3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

# 1920

## *Warren G. Harding vs James M. Cox*

A 35-minute lesson on the 1920 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

| | |
|---|---|
| ERA<br>Roaring Twenties | ELECTORAL VOTES<br>531 total |
| WINNER<br>Warren G. Harding (Republican) · 404 EV | RUNNER-UP<br>James M. Cox (Democratic) · 127 EV |
| KEY ISSUE<br>League of Nations; postwar recovery; 'Return to Normalcy' | TURNOUT<br>49.2% |

CONTENTS


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

# 1920: Warren G. Harding vs James M. Cox

## Timing

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 5 min | **Warm-up** | A presidential election landslide of 60%+ popular vote is rare - only seven candidates in U.S. history have won by that margin. What political conditions would produce such a landslide after a war? |
| 15 min | **Reading** | The 1920 election was the 34th U.S. presidential election. It produced Warren G. Harding's 404-127 electoral-vote victory over Democrat James M. Cox - the largest popular-vote margin in U.S. history up to that point (60.3% vs 34.1%). The election was the first in which American women could vote nationwide (the 19th Amendment had been ratified August 18, 1920). The 1920 result was a structural Republican restoration after the 1912-16 Wilson Democratic interruption.<br><br>The political conditions had been transformed by the post-war crisis. World War I had ended November 11, 1918. The U.S. had lost 116,516 American soldiers. The post-war period had been devastating: the October 1918 - April 1919 flu pandemic ("Spanish flu") killed approximately 675,000 Americans. The 1919-1920 economic recession had reduced industrial production by 17%. The summer 1919 race riots (Red Summer) had killed dozens of Americans in major cities (Chicago, Washington DC, East St. Louis, Tulsa). Labor unrest produced major 1919 strikes (Seattle general strike, Boston police strike, U.S. Steel strike). The 1919-1920 "Red Scare" had seen Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer raid suspected radicals (the Palmer Raids), arrest thousands, and deport approximately 250 (including Emma Goldman).<br><br>President Wilson had spent the last 18 months of his term incapacitated. His September 25, 1919 stroke had left him bedridden and unable to handle the basic duties of the presidency. Edith Wilson (his second wife, whom he had married in December 1915 after his first wife's 1914 death) functionally governed - controlling who could see Wilson, what papers reached him, and what decisions were made. The Senate had rejected the League of Nations (November 1919 and March 1920) over Wilson's opposition to the Lodge Reservations. Americans were exhausted with Wilson, with war, and with crisis.<br><br>The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 8-12, 1920. The convention was deeply divided between three leading candidates: General Leonard Wood (former Army Chief of Staff, Roosevelt protégé); Governor Frank Lowden of Illinois; and Senator Hiram Johnson of California (the former Bull Moose VP). The convention deadlocked through nine ballots. On the night of June 11, Republican leaders met in the "smoke-filled room" at the Blackstone Hotel and chose Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio as a compromise dark-horse candidate. Harding was acceptable to multiple factions. He was nominated on the tenth ballot. Governor Calvin |

Coolidge of Massachusetts (who had become famous for breaking the September 1919 Boston police strike with the declaration "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time") was the vice presidential candidate.

Harding was 55, a Republican senator from Ohio (1915-21), a former newspaper publisher (the Marion Star), and Lieutenant Governor of Ohio (1903-05). He was handsome, dignified, and had a strong public-speaking style. He was personally easy-going and politically moderate. Harding's campaign slogan was "A Return to Normalcy" - meaning a return to pre-war conditions of stability, prosperity, and limited government. The "normalcy" word was Harding's coinage; critics complained that "normality" was the proper English word, but "normalcy" stuck.

The Democratic National Convention met in San Francisco on June 28 - July 6, 1920. The convention was bitterly divided between Bryan supporters (who wanted Progressive policy continuation), Wilson loyalists (who wanted to defend the League of Nations), and conservative Democrats (who wanted to distance the party from Wilson). The convention nominated Governor James M. Cox of Ohio on the 44th ballot. Cox was 50, a former U.S. Representative (1909-13) and three-term governor of Ohio (1913-15, 1917-21). Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York - the Assistant Secretary of the Navy under Wilson - was the vice presidential candidate. Roosevelt was 38, distantly related to Theodore Roosevelt (his fifth cousin), and was running on the Democratic ticket for the first time. Cox actively supported the League of Nations during the campaign.

The Socialist Party of America renominated Eugene V. Debs - who was serving a 10-year federal prison sentence at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. Debs had been imprisoned under the 1918 Sedition Act for his June 16, 1918 anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio. He was Prisoner #9653. The Socialist Party of America campaigned with the slogan "From Atlanta Prison to the White House." Debs would win 913,693 votes (3.4%) - more votes than he had received in any prior election except 1912.

