador attempting to recruit American privateers). (3) The 1794 Whiskey Rebellion and federal militia response. (4) The 1794 Jay Treaty with Britain. (5) The 1795 Senate ratification fight over the Jay Treaty. (6) The 1795 Pinckney Treaty with Spain (opening the Mississippi). (7) The 1796 Indiana Wabash settlement under Anthony Wayne. The Jay Treaty fight is the most directly relevant to the partisan crystallization.

The 1793-1796 partisan crystallization was driven primarily by foreign-policy choices. AP-level students should be able to identify multiple specific events.

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, organized partisan competition produced two leading candidates from opposing parties (Adams and Jefferson). Adams's 71 votes made him president; Jefferson's 68 votes made him vice president. The two-ballot rule had not anticipated that organized parties would produce candidates whose second ballots would be deliberately strategic.

The 1796 result is the canonical example of how a procedural design can produce constitutionally legitimate but politically incoherent outcomes. The Twelfth Amendment (1804) is the eventual remedy.

QUESTION 5

Adams was framing his presidency in explicitly constitutional rather than partisan terms. By tying his legitimacy to his commitment to the Constitution rather than to any policy platform, he was signaling that his administration would be constrained by constitutional norms rather than driven by Federalist partisan goals. The audience was both Democratic-Republicans (defusing fears of Federalist overreach) and his own party (warning Hamilton that he would not subordinate himself to Hamilton's scheming).

The constitutional-loyalty framing was strategic. Adams knew his administration's legitimacy depended on managing the partisan tension Jefferson's VP role embodied.

QUESTION 6

Adams faced three structural problems at his inauguration: a Democratic-Republican vice president (Jefferson) actively organizing opposition; a Federalist Party Hamilton was trying to control behind his back; and a Senate where the Federalist margin was thin. The self-doubt passage was strategic, not personal. By acknowledging openly that the country might have preferred a different leader, Adams positioned himself as constitutionally humble rather than partisan triumphant. The framing made it harder for his opponents to attack him as a Federalist partisan.

Adams's 1797 self-doubt is one of the most-studied passages in U.S. inaugural rhetoric. AP students should be able to read it as deliberate political positioning rather than emotional confession.

QUESTION 7

Adams strength: New England (Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont). Jefferson strength: the South (Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee). The decisive middle state was Pennsylvania, where Jefferson narrowly carried the popular vote and most of the state's 15 electors. New York went to Adams; New Jersey to Adams. The Pennsylvania result was decisive because it was the largest state in the middle bloc and had been narrowly contested.

Pennsylvania's structural importance to both parties was visible already in 1796. The state's urban Philadelphia commercial sector tended Federalist; the rural western Pennsylvania farmers tended Democratic-Republican.

Discussion prompts

1. Hamilton actively schemed against his own party's nominee in 1796. Identify two reasons Hamilton distrusted Adams, and explain how the scheme's failure shaped Federalist coalition dynamics through 1800.

2. The 1796 result is the textbook example of constitutional procedure producing a politically incoherent outcome. Identify the specific constitutional feature responsible, one alternative the framers had considered, and the eventual constitutional remedy.