1820

James Monroe vs John Quincy Adams

A 20-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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1820

President James Monroe had been president for four years. He had been a good leader. The country was growing and feeling proud. The War of 1812 was over. Florida had been added to the United States as a new territory. People were happy.

Look at the picture. That's President Monroe again. In 1820 he was running for re-election. The Federalist Party - the only other big party in America - was broken. They did not even pick a candidate. There was nobody to run against Monroe.

So Monroe won. He won 231 electoral votes. He only missed one. A man named William Plumer from New Hampshire voted for John Quincy Adams instead. Some people say Plumer wanted to keep George Washington's record - Washington was the only president to win every electoral vote ever.

Something big happened during 1820. Missouri wanted to join the United States as a new state. But some people wanted Missouri to be a slave state and others wanted it to be a free state. After a lot of fighting in Congress, they made a deal. Missouri became a slave state. Maine became a free state. And in all the western territory north of Missouri, slavery was banned. People called this the Missouri Compromise. It was supposed to keep peace between



James Monroe was re-elected in 1820. He won every electoral vote except one.
JOHN VANDERLYN (1775-1852), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who won re-election in 1820?

2.

How many electoral votes did Monroe win in 1820? Why is this number remarkable?

3.

What was the Missouri Compromise?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1820 there was almost no political fighting in America. President Monroe had no real opponent! He won 231 electoral votes - one elector voted for someone else just so Monroe would not get every single vote.

Answer key

1.

James Monroe won re-election. He started his second term on March 4, 1821.

Monroe was unopposed for re-election - the only major American politician of his era against whom nobody ran a serious challenge.

2.

Monroe won 231 electoral votes. He missed just one - New Hampshire elector William Plumer voted for John Quincy Adams instead. The number is remarkable because Monroe came one vote short of George Washington's record of being elected unanimously. Some historians believe Plumer voted against Monroe specifically to preserve Washington's record.

Plumer's defection is one of the most-discussed individual elector votes in U.S. history. The Washington-record theory is one possible explanation.

3.

The Missouri Compromise was a 1820 deal in Congress. Missouri became a slave state. Maine became a free state. Slavery was banned in all the western territory north of Missouri's southern boundary (the 36°30' line). The compromise tried to keep peace between the North and the South over slavery in new states.

The Missouri Compromise lasted 34 years until repealed by the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act. It is the first major sectional compromise over slavery in U.S. history.