The Farmer-Labor Party (a coalition of agrarian and labor activists) nominated Parley P. Christensen of Utah. Christensen would receive 265,398 votes (1.0%).

The campaign featured Harding's "front-porch campaign" - a deliberate echo of McKinley's 1896 strategy. Harding stayed home in Marion, Ohio, and gave speeches from his front porch. Approximately 600,000 visitors came to Marion during the campaign. The Republican fundraising chair Will Hays raised approximately $5.4 million - a record at the time. The Democratic campaign raised approximately $2.2 million. The "normalcy" message resonated with exhausted Americans.

The campaign's most damaging moment for Cox was his Wilson connection. Cox campaigned as a defender of Wilson's League of Nations - which had been rejected by the Senate and was unpopular with most Americans. Cox's defense of Wilson made him appear committed to the unpopular past rather than the desired "normal-

cy."

The 1920 election was the first in which American women could vote nationwide. The 19th Amendment had been ratified on August 18, 1920 - the 36th state (Tennessee) ratifying by a one-vote margin in the Tennessee House of Representatives. The amendment was the culmination of 70+ years of women's suffrage advocacy beginning with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. The 1920 turnout was the highest in U.S. history up to that point: approximately 26.7 million votes cast. Many women voted in 1920; subsequent studies estimated women voted similarly to men by party.

Harding won 404 electoral votes to Cox's 127. Harding carried 37 states; Cox carried 11 states (the Solid South). The popular vote: Harding 16,144,093 (60.3%); Cox 9,139,661 (34.1%); Debs (Socialist) 913,693 (3.4%); Christensen (Farmer-Labor) 265,398 (1.0%); Watkins (Prohibition) 188,787 (0.7%); Cox/Cox confusion. Harding-Cox popular-vote margin: 7,004,432 - the largest in U.S. history up to that point. Harding's 60.3% was the highest percentage of any presidential candidate since 1820 (when James Monroe ran unopposed for re-election).

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. Harding swept every state outside the 11 former Confederate states. The Republican coalition was even stronger than 1896-1908: New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, all of New England, the entire Midwest, the entire Mountain West, the West Coast. The 1920 map established the 1920-1928 Republican-dominant pattern that would persist through the 1924 Coolidge and 1928 Hoover elections.

Harding was inaugurated March 4, 1921. He governed as a conservative Republican: tax reduction (the Revenue Acts of 1921, 1924, 1926 progressively reduced federal income tax rates from 77% to 25% on top incomes); tariff increases (the September 1921 Emergency Tariff and the September 1922 Fordney-McCumber Tariff); federal budget reduction (the Bureau of the Budget was created in June 1921 under the Budget and Accounting Act); immigration restriction (the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and 1924 Immigration Act).

Harding pardoned Eugene V. Debs on December 25, 1921 - commuting Debs's 10-year sentence to time served. Debs walked out of the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary on Christmas Day 1921. Harding personally invited Debs to the White House before Debs returned home to Indiana.

Harding died suddenly on August 2, 1923 in San Francisco - apparently of a heart attack (though the cause was never definitively established due to Florence Harding's refusal to permit an autopsy). Vice President Calvin Coolidge - who was at his father's farm in Plymouth Notch, Vermont - was sworn in by his father (a justice of the peace) at 2:47 AM on August 3, 1923. Coolidge became the 30th president. The Teapot Dome Scandal (Harding's Interior Secretary Albert Fall had leased federal oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming and Elk Hills, California to private oil companies

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | | in exchange for bribes) emerged after Harding's death and damaged his historical reputation.<br><br>The 1920 election's structural significance was threefold. First, it ended the 1912-16 Wilson Democratic interruption and restored the 1896-1932 Republican alignment. Second, it operationalized the 19th Amendment - producing the first national women's presidential election. Third, it inaugurated the 1920s Republican prosperity decade (Harding 1921-23, Coolidge 1923-29, Hoover 1929-33) that would end with the 1929 stock market crash and Great Depression. |
| **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 1920 Election

The 1920 election was the 34th U.S. presidential election. It produced Warren G. Harding's 404-127 electoral-vote victory over Democrat James M. Cox - the largest popular-vote margin in U.S. history up to that point (60.3% vs 34.1%). The election was the first in which American women could vote nationwide (the 19th Amendment had been ratified August 18, 1920). The 1920 result was a structural Republican restoration after the 1912-16 Wilson Democratic interruption.

The political conditions had been transformed by the post-war crisis. World War I had ended November 11, 1918. The U.S. had lost 116,516 American soldiers. The post-war period had been devastating: the October 1918 - April 1919 flu pandemic ("Spanish flu") killed approximately 675,000 Americans. The 1919-1920 economic recession had reduced industrial production by 17%. The summer 1919 race riots (Red Summer) had killed dozens of Americans in major cities (Chicago, Washington DC, East St. Louis, Tulsa). Labor unrest produced major 1919 strikes (Seattle general strike, Boston police strike, U.S. Steel strike). The 1919-1920 "Red Scare" had seen Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer raid suspected radicals (the Palmer Raids), arrest thousands, and deport approximately 250 (including Emma Goldman).

