AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1796

John Adams vs Thomas Jefferson

A 105-minute lesson on the 1796 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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
2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
4. Primary source B (DBQ pair)
5. Worksheet (8 questions)
6. Long-essay-question + rubric
7. Answer key + discussion

1796: John Adams vs Thomas Jefferson

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural features of the early-Republic political situation that would have made the 1796 election the first contested race even without Washington's decision to retire. For each, identify the specific 1789-1796 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1796 election is the institutional pivot of the First Party System. It was the first contested U.S. presidential race, the first to produce a politically incoherent split-party administration, and the structural precondition of the Twelfth Amendment. The result demonstrated that the original constitutional design could be operated under organized partisan competition but with severe institutional costs. The structural conditions had been building since 1791. Hamilton's 1790-91 financial program (federal assumption of state debts, the First Bank of the United States, the whiskey excise) had crystallized Federalist policy commitments. The 1791 ratification of the Bill of Rights had removed the most principled ground for Anti-Federalist opposition to the Constitution as such, forcing former Anti-Federalists to reorganize their politics around concrete policy disputes. The 1792 VP race had been the first electoral expression of organized partisan competition. The 1793 French declaration of war against Britain had forced the new Republic to take a foreign-policy posture (Washington declared neutrality, but the partisan implications were unmistakable). The 1793 Genet Affair, the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion, the 1794 Jay Treaty negotiation, and the 1795 Senate ratification fight had each in turn sharpened the partisan split. By 1795 the Federalist and Democratic-Republican coalitions were institutionally distinct, with their own press networks (the Gazette of the United States; the Aurora), their own congressional caucuses, and their own state organizations. Washington's September 19, 1796 Farewell Address - drafted with Hamilton from a 1792 Madison original - declined a third term and warned future Americans against "the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally" and against "entangling foreign alliances." The address was simultaneously a personal valediction and a structural diagnosis. Washington recognized that the partisan crisis his presidency had attempted to contain would now play out fully. Two months of organized partisan campaigning followed. The Federalist nominee was Vice President John Adams, 61 years old. Adams's

campaign was conducted through Federalist newspapers and pamphlets without his personal participation, following the candidate-as-private-citizen norm. Behind the scenes, Hamilton organized a complex scheme to elevate vice presidential candidate Thomas Pinckney of South Carolina above Adams. Hamilton's plan: Federalist electors in northern states would cast both ballots for Adams and Pinckney, expecting Southern electors' native-son support for Pinckney to push him above Adams in the final count. The Hamilton-Adams feud, partly personal (Adams considered Hamilton an unprincipled schemer) and partly structural (Hamilton wanted a more pliant Federalist president than Adams would be), was already visible to both parties' insiders. New England Federalist electors, sensing the scheme, withheld their second ballots from Pinckney. Pinckney finished third (59 votes) instead of first.

The Democratic-Republican nominee was former Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson, 53 years old. Jefferson's campaign was similarly indirect: Madison and Madison's allies organized state-by-state Democratic-Republican electoral slates. Aaron Burr of New York served as the formal vice presidential candidate. Jefferson's public posture was retirement at Monticello; his political work was conducted entirely through correspondence.

The electoral count produced a three-vote Adams-Jefferson margin (71 to 68). The decisive state was Pennsylvania, where Jefferson narrowly carried 14 of 15 electors against a Federalist organization that had outspent Democratic-Republicans. The Federalist-Pennsylvania surprise (one Federalist elector defected to Jefferson) was as structurally important as Hamilton's Pinckney scheme.

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 that resulted (Federalist president, Democratic-Republican vice president) was politically incoherent. Jefferson, as vice president, presided over the Senate but actively organized Democratic-Republican opposition to Adams's Federalist agenda from the chair. The 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, the 1798-1800 Quasi-War with France, and the 1798-99 Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions all reflected the partisan tension the 1796 result had institutionalized.

The constitutional remedy was the Twelfth Amendment, proposed by Congress in December 1803 and ratified June 15, 1804. The amendment requires each elector to cast separate ballots for president and vice president, ending the runner-up-becomes-VP rule. The amendment is the first U.S. constitutional change written to address a specific recent electoral failure - in this case, simultaneously the 1796 split-party result and the 1800 Jefferson-Burr tie.

20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	

		Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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 Senate ratification fight crystallized partisan alignments.

Two-ballot rule
The original Constitution required each elector to cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. Worked in 1789 and 1792 (Washington uncontested); produced split-party result in 1796 and tie in 1800. Replaced by the Twelfth Amendment (1804).

Alien and Sedition Acts
Four 1798 federal laws passed by the Federalist Congress and signed by Adams. Authorized deportation of non-citizens and criminalized speech critical of the federal government. Used overwhelmingly against Democratic-Republican press; the central campaign issue of 1800.

Genet Affair
The 1793 incident in which the French ambassador Edmond-Charles Genet attempted 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 future Americans against political parties and entangling foreign alliances.

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.

Twelfth Amendment
Ratified June 15, 1804 in direct response to the 1796 split-party result and the 1800 Jefferson-Burr tie. Requires electors to cast separate ballots for president and vice president. The first U.S. constitutional amendment written to address specific recent electoral failures.

Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions
The 1798-99 state-legislature resolutions, drafted by Jefferson and Madison, declaring the Alien and Sedition Acts unconstitutional and articulating the doctrine of state nullification of federal law. The first major theoretical statement of states-rights constitutionalism.

