1820

James Monroe vs John Quincy Adams

A 50-minute lesson on the 1820 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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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2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1820: James Monroe vs John Quincy 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**	List two political conditions that would produce an incumbent president's near-unanimous re-election. For each, identify a specific 1817-1820 development that fits the pattern.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1820 election was the eighth U.S. presidential election. It was the only U.S. presidential election after 1789 in which the incumbent president faced no serious opposition. The Era of Good Feelings (1817-1825) reached its political peak in the 231-1 electoral result. President James Monroe was finishing his first term. The Federalist Party had effectively dissolved as a national organization after Rufus King's 1816 loss. The Democratic-Republican congressional caucus did not formally meet to nominate Monroe in 1820 - the party did not need to. Monroe and Vice President Daniel D. Tompkins were consensus candidates simply by virtue of incumbency. No Federalist filed nationally. Monroe's first term had produced what the 1817 inaugural promised. The 1819 Adams-Onis Treaty had acquired Florida from Spain and fixed the western boundary of the Louisiana Purchase. Andrew Jackson's 1818 First Seminole War had de facto demonstrated U.S. control of Florida before the treaty formalized it. The 1816-17 chartering of the Second Bank of the United States had stabilized federal finance. The 1819 Panic was a serious economic downturn but did not produce partisan backlash because no opposition party existed to capitalize on it. Internal improvements, the tariff debate, and the slavery extension question were all argued within the Democratic-Republican coalition. What made 1820 historically remarkable was not the election but the Missouri Crisis happening alongside it. Missouri had applied for statehood in February 1819. The application triggered the first explicitly sectional congressional fight in U.S. history. Representative James Tallmadge of New York attached amendments banning further introduction of slavery into Missouri and gradually emancipating those already there. The Tallmadge Amendments passed the House on a strict sectional vote (87-76 in the slavery ban, 82-78 in gradual emancipation). They failed in the Senate, which was tied 11-11 by slave-state and free-state senators. The deadlock lasted nine months.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 - brokered primarily by Speaker Henry Clay of Kentucky - resolved the deadlock through three provisions. (1) Missouri was admitted as a slave state. (2) Maine (separated from Massachusetts) was admitted as a free state. (3) Slavery was banned in remaining Louisiana Purchase territory north of Missouri's southern boundary at 36°30' latitude. The combination maintained the slave state / free state balance at 12-12 and drew a geographic line through the remaining federal territory. The Compromise was the first explicit sectional compromise over slavery extension in U.S. history.

Thomas Jefferson, then 76 and in retirement at Monticello, wrote about the Missouri Crisis in his famous April 22, 1820 letter to John Holmes (a Maine senator who had voted for the Compromise). "This momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union." Jefferson saw in the Crisis the beginning of a sectional split that would eventually destroy the Union. He was correct: the Union would split 40 years later in the Civil War.

The 1820 election itself produced 231 electoral votes for Monroe. New Hampshire elector William Plumer cast his electoral vote for John Quincy Adams - the only defector. Plumer's motivation has been debated for two centuries: some historians believe he voted strategically to preserve George Washington's distinction as the only president ever elected unanimously; others argue he simply preferred Adams's record as a diplomat over Monroe's. The 231-1 result is the most one-sided U.S. presidential election in the Era of Good Feelings.

Monroe's second term would unwind the Era of Good Feelings as Democratic-Republican factions positioned themselves for the 1824 succession. By 1823 Monroe's cabinet was openly split: Secretary of State John Quincy Adams, Secretary of Treasury William Crawford, and Secretary of War John C. Calhoun were all maneuvering for the 1824 presidency, joined by Speaker Henry Clay and General Andrew Jackson. The 1820 unity would not survive.

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

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. Lasted 34 years until repealed by the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act.

36°30' line

The latitude 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. The line remained in force until 1854.

Adams-Onis Treaty

The February 1819 treaty between the U.S. and Spain, negotiated by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. Acquired Florida; set the western boundary of the Louisiana Purchase; renounced U.S. claims to Texas.