President Wilson had spent the last 18 months of his term incapacitated. His September 25, 1919 stroke had left him bedridden and unable to handle the basic duties of the presidency. Edith Wilson (his second wife, whom he had married in December 1915 after his first wife's 1914 death) functionally governed - controlling who could see Wilson, what papers reached him, and what decisions were made. The Senate had rejected the League of Nations (November 1919 and March 1920) over Wilson's opposition to the Lodge Reservations. Americans were exhausted with Wilson, with war, and with crisis.

The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 8-12, 1920. The

convention was deeply divided between three leading candidates: General Leonard Wood (former Army Chief of Staff, Roosevelt protégé); Governor Frank Lowden of Illinois; and Senator Hiram Johnson of California (the former Bull Moose VP). The convention deadlocked through nine ballots. On the night of June 11, Republican leaders met in the "smoke-filled room" at the Blackstone Hotel and chose Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio as a compromise dark-horse candidate. Harding was acceptable to multiple factions. He was nominated on the tenth ballot. Governor Calvin Coolidge of Massachusetts (who had become famous for breaking the September 1919 Boston police strike with the declaration "There is no right to strike against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time") was the vice presidential candidate.

Harding was 55, a Republican senator from Ohio (1915-21), a former newspaper publisher (the Marion Star), and Lieutenant Governor of Ohio (1903-05). He was handsome, dignified, and had a strong public-speaking style. He was personally easy-going and politically moderate. Harding's campaign slogan was "A Return to Normalcy" - meaning a return to pre-war conditions of stability, prosperity, and limited government. The "normalcy" word was Harding's coinage; critics complained that "normality" was the proper English word, but "normalcy" stuck.

The Democratic National Convention met in San Francisco on June 28 - July 6, 1920. The convention was bitterly divided between Bryan supporters (who wanted Progressive policy continuation), Wilson loyalists (who wanted to defend the League of Nations), and conservative Democrats (who wanted to distance the party from Wilson). The convention nominated Governor James M. Cox of Ohio on the 44th ballot. Cox was 50, a former U.S. Representative (1909-13) and three-term governor of Ohio (1913-15, 1917-21). Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York - the Assistant Secretary of the Navy under Wilson - was the vice presidential candidate. Roosevelt was 38, distantly related to Theodore Roosevelt (his fifth cousin), and was running on the Democratic ticket for the first time. Cox actively supported the League of Nations during the campaign.

The Socialist Party of America renominated Eugene V. Debs - who was serving a 10-year federal prison sentence at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. Debs had been imprisoned under the 1918 Sedition Act for his June 16, 1918 anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio. He was Prisoner #9653. The Socialist Party of America campaigned with the slogan "From Atlanta Prison to the White House." Debs would win 913,693 votes (3.4%) - more votes than he had received in any prior election except 1912.

The Farmer-Labor Party (a coalition of agrarian and labor activists) nominated Parley P. Christensen of Utah. Christensen would receive 265,398 votes (1.0%).

The campaign featured Harding's "front-porch campaign" - a deliberate echo of McKinley's 1896 strategy. Harding stayed home in Marion, Ohio, and gave speeches from his front porch. Approximately 600,000 visitors came to Marion during the campaign. The Republican fundraising chair Will Hays raised approximately $5.4 million - a record at the time. The Democratic campaign raised approximately $2.2 million. The "normalcy" message resonated with exhausted Americans.

The campaign's most damaging moment for Cox was his Wilson connection. Cox campaigned as a defender of Wilson's League of Nations - which had been rejected by the Senate and was unpopular with most Americans. Cox's defense of Wilson made him appear committed to the unpopular past rather than the desired "normalcy."

The 1920 election was the first in which American women could vote nationwide. The 19th Amendment had been ratified on August 18, 1920 - the 36th state (Tennessee) ratifying by a one-vote margin in the Tennessee House of Representatives. The amendment was the culmination of 70+ years of women's suffrage advocacy beginning with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. The 1920 turnout was the highest in U.S. history up to that point: approximately 26.7 million votes cast. Many women voted in 1920; subsequent studies estimated women voted similarly to men by party.

Harding won 404 electoral votes to Cox's 127. Harding carried 37 states; Cox carried 11 states (the Solid South). The popular vote: Harding 16,144,093 (60.3%); Cox 9,139,661 (34.1%); Debs (Socialist) 913,693 (3.4%); Christensen (Farmer-Labor) 265,398 (1.0%); Watkins (Prohibition) 188,787 (0.7%); Cox/Cox confusion. Harding-Cox popular-vote margin: 7,004,432 - the largest in U.S. history up to that point. Harding's 60.3% was the highest percentage of any presidential candidate since 1820 (when James Monroe ran unopposed for re-election).

