1800

Thomas Jefferson vs John Adams

A 50-minute lesson on the 1800 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 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%

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1800: Thomas Jefferson vs John Adams

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 situations in modern political life when a losing party might be tempted to refuse to accept the result. For each, suggest one rule or norm that makes it harder to refuse.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1800 election was the fourth U.S. presidential election. It was also the first to produce a transfer of power between political parties - a moment Jefferson himself later called the Revolution of 1800. The two parties were the Federalists, led by President John Adams, and the Democratic-Republicans, led by Vice President Thomas Jefferson. The parties had been forming since 1796 around two fault lines. Federalists favored a strong national government, a national bank, manufacturing, and conciliation with Britain. Democratic-Republicans favored state authority, agrarian economics, friendly relations with revolutionary France, and a strict reading of the Constitution. The 1798 Alien and Sedition Acts, which Federalists passed and used to jail Democratic-Republican newspaper editors, had pushed the party fight to its highest pitch. The campaign was unprecedented in personal viciousness. Federalist papers warned that Jefferson would bring Jacobin terror. Democratic-Republican papers called Adams a closet monarchist. There was no in-person campaigning, but pamphlet and newspaper warfare reached every literate household. When the 138 electoral votes were counted, Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr each had 73. Adams had 65; his running mate Charles Pinckney had 64. Under the original two-ballot rule, the Jefferson-Burr tie sent the election to the House of Representatives. There, in a lame-duck session dominated by Federalists, Burr refused to publicly defer to Jefferson. The House deadlocked for thirty-five ballots. Some Federalists tried to engineer a Burr presidency; some considered blocking either man and installing a Federalist by congressional resolution. Alexander Hamilton broke the deadlock. Hamilton was a Federalist but considered Burr an opportunist with no principles. He persuaded several Federalist delegations to abstain on the thirty-sixth ballot, throwing the election to Jefferson.

		Jefferson took office on March 4, 1801. John Adams left town that morning. The peaceful transfer between hostile parties - far from guaranteed in 1801 - became the founding precedent that elections, not soldiers, decide American governance. The Twelfth Amendment, ratified in 1804, separated presidential and vice-presidential ballots so that running mates could no longer tie each other.
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

Federalist
Member of the political party of Washington, Adams, and Hamilton. Favored a strong national government, a national bank, and friendly relations with Britain. Collapsed as a national party by 1820.

Democratic-Republican
Member of the political party of Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe. Favored state authority, agrarian economics, and friendly relations with revolutionary France. Eventually evolved into the modern Democratic Party.

Alien and Sedition Acts
Four 1798 federal laws passed by Federalists that allowed the deportation of non-citizens and criminalized speech critical of the federal government. Used to jail Democratic-Republican newspaper editors. Central campaign issue in 1800.

Two-ballot rule
The original Constitution required each elector to cast two ballots without distinguishing president and vice president. The 1800 Jefferson-Burr tie was the rule's catastrophic failure.

Revolution of 1800
Jefferson's own phrase for the peaceful transfer of power from Federalists to Democratic-Republicans. Used to emphasize that the change of regime, though peaceful, was as fundamental as a violent revolution.

Twelfth Amendment
Ratified 1804 in direct response to the 1800 tie. Requires electors to cast separate ballots for president and vice president, ending the running-mate tie problem.

First Inaugural Address

THOMAS JEFFERSON, MARCH 4, 1801

Jefferson took the oath at the new Capitol in Washington, DC. Adams had left town that morning. The address is famous for its conciliatory framing of partisan difference - Jefferson knew his Federalist opponents were watching for any sign he would govern as a vengeful party leader.

> *"But every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it."*

Jefferson, "First Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1801). Public domain.

The 1800 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

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

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which 1798 federal laws were a major campaign issue in 1800?

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

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain in two sentences why Jefferson and Burr tied at 73 electoral votes each when they were running together rather than against each other.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Alexander Hamilton, a Federalist, help Jefferson (a Democratic-Republican) win the House deadlock instead of supporting Burr?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Jefferson says "We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists" in the excerpt. In two sentences, explain what political message he was sending and to whom.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1800 election map, identify the regional pattern of Federalist vs. Democratic-Republican support. Which two regions held strongest for each side?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

36. The House deadlocked for 35 ballots before Jefferson won the 36th.

The deadlock lasted six days in February 1801. The 36th ballot came after Hamilton persuaded several Federalists to abstain.

QUESTION 2

Alien and Sedition Acts. The four 1798 laws (especially the Sedition Act) had jailed Democratic-Republican newspaper editors and become a rallying issue for Jefferson's campaign.

The Sedition Act criminalized criticism of the federal government and was used overwhelmingly against Democratic-Republican press. Jefferson pardoned all those convicted on his first day in office.

QUESTION 3

Each elector cast two ballots without distinguishing president from vice president. Democratic-Republican electors all named Jefferson and Burr on both ballots so both would get the same total, producing identical 73-vote tallies.

The two-ballot rule assumed non-partisan electors. Once parties coordinated to put both running mates on every ballot, a running-mate tie became the predictable outcome.

QUESTION 4

Hamilton considered Burr an opportunist with no fixed principles, while he believed Jefferson, though ideologically opposed, would respect basic constitutional norms. Hamilton wrote to Federalist congressmen urging them to support Jefferson as the lesser danger to the Union.

Hamilton's personal letters from February 1801 spell this out. The Hamilton-Burr feud begun here would end in their 1804 duel.

QUESTION 5

Jefferson was signaling that his administration would not punish Federalists or treat partisan disagreement as treason. The audience was both Federalists worried about reprisals and any Americans alarmed that party government would tear the new republic apart.

Jefferson knew his administration's legitimacy depended on Federalists accepting his presidency. The "Republicans / Federalists" line was carefully chosen to defuse the partisan tension of the campaign.

QUESTION 6

Federalists held New England (especially Connecticut and Massachusetts). Democratic-Republicans dominated the South (especially Virginia and the Carolinas) plus New York and Pennsylvania.

New York's swing under Aaron Burr's organizing was decisive. The sectional pattern roughly tracks commercial-seaboard versus agrarian-southern interests.