Tallmadge Amendments

The 1819 House amendments by Representative James Tallmadge of New York to the Missouri statehood bill. Would have banned further introduction of slavery into Missouri and gradually emancipated those already there. Passed the House on strict sectional vote; killed in the Senate.

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.

Panic of 1819

The first major peacetime financial crisis in U.S. history. Caused by Second Bank credit contraction, post-1815 commodity-price collapse, and over-leveraged Western land speculation. Produced widespread unemployment and bankruptcies but no partisan backlash because no opposition party existed.

Letter to John Holmes (the Missouri Question letter)

THOMAS JEFFERSON, APRIL 22, 1820

Jefferson wrote this letter at age 76 from his retirement at Monticello to Maine Senator John Holmes, who had voted for the Missouri Compromise. The letter is one of the most-cited American statements about the political crisis of slavery extension. The "fire bell in the night" framing was Jefferson's recognition that the sectional split exposed by the Missouri Crisis would eventually destroy the Union his generation had built.

> *"I had for a long time ceased to read newspapers, or pay any attention to public affairs, confident they were in good hands, and content to be a passenger in our bark to the shore from which I am not distant. But this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed indeed for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper."*

Jefferson, "Letter to John Holmes" (Monticello, VA, April 22, 1820). Public domain.

The 1820 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Monroe win in 1820?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who was the 1820 faithless elector who voted for John Quincy Adams instead of Monroe?

( ) A. Daniel Webster
( ) B. William Plumer
( ) C. John Holmes
( ) D. Rufus King

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the three main provisions of the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Jefferson says in the excerpt that the Missouri Compromise "is hushed indeed for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence." Explain his prediction about the long-term consequences of the geographic line drawn by the Compromise.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1820 election map, identify the slave states and free states existing after the Missouri Compromise. What does the geographic distribution tell you about the sectional balance the Compromise was designed to preserve?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

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

Some historians believe Plumer voted strategically to preserve Washington's distinction as the only unanimously-elected president.

QUESTION 2

William Plumer of New Hampshire. He cast his electoral vote for John Quincy Adams instead of Monroe.

Plumer's motivation has been debated for two centuries. The Washington-record theory is one possibility; pure preference for Adams is another.

QUESTION 3

The Federalist Party had effectively dissolved as a national organization after Rufus King's 1816 loss. The Democratic-Republican Party had no serious internal challenger to Monroe's re-election. The Panic of 1819, though serious, produced no partisan backlash because no opposition party existed to capitalize on it. The Era of Good Feelings reached its political peak: no Federalist candidate filed; no Democratic-Republican alternative emerged; Monroe was unopposed by default.

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

QUESTION 4

(1) Missouri admitted to the Union as a slave state. (2) Maine (separated from Massachusetts) admitted as a free state. (3) Slavery banned in remaining Louisiana Purchase territory north of 36°30' latitude (Missouri's southern boundary). The combination maintained the slave state / free state balance at 12-12.

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

QUESTION 5

Jefferson predicted that the geographic line drawn by the Compromise (the 36°30' line) would not solve the underlying sectional dispute over slavery. Instead, the line would become the focal point of every future sectional conflict. Each new political dispute over slavery extension would deepen the geographic-ideological split. The Compromise had merely postponed the eventual confrontation. Jefferson was correct: the 36°30' line dominated American politics for the next 34 years until the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed it, triggering the political crisis that produced the Civil War in 1861.

Jefferson's "geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle" analysis is one of the most-quoted predictive statements in American political history. AP students should be able to engage it analytically.

QUESTION 6

Slave states (12 after the Compromise): Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Missouri. Free states (12 after the Compromise): New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maine, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Vermont, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois. The geographic distribution: free states concentrated in the North and Old Northwest; slave states in the South and the trans-Appalachian South. The Compromise maintained an exact 12-12 balance to preserve sectional power equilibrium in the Senate, where each state has two votes regardless of population.

The 12-12 balance was the structural goal of the Compromise. Sectional power equilibrium in the Senate was the key political concern; the House had been dominated by free states (which had more population) for decades.