3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1820

James Monroe vs John Quincy Adams

A 35-minute lesson on the 1820 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Era of Good Feelings	ELECTORAL VOTES 232 total
WINNER James Monroe (Democratic-Republican) · 231 EV	RUNNER-UP John Quincy Adams (Democratic-Republican) · 1 EV
KEY ISSUE National unity and the Missouri Compromise over slavery	TURNOUT 10.1%

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

1820: James Monroe vs John Quincy Adams

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When there is only one political party in a country, big decisions still have to be made. How might people who disagree work out their differences inside the same party?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1820 election was the eighth U.S. presidential election. It was the only election after 1789 in which the incumbent president faced no serious opposition. President James Monroe was finishing his first term, the Federalist Party had effectively died, and the Democratic-Republican Party had no serious internal challenger to Monroe's re-election. The Democratic-Republican congressional caucus did not even formally meet to nominate Monroe in 1820 - the party did not need to. Monroe and Vice President Daniel D. Tompkins were the consensus candidates simply by virtue of incumbency. No Federalist candidate filed nationally; the party had dissolved as a national organization after the 1816 Rufus King loss. What made 1820 politically remarkable was not the election itself but what was happening alongside it. The Missouri Crisis had begun in February 1819 when Missouri applied for statehood and Congress had to decide whether to admit it as a slave state or a free state. The vote split along strict sectional lines for the first time in U.S. history. Northern congressmen passed amendments to Missouri's statehood bill banning further introduction of slavery into Missouri and gradually emancipating those already there. Southern senators killed the amendments. The deadlock lasted nine months. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 resolved the deadlock. Henry Clay of Kentucky brokered the deal: Missouri was admitted as a slave state, Maine (which had been part of Massachusetts) was admitted as a free state, and slavery was banned in all remaining Louisiana Purchase territory north of Missouri's southern boundary (36°30' latitude). The Compromise maintained the slave state / free state balance at 12-12. It was the first explicit sectional compromise over slavery extension in U.S. history. Thomas Jefferson, then 76 and in retirement, wrote about the Missouri Crisis in his famous April 22, 1820 letter to John Holmes: the political fight had been "like a fire bell in the night," he wrote, "awakened and filled me with terror." He saw in the Missouri Crisis the beginning of a sectional split that would eventually destroy the Union. He was correct. The 1820 election itself was anticlimactic. Monroe won 231 electoral votes; Vice

		President Tompkins won 218 (some electors split their VP ballot). New Hampshire elector William Plumer cast his electoral vote for John Quincy Adams - the only defector. Some historians believe Plumer voted strategically to preserve George Washington's distinction as the only president ever elected unanimously. Other historians dispute this and argue Plumer simply preferred Adams. Either way, the 231-1 result is the most one-sided U.S. presidential election in the Era of Good Feelings and one of the most one-sided in U.S. history. Monroe's second term saw the December 1823 announcement of the Monroe Doctrine (warning European powers against further colonization of the Americas), continued debate over the tariff and the Second Bank of the United States, and the gradual unwinding of the Era of Good Feelings as Democratic-Republican factions positioned themselves for the 1824 succession. By 1823 Monroe's cabinet was openly split: John Quincy Adams (Secretary of State), William Crawford (Secretary of Treasury), and John C. Calhoun (Secretary of War) were all maneuvering for the 1824 presidency. The 1820 unity would not survive Monroe's second term.
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 1820 Election

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What made 1820 politically remarkable was not the election itself but what was happening alongside it. The Missouri Crisis had begun in February 1819 when Missouri applied for statehood and Congress had to decide whether to admit it as a slave state or a free state. The vote split along strict sectional lines for the first time in U.S. history. Northern congressmen passed amendments to Missouri's statehood bill banning further introduction of slavery into Missouri and gradually emancipating those already there. Southern senators killed the amendments. The deadlock lasted nine months.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 resolved the deadlock. Henry Clay of Kentucky brokered the deal: Missouri was admitted as a slave state, Maine (which had been part of Massachusetts) was admitted as a free state, and slavery was banned in all remaining Louisiana Purchase territory north of Missouri's southern boundary (36°30' latitude). The Compromise maintained the slave state / free state balance at 12-12. It was the first explicit sectional compromise over slavery extension in U.S. history.

