1804

Thomas Jefferson vs Charles C. Pinckney

A 50-minute lesson on the 1804 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 176 total
WINNER Thomas Jefferson (Democratic-Republican) · 162 EV	RUNNER-UP Charles C. Pinckney (Federalist) · 14 EV
KEY ISSUE Louisiana Purchase and westward expansion; declining Federalist influence	TURNOUT 23.8%

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1804: Thomas Jefferson vs Charles C. Pinckney

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**	List two political conditions that would make an incumbent president likely to win re-election by a landslide. For each, suggest one specific 1801-1804 development that fits the pattern.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1804 election was the fourth U.S. presidential election and the first under the new Twelfth Amendment, ratified June 15, 1804. The amendment required electors to cast separate ballots for president and vice president, ending the original two-ballot rule. The new procedure had been written specifically to prevent another 1800-style tie between running mates. The Democratic-Republican incumbent was Thomas Jefferson, 61 years old. Jefferson's first term had been politically successful. He had cut federal taxes, reduced the national debt, repealed the unpopular Alien and Sedition Acts, and made the Louisiana Purchase from France in May 1803 for $15 million. The Louisiana Purchase doubled the size of the United States and added the future heartland states from Louisiana to the Dakotas. Jefferson had also sent the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1804-1806) to map the new territory and find a route to the Pacific. The 1804 admission of Ohio as the 17th state was completed early in his term. The Federalist nominee was Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of South Carolina, 58 years old. Pinckney had been a delegate to the Constitutional Convention and U.S. ambassador to France during the XYZ Affair in 1797-98. He had been the Federalist vice presidential candidate in 1800 (and the target of Hamilton's 1796 elevation scheme). The Federalist Party was in deep structural trouble by 1804. Alexander Hamilton, the party's organizing genius, had been killed in a duel by Vice President Aaron Burr on July 11, 1804 - just four months before the election. The party had no clear ideological response to Jefferson's successes. New England Federalists, alarmed by the Louisiana Purchase's perceived shift of political power toward the South and West, had even briefly considered secession in early 1804. The campaign was conducted through partisan newspapers without candidate participation. The Democratic-Republican organization (especially in Pennsylvania and New York under Albert Gallatin and George Clinton) far outpaced the Federalist effort. The new running-mate procedure under the Twelfth Amendment allowed

		Jefferson to select Governor George Clinton of New York as his running mate, replacing Burr. The Clinton selection was strategic: it locked down New York for the Democratic-Republicans and signaled distance from Burr after the Hamilton duel. The electoral count was 162 Jefferson to 14 Pinckney - one of the largest electoral landslides in U.S. history at 92 percent of the Electoral College. Jefferson carried every state except Connecticut, Delaware, and two of Maryland's 11 electors. He won 72.8 percent of the popular vote where it was measured (most states still used legislative selection for electors). The Federalist Party would never win another presidential election.
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

Louisiana Purchase

The 1803 federal acquisition of 828,000 square miles of land from France for $15 million. Doubled the size of the United States and added the future heartland states from Louisiana to the Dakotas.

Burr-Hamilton duel

The July 11, 1804 duel in Weehawken, New Jersey, in which Vice President Aaron Burr mortally wounded Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton was the Federalist Party's organizing genius; his death four months before the election severely hurt Federalist prospects.

Strict construction

The legal doctrine that the federal government can exercise only those powers explicitly granted by the Constitution. Jefferson's position before the Louisiana Purchase, which he had to set aside to justify the deal.

Twelfth Amendment

Ratified June 15, 1804. Required electors to cast separate ballots for president and vice president. Replaced the original two-ballot rule. The 1804 election was the first held under it.

Lewis and Clark Expedition

The 1804-1806 exploration team Jefferson sent under Meriwether Lewis and William Clark to map the Louisiana Purchase and find a Northwest Passage to the Pacific Ocean. Reached the Pacific in November 1805.

Federalist collapse

The structural decline of the Federalist Party between 1800 and 1816. The 1804 result confirmed the trend; the 1816 Rufus King campaign was the party's last credible national bid.