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 thin Federalist Senate margin.

> *"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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Inaugural Address

JOHN ADAMS, MARCH 4, 1797

“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.

SOURCE B

Farewell Address (warning against parties)

GEORGE WASHINGTON, SEPTEMBER 19, 1796

“I have already intimated to you the danger of parties in the state, with particular reference to the founding of them on geographical discriminations. Let me now take a more comprehensive view, and warn you in the most solemn manner against the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally. The alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism.”

Washington, "Farewell Address" (Philadelphia, PA, September 19, 1796). Public domain.

The 1796 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Adams's Inaugural) that frames his legitimacy in constitutional rather than partisan terms. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Washington's Farewell Address) that names partisan competition as a structural threat to constitutional government. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address the partisan crisis of the 1790s, but they make different claims about it. Identify the specific claim each source makes.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B was published before the 1796 election; Source A six months after. What does the ordering tell you about how the partisan crisis Washington warned about actually played out?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B warns specifically against parties founded on "geographical discriminations." Identify two specific 1791-1795 federal-government developments that had created geographic-ideological alignment.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which constitutional amendment was ratified in 1804 in direct response to the 1796 split-party result and the 1800 tie?

( ) A. Tenth
( ) B. Eleventh
( ) C. Twelfth
( ) D. Thirteenth

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 1798 federal laws that criminalized speech critical of the federal government and were used overwhelmingly against Democratic-Republican press were the:

( ) A. Naturalization Acts
( ) B. Alien and Sedition Acts
( ) C. Judiciary Acts
( ) D. Embargo Acts

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: did the 1796 result confirm, contradict, or transform Washington's Farewell warning? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Washington's Farewell Address (Source B) warns that organized political parties pose a "frightful despotism" to the new Republic. Adams's Inaugural (Source A) accepts the Federalist nomination while framing his commitment in explicitly constitutional rather than partisan terms. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1789-1804 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1796 election's outcome confirmed Washington's warning, contradicted it (by showing that constitutional procedure could absorb partisan competition), or transformed it (by showing that partisan competition was the price of constitutional survival). Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the confirmation-vs-contradiction-vs-transformation axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Jay Treaty fight, the Pinckney scheme, the Alien and Sedition Acts, the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, the Twelfth Amendment. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "an attachment to the Constitution of the United States", "a conscientious determination to support it until it shall be altered by the judgments and wishes of the people", "a preference, upon principle, of a free republican government". The first phrase is the cleanest articulation of constitutional legitimacy.

Adams's strategic choice to frame his legitimacy in constitutional rather than partisan terms is one of the most-studied features of the 1797 inaugural. AP students should recognize it as deliberate.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "the baneful effects of the spirit of party generally", "the alternate domination of one faction over another", "a frightful despotism". The "frightful despotism" phrase is the most-quoted.

Washington's Farewell warning is one of the most-quoted statements in American political rhetoric. The "frightful despotism" framing is structurally important.

QUESTION 3

Source A claims that constitutional commitment - rather than partisan loyalty - is the proper basis of presidential legitimacy. Source B claims that organized partisan competition is itself a structural threat to constitutional government. The two framings are politically compatible (both treat the Constitution as primary) but rest on different theories of partisan politics: Adams accepts partisan competition as inevitable but argues it can be contained by constitutional norms; Washington argues partisan competition will eventually overwhelm constitutional norms.

The two framings represent two distinct theories of the early Republic's political project. AP students should recognize the distinction.

QUESTION 4

Source B was a structural warning issued before the partisan crisis fully manifested. Source A was a strategic response after the crisis had institutionalized in the form of a split-party administration. The ordering tells you that Washington's warning predicted the partisan structure of the new Republic but did not prevent it; Adams's inaugural attempted to manage the consequence of what Washington had warned against. The 1796 result therefore both confirmed Washington's warning (by producing organized partisan competition) and transformed it (by showing that the constitutional system could survive the partisan competition Washington feared).

The temporal-ordering analysis is structurally important. AP students should be able to read the warning-response relationship as a moving political situation.

QUESTION 5

Accept any two of: (1) The 1790 federal assumption of state Revolutionary War debts (which the South perceived as a transfer from agrarian taxpayers to Northern bondholders). (2) The 1791 First Bank of the United States (which the South perceived as a Northern commercial institution). (3) The 1791 whiskey excise (which fell disproportionately on Southern and trans-Appalachian farmers). (4) The 1791 Report on Manufactures (Northern industrial policy). (5) The 1794 Jay Treaty's pro-British orientation (commercial Northern conciliation vs. agrarian Southern resentment).

The early-Republic partisan split was largely geographic-economic before it was ideological. AP students should know the menu of geographic-coding policy disputes.

QUESTION 6

Twelfth.

The Twelfth Amendment was proposed December 1803 and ratified June 15, 1804. It is the first U.S. constitutional amendment written to address specific recent electoral failures - here, both the 1796 split-party result and the 1800 Jefferson-Burr tie.

QUESTION 7

Alien and Sedition Acts.

The four 1798 federal laws criminalized speech critical of the federal government, authorized deportation of non-citizens, and were used overwhelmingly against Democratic-Republican press. The Sedition Act in particular jailed at least 25 Democratic-Republican newspaper editors.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) take a defensible position on the confirmation-vs-contradiction-vs-transformation axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric evaluates the full essay.