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The 1820 election itself was anticlimactic. Monroe won 231 electoral votes; Vice President Tompkins won 218 (some electors split their VP ballot). New Hampshire elector William Plumer cast his electoral vote for John Quincy Adams - the only defector. Some historians believe Plumer voted strategically to preserve George Washington's distinction as the only president ever elected unanimously. Other historians dispute this and argue Plumer simply preferred Adams. Either way, the 231-1 result is the most one-sided U.S. presidential election in the Era of Good Feelings and one of the most one-sided in U.S. history.

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Key words

Missouri Compromise The 1820 federal law admitting Missouri as a slave state, Maine as a free state, and banning slavery in remaining Louisiana Purchase territory north of 36°30' latitude. The first explicit sectional compromise over slavery extension in U.S. history.

36°30' line	The latitude (36 degrees, 30 minutes north) used by the Missouri Compromise as the boundary above which slavery would be banned in remaining Louisiana Purchase territory. Missouri itself was permitted as a slave state north of the line as part of the deal.
Faithless elector	A presidential elector who casts a ballot for someone other than the candidate they were pledged to support. New Hampshire elector William Plumer was the 1820 faithless elector - voting for John Quincy Adams instead of Monroe.
Era of Good Feelings	The 1817-1825 period of one-party Democratic-Republican government. James Monroe was president the entire time. The "good feelings" referred to the absence of formal two-party competition.
Monroe Doctrine	Monroe's December 1823 announcement (in his annual message to Congress) declaring the Americas closed to further European colonization. Drafted primarily by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did James Monroe win in 1820?

( ) A. 189
( ) B. 212
( ) C. 231
( ) D. 247

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did James Monroe face no serious opposition in his 1820 re-election?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What did the Missouri Compromise do? Identify all three of its main provisions.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Thomas Jefferson call the Missouri Crisis "a fire bell in the night"?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

231. Monroe won 231 electoral votes; one elector (William Plumer of New Hampshire) voted for John Quincy Adams. The 231-1 result is one of the most one-sided in U.S. history.

Some historians believe Plumer voted strategically to preserve George Washington's record as the only unanimously-elected president. Others dispute this.

QUESTION 2

The Federalist Party had effectively died as a national organization after the 1816 loss. The Democratic-Republican Party had no serious internal challenger to Monroe's re-election. With no other major party in existence and no Democratic-Republican alternative, Monroe was unopposed by default. The Era of Good Feelings had reached its political peak.

Monroe's 1820 race is the only U.S. presidential election after 1789 in which the incumbent president faced no serious opposition. Even Washington had faced an organizing partisan opposition by 1792.

QUESTION 3

The Missouri Compromise (1) admitted Missouri to the Union as a slave state. (2) admitted Maine (separated from Massachusetts) as a free state. (3) banned slavery in all remaining Louisiana Purchase territory north of 36°30' latitude. The combination maintained the slave state / free state balance at 12-12 and tried to prevent further sectional dispute over slavery extension.

Henry Clay of Kentucky was the primary architect. The compromise lasted 34 years until the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed it.

QUESTION 4

Thomas Jefferson wrote in his April 22, 1820 letter to John Holmes that the Missouri Crisis "like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union." He saw in the Crisis the beginning of a sectional split that would eventually destroy the Union. The fight had divided Congress along strict geographic lines for the first time in U.S. history - not along party lines, but along North vs. South. Jefferson recognized this as a structural threat that no compromise could permanently resolve. He was correct: the Union would split 40 years later in the Civil War.

Jefferson's "fire bell in the night" framing is one of the most-quoted American statements about the political crisis of slavery. AP students should be able to engage it analytically.