Second Inaugural Address

THOMAS JEFFERSON, MARCH 4, 1805

Jefferson took the oath at the Capitol in Washington, DC. The Second Inaugural was much shorter than the famous 1801 inaugural. Jefferson used the occasion to reflect on his first-term record - particularly the Louisiana Purchase - and to acknowledge the partisan attacks his opponents had directed at him.

> *"On the question of war or peace, or of the necessary remedies for the safety of our country, we may differ in opinion. But there is one moral law which is binding upon all - that is, the law of self-preservation. The acquisition of Louisiana has been disapproved by some, from a candid apprehension that the enlargement of our territory would endanger its union. But who can limit the extent to which the federative principle may operate effectively? The larger our association, the less will it be shaken by local passions."*

Jefferson, "Second Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1805). Public domain.

The 1804 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Thomas Jefferson win in 1804?

( ) A. 89
( ) B. 123
( ) C. 162
( ) D. 193

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which constitutional amendment, ratified in 1804, required electors to cast separate ballots for president and vice president?

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

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Louisiana Purchase change the political situation between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Jefferson, a strict-construction Democratic-Republican, made the Louisiana Purchase even though the Constitution does not explicitly authorize the federal government to buy foreign territory. How did he justify the deal?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Jefferson says in his Second Inaugural that "the larger our association, the less will it be shaken by local passions." What argument was he making about the political effects of territorial expansion?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1804 election map, identify the three states (and Maryland's split) Jefferson failed to carry. What pattern do they share?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

162. Jefferson 162; Pinckney 14. One of the largest electoral landslides in U.S. history at 92 percent of the Electoral College.

Jefferson carried every state except Connecticut, Delaware, and two of Maryland's 11 electors. He won 72.8 percent of the popular vote where it was measured.

QUESTION 2

Twelfth. The Twelfth Amendment was ratified June 15, 1804. The 1804 election was the first held under it.

The amendment was a direct response to the 1796 split-party result and the 1800 Jefferson-Burr tie. It is the first constitutional amendment written to address specific recent electoral failures.

QUESTION 3

The Louisiana Purchase shifted political power toward the South and West. New England Federalists were alarmed because they had been the country's political and commercial center and the Louisiana Purchase implied a future in which agricultural Southern and Western states would dominate. Some New England Federalists briefly considered secession in early 1804. Meanwhile, Democratic-Republicans gained huge popular credit for the deal, which Jefferson got at a low price ($15 million) without going to war.

The Louisiana Purchase is one of the key inflection points of early American political alignment. It accelerated the Federalist decline by shifting the political center of gravity away from New England commercial interests.

QUESTION 4

Jefferson initially worried the deal exceeded federal constitutional authority - he was a strict-construction Democratic-Republican who had opposed Hamilton's loose-construction reading. He briefly considered proposing a constitutional amendment to authorize the purchase but abandoned the idea when France's offer seemed about to expire. He eventually justified the purchase under the treaty-making power (Article II) and the implied powers of national self-preservation. Jefferson's strict-construction principles were quietly set aside.

The Louisiana Purchase is one of the most-studied examples of a principled politician making a practical exception. Jefferson's reasoning is now treated as an early case of executive-power expansion.

QUESTION 5

Jefferson was arguing that a larger Union would actually be more politically stable than a smaller one because territorial expansion would dilute local factional disputes. Each region's grievances would matter less when balanced against the interests of many more regions. The argument directly addressed Federalist fears that the Louisiana Purchase would destabilize the Union by adding too many new agrarian states.

Jefferson's "federative principle" argument is one of the most-cited articulations of expansionist constitutional theory in early American history.

QUESTION 6

Connecticut (9 EV), Delaware (3 EV), and two of Maryland's 11 electors voted Federalist. Pattern: all three are commercial-seaboard states with strong Federalist organizations. They represent the residual core of Federalist strength in 1804 - mostly New England plus a few middle-state federal commercial centers.

The 1804 map shows the Federalist Party reduced to a New England rump. The geographic pattern foreshadows the party's 1816 collapse.