1820

James Monroe vs John Quincy Adams

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1820: James Monroe vs John Quincy Adams

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1820 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1820 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1820 that would produce a near-unanimous re-election for the incumbent. For each, identify the specific 1816-1820 development most responsible.
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 faced no serious opposition. The Era of Good Feelings (1817-1825) reached its political peak in the 231-1 electoral result. But the same year produced the Missouri Compromise - the first explicit sectional compromise over slavery extension in U.S. history and the first concrete sign that the one-party period was masking rather than resolving structural political divisions. 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 candidate filed nationally; no Democratic-Republican challenger emerged. Monroe's first term had been substantively successful. The February 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 April 1816 chartering of the Second Bank of the United States and the 1816 Tariff had built on Hamiltonian economic policy. The 1819 McCulloch v. Maryland decision had constitutionalized federal implied powers. Internal improvements (the National Road extension, the federal subsidy of the Erie Canal) were proceeding. The 1819 Panic was a serious economic downturn - the first peacetime financial crisis in U.S. history - but produced no partisan backlash because no opposition party existed to capitalize on it.

The Missouri Crisis dominated the political year. Missouri had applied for statehood in February 1819 under the December 1818 Enabling Act. The application triggered the first explicitly sectional congressional fight in U.S. history. Representative James Tallmadge of New York (a Democratic-Republican) attached two amendments to Missouri's statehood bill: (1) prohibition of further introduction of slavery into Missouri; (2) gradual emancipation of enslaved persons already there. The Tallmadge Amendments passed the House on strict sectional votes (87-76 and 82-78, with party affiliation almost completely overridden by geographic origin). They failed in the Senate, which was tied 11-11 between slave-state and free-state senators. The deadlock lasted from February 1819 through March 1820.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 - brokered primarily by Speaker Henry Clay of Kentucky - resolved the deadlock through three provisions: Missouri admitted as a slave state; Maine (separated from Massachusetts) admitted as a free state; slavery 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 that would dominate American politics for the next 34 years.

Thomas Jefferson, then 76, wrote about the Missouri Crisis in his famous April 22, 1820 letter to Maine senator John Holmes (who had voted for the Compromise). The letter recognized that the Crisis had exposed a structural sectional split that no compromise could permanently resolve. "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 was correct: the 36°30' line would dominate every subsequent slavery-extension dispute until the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed it, triggering the political crisis that produced 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 (including his great-grandson Plumer the senator) believe he voted strategically to preserve George Washington's distinction as the only unanimously-elected president; others argue he simply preferred Adams's record as a diplomat. The 231-1 result is the most one-sided U.S. presidential election in the Era of Good Feelings - and one of the few in U.S. history.

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 December 1823 Monroe Doctrine projected the U.S. as a

		regional hemispheric power - and was drafted primarily by Adams as part of his own presidential positioning. The 1820 unity would not survive Monroe's second term. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.
15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1820 election tells you about the Era of Good Feelings that the textbook didn't?"

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 (36 degrees, 30 minutes north) used by the Missouri Compromise as the boundary above which slavery would be banned in remaining Louisiana Purchase territory. Dominated American sectional politics for 34 years until the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed it.

Panic of 1819

The first 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, bankruptcies, and the wildcat-banker problem - but no partisan backlash because no opposition party existed.

Monroe Doctrine

Monroe's December 1823 announcement (in his annual message to Congress) declaring the Western Hemisphere closed to further European colonization. Drafted primarily by Secretary of State John Quincy Adams. The first U.S. claim of regional hemispheric leadership.

Tallmadge Amendments

The 1819 House amendments by Representative James Tallmadge of New York (a Democratic-Republican) 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 (87-76 and 82-78); killed in the Senate (11-11).

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 (the Sabine River through the 42nd parallel); renounced U.S. claims to Texas.

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.

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. The letter was published shortly after Jefferson's death in 1826 and immediately became a touchstone of American political analysis.

> *"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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

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?

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

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the three provisions of the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Jefferson calls the Missouri Crisis "a fire bell in the night." Explain what the metaphor means and why he chose it specifically.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Jefferson predicts in the excerpt that the geographic line drawn by the Compromise "will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper." Identify two specific 1820-1854 political crises that confirmed this prediction.

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the 1819 Panic - a serious peacetime financial crisis - produce no partisan backlash against Monroe?

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1820 election map, identify the 12 slave states and 12 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 argue Plumer voted strategically to preserve Washington's distinction.

QUESTION 2

William Plumer of New Hampshire.

Plumer's motivation has been debated for two centuries.

QUESTION 3

(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). 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 4

A fire bell in the night is a warning bell rung when a fire breaks out at night - an alarm signaling a serious immediate danger. Jefferson chose the metaphor because the Missouri Crisis had awakened him from political retirement and filled him with terror about the long-term consequences. The bell rings just once; you cannot ignore it; you must respond immediately. Jefferson saw the Crisis as the first explicit signal of a sectional split that would eventually destroy the Union. The metaphor combined urgency, alarm, and tragic foresight.

The fire-bell-in-the-night metaphor is one of the most-quoted American political phrases. AP students should be able to engage its rhetorical structure.

QUESTION 5

Accept any two of: (1) The 1832 Nullification Crisis (South Carolina's nullification of the federal tariff). (2) The 1846-48 Mexican-American War and the 1846 Wilmot Proviso (proposal to ban slavery in territory acquired from Mexico). (3) The Compromise of 1850 (admitting California as a free state, popular sovereignty in Utah and New Mexico, the Fugitive Slave Act). (4) The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act (repealing the Missouri Compromise's 36°30' line). (5) The 1857 Dred Scott decision. The Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act are the strongest single examples.

Jefferson's prediction is structurally important. AP students should be able to identify the chain of 1820-1860 events that confirmed it.

QUESTION 6

No opposition party existed to capitalize on the Panic. The Federalists had dissolved as a national organization after 1816; no Democratic-Republican challenger emerged. The Panic was severe (it caused widespread unemployment, bankruptcies, and Western land foreclosures) but politically diffuse - there was no organized political vehicle for blame to attach to. The Era of Good Feelings' one-party structure meant economic distress translated into intra-Democratic-Republican factional positioning (for 1824) rather than into a partisan referendum on Monroe's policies. The structural lesson: a one-party system can absorb economic crisis without electoral consequence, but the underlying factional positioning may produce more severe future ruptures.

The 1819 Panic's political consequences are one of the clearest examples of how a one-party system can mask but not resolve political conflict. AP students should be able to articulate the structural point.

QUESTION 7

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. 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 structural goal was that no faction could dominate the Senate; the House had been dominated by free states for decades because of population.

The 12-12 balance was the structural goal of the Compromise. AP students should recognize that the slavery-extension fight was simultaneously a fight over Senate control.

Discussion prompts

1. Monroe's 231-1 result was the most one-sided U.S. presidential election since 1789. Identify two structural reasons for the result and one specific 1819-1820 political development that ought to have produced significant opposition but did not.

2. Thomas Jefferson predicted in his April 1820 letter that the geographic line drawn by the Missouri Compromise would dominate every subsequent slavery dispute. Identify two specific 1820-1854 political crises that confirmed his prediction.