K-2 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1796

John Adams vs Thomas Jefferson

A 20-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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3. Three questions
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1796

George Washington had been president for eight years. He told the country that he was going home to his farm. The country had to choose a new president for the first time without Washington.

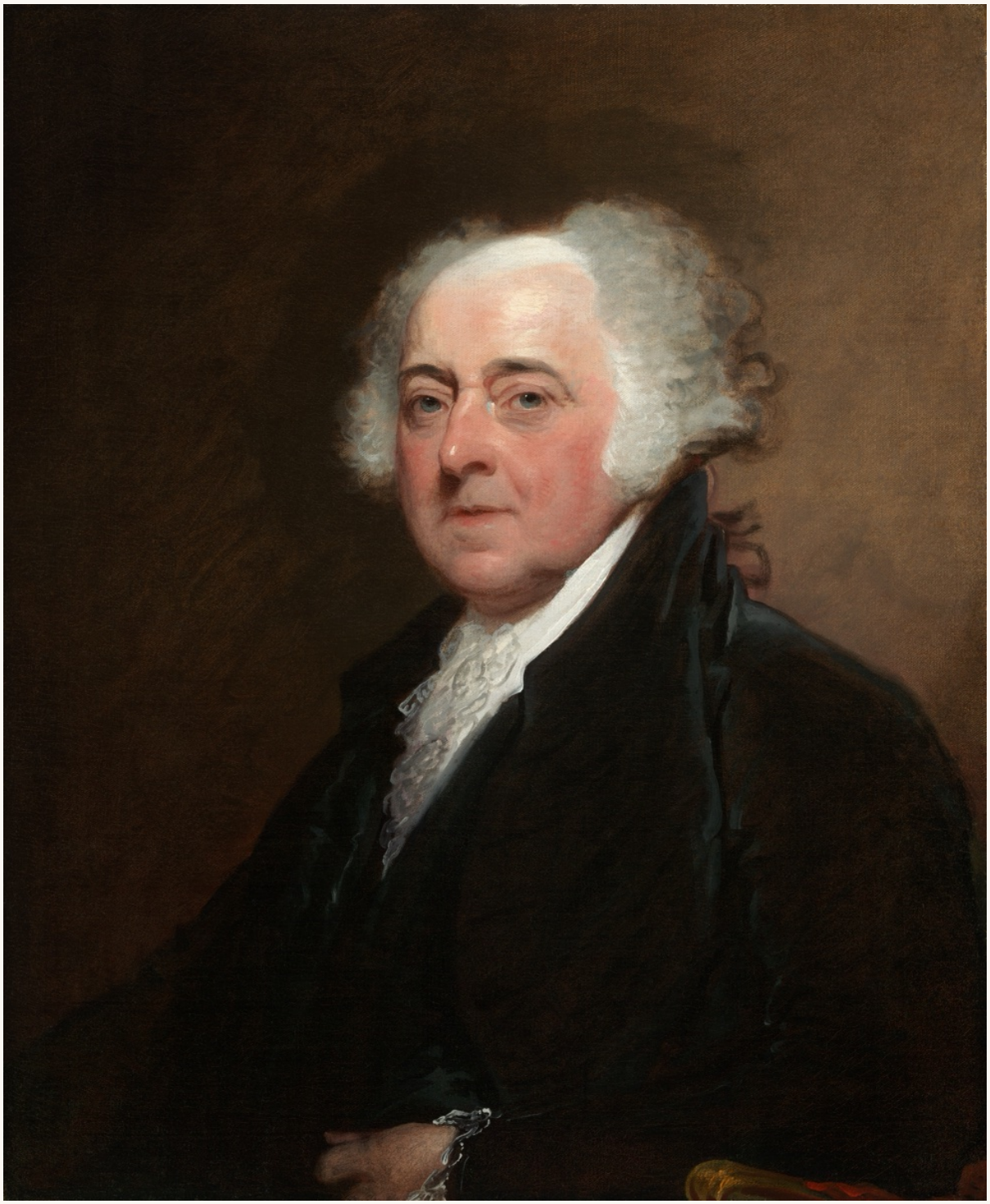
Two men wanted the job. One was John Adams. Look at his picture. He was the vice president. He had also helped write the Declaration of Independence. The other was Thomas Jefferson. He had written most of the Declaration of Independence himself.

They did not agree about how the country should work. Mr. Adams wanted a strong national government. Mr. Jefferson wanted small farmers to be in charge.

The vote was very close. In the end, John Adams won by only three electoral votes. He got 71. Thomas Jefferson got 68.

Back then, the rules said the person who came in second would be vice president. So John Adams, a Federalist, became president. And Thomas Jefferson, a Democratic-Republican, became vice president. The president and the vice president were from two different teams!

This caused problems. Later the rules were changed so that the



John Adams, the second U.S. president, painted by Gilbert Stuart. Adams had been vice president to George Washington for eight years before winning the 1796 election.
GILBERT STUART (1755-1828), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the second president of the United States in 1797?

2.

Who came in second and became the vice president?

3.

Why was it unusual that the president and vice president came from different teams?

Warm-up (5 min)

Look at the man in the picture. His name is John Adams. In 1796 George Washington said he was going home. Mr. Adams was one of the people who wanted to take his job.

Answer key

1.

John Adams became the second president. He started his job on March 4, 1797.

Adams won 71 electoral votes to Jefferson's 68. He was the first vice president to become president.

2.

Thomas Jefferson came in second with 68 electoral votes and became the vice president.

Under the original two-ballot Constitution, the runner-up automatically became vice president.

3.

Adams was a Federalist who wanted a strong national government. Jefferson was a Democratic-Republican who wanted small farmers to lead. The two leaders disagreed about big questions. The rule was later changed so president and vice president would be from the same team.

The 1796 split-party result was the first sign that the original two-ballot rule could not handle organized parties. The Twelfth Amendment in 1804 fixed the problem.