3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1800

Thomas Jefferson vs John Adams

A 35-minute lesson on the 1800 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA First Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 138 total
WINNER Thomas Jefferson (Democratic-Republican) · 73 EV	RUNNER-UP John Adams (Federalist) · 65 EV
KEY ISSUE Federalist power vs. Democratic-Republican principles; Alien and Sedition Acts	TURNOUT 32.3%

CONTENTS

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

1800: Thomas Jefferson vs John Adams

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Imagine your favorite sports team just lost the championship game. The captain has to walk over and shake hands with the captain of the team that beat them. Why is that handshake important?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1800 election was the fourth presidential election in U.S. history. It was also the first election where one political party gave up power peacefully to a different party. People at the time called this the Revolution of 1800. Two men ran for president. One was John Adams, who had been president for four years. He was a Federalist - he believed the country needed a strong federal government and friendly relations with Great Britain. The other was Thomas Jefferson, who had been vice president under Adams. Jefferson was a Democratic-Republican - he believed the federal government should stay small, and that ordinary farmers and craftsmen, not wealthy bankers, should run the country. The campaign was nasty. Federalists called Jefferson a dangerous radical who would bring chaos. Democratic-Republicans called Adams a secret king who wanted to crush freedom. Newspapers on both sides printed insults that today would shock most people. When the electors voted, something strange happened. Each elector cast two ballots - the rule at the time. All the Democratic-Republican electors voted for both Jefferson and Aaron Burr (who was supposed to be vice president). The result: Jefferson and Burr tied with 73 votes each. The election then went to the House of Representatives, which had to break the tie. The House voted thirty-five times. Each time, no one had enough votes to win. Finally, on the thirty-sixth ballot, Alexander Hamilton (a Federalist who hated Burr more than he hated Jefferson) persuaded a few Federalists to step aside. Jefferson won. John Adams accepted the loss. He packed up the White House and left town the morning Jefferson took office. The peaceful handover taught the world that voters - not soldiers - can change a government. Four years later, the Twelfth Amendment fixed the tie problem by making electors vote separately for president and vice president.
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 1800 Election

The 1800 election was the fourth presidential election in U.S. history. It was also the first election where one political party gave up power peacefully to a different party. People at the time called this the Revolution of 1800.

Two men ran for president. One was John Adams, who had been president for four years. He was a Federalist - he believed the country needed a strong federal government and friendly relations with Great Britain. The other was Thomas Jefferson, who had been vice president under Adams. Jefferson was a Democratic-Republican - he believed the federal government should stay small, and that ordinary farmers and craftsmen, not wealthy bankers, should run the country.

The campaign was nasty. Federalists called Jefferson a dangerous radical who would bring chaos. Democratic-Republicans called Adams a secret king who wanted to crush freedom. Newspapers on both sides printed insults that today would shock most people.

When the electors voted, something strange happened. Each elector cast two ballots - the rule at the time. All the Democratic-Republican electors voted for both Jefferson and Aaron Burr (who was supposed to be vice president). The result: Jefferson and Burr tied with 73 votes each. The election then went to the House of Representatives, which had to break the tie.

The House voted thirty-five times. Each time, no one had enough votes to win. Finally, on the thirty-sixth ballot, Alexander Hamilton (a Federalist who hated Burr more than he hated Jefferson) persuaded a few Federalists to step aside. Jefferson won.

John Adams accepted the loss. He packed up the White House and left town the morning Jefferson took office. The peaceful handover taught the world that voters -

not soldiers - can change a government. Four years later, the Twelfth Amendment fixed the tie problem by making electors vote separately for president and vice president.

Key words

Federalist	A member of the political party that wanted a strong federal government and good relations with Britain. John Adams was a Federalist.
Democratic-Republican	A member of the political party that wanted a smaller federal government and rule by farmers and ordinary citizens. Jefferson was a Democratic-Republican.
Elector	A person picked by each state to cast a ballot for president. In 1800, each elector cast two ballots without saying which was for president and which for vice president.
Tie	When two candidates get the same number of votes. Jefferson and Burr tied at 73 electoral votes each in 1800.
Twelfth Amendment	A change to the Constitution added in 1804 to fix the 1800 tie problem. It requires electors to cast separate ballots for president and vice president.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many ballots did the House of Representatives take to break the Jefferson-Burr tie?

( ) A. 12
( ) B. 24
( ) C. 36
( ) D. 48

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Jefferson and Burr tie at 73 electoral votes each in 1800?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the Revolution of 1800 about? Why is it called a "revolution" if there was no fighting?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Americans add the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution after the 1800 election?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

36. The House voted 35 times without a winner; on the 36th ballot, Jefferson won.

The deadlock lasted six days. Alexander Hamilton's opposition to Burr is widely credited with shifting the final ballots.

QUESTION 2

Each elector had to cast two ballots. All the Democratic-Republican electors voted for both Jefferson and Burr because they wanted Jefferson as president and Burr as vice president. But the rule did not say which ballot was for which job, so the two men tied.

The two-ballot rule assumed non-partisan electors who would deliberate freely. Once parties coordinated, tying running mates was the predictable outcome.

QUESTION 3

It is called a revolution because power changed completely - from one party (Federalists) to a different party (Democratic-Republicans) - without any war or fighting. Most other countries at the time changed leaders only through fighting or death. Jefferson, Adams, and the voters proved a peaceful swap was possible.

The term Revolution of 1800 was used by Jefferson himself. It refers to the peaceful transfer rather than to street violence.

QUESTION 4

They added the Twelfth Amendment because the 1800 tie almost broke the country. The new rule, ratified in 1804, requires electors to cast separate ballots: one for president, one for vice president. After 1804, two running mates from the same party could not tie each other.

The 12th Amendment is one of the clearest examples of a constitutional change written to fix a specific past crisis.