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. Harding swept every state outside the 11 former Confederate states. The Republican coalition was even stronger than 1896-1908: New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts, all of New England, the entire Midwest, the entire Mountain West, the West Coast. The 1920 map established the 1920-1928 Republican-dominant pattern that would persist through the 1924 Coolidge and 1928 Hoover elections.

Harding was inaugurated March 4, 1921. He governed as a conservative Republican: tax reduction (the Revenue Acts of 1921, 1924, 1926 progressively reduced federal income tax rates from 77% to 25% on top incomes); tariff increases (the September 1921 Emergency Tariff and the September 1922 Fordney-McCumber Tariff); federal budget reduction (the Bureau of the Budget was created in June 1921 under the Budget and Accounting Act); immigration restriction (the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and 1924 Immigration Act).

Harding pardoned Eugene V. Debs on December 25, 1921 - commuting Debs's 10-year sentence to time served. Debs walked out of the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary on Christmas Day 1921. Harding personally invited Debs to the White House before Debs returned home to Indiana.

Harding died suddenly on August 2, 1923 in San Francisco - apparently of a heart

attack (though the cause was never definitively established due to Florence Harding's refusal to permit an autopsy). Vice President Calvin Coolidge - who was at his father's farm in Plymouth Notch, Vermont - was sworn in by his father (a justice of the peace) at 2:47 AM on August 3, 1923. Coolidge became the 30th president. The Teapot Dome Scandal (Harding's Interior Secretary Albert Fall had leased federal oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming and Elk Hills, California to private oil companies in exchange for bribes) emerged after Harding's death and damaged his historical reputation.

The 1920 election's structural significance was threefold. First, it ended the 1912-16 Wilson Democratic interruption and restored the 1896-1932 Republican alignment. Second, it operationalized the 19th Amendment - producing the first national women's presidential election. Third, it inaugurated the 1920s Republican prosperity decade (Harding 1921-23, Coolidge 1923-29, Hoover 1929-33) that would end with the 1929 stock market crash and Great Depression.

## Key words

| | |
|---|---|
| **Return to Normalcy** | Warren G. Harding's 1920 campaign slogan promising a return to pre-World War I conditions. The "normalcy" word was Harding's coinage. The slogan reflected American exhaustion with the war, the 1918-19 flu pandemic, the post-war recession, the 1919 Red Scare, and Wilson's incapacitation. |
| **Warren G. Harding** | The 29th U.S. president (1921-23). Republican senator from Ohio (1915-21). Won 1920 with 404-127 EV and 60.3% popular vote - largest in U.S. history up to that point. Died August 2, 1923; VP Calvin Coolidge became 30th president. |
| **Smoke-filled room** | The June 11, 1920 meeting at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago where Republican leaders chose Harding as a compromise dark-horse candidate after the convention deadlocked through nine ballots. The "smoke-filled room" became a metaphor for backroom political deal-making. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **19th Amendment** | August 18, 1920 constitutional amendment prohibiting denial of the vote based on sex. The 1920 election was the first in which American women could vote in a presidential election nationwide. The 1920 turnout was the highest in U.S. history up to that point: approximately 26.7 million votes cast. |
| **Eugene V. Debs from prison** | The 1920 Socialist Party presidential candidate ran from his federal prison cell at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. Debs (Prisoner #9653) had been imprisoned under the 1918 Sedition Act for a June 1918 anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio. Won 913,693 votes (3.4%). Pardoned by Harding December 25, 1921. |

# Four questions

**QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

How many electoral votes did Warren G. Harding win in 1920?

( ) A. 292
( ) B. 321
( ) C. 370
( ) D. 404

**QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

What percentage of the popular vote did Harding win in 1920?

( ) A. 51.5%
( ) B. 54.2%
( ) C. 60.3%
( ) D. 65.1%

**QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER**

What was Harding's "Return to Normalcy" slogan and why did it resonate?

**QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER**

How did Eugene V. Debs run for president from prison in 1920?

# Answer key

**QUESTION 1**

404. Harding 404; Cox 127. Harding's 277-EV margin was the largest since Grant's 1872 (286-42).

AP students should know the 404-127 split.

**QUESTION 2**

60.3%. Harding 60.3%; Cox 34.1%; Debs 3.4%; Christensen 1.0%. Harding's 60.3% was the highest percentage of any presidential candidate since 1820 (Monroe unopposed).

AP students should know the 60.3% figure.

**QUESTION 3**

Harding's "Return to Normalcy" slogan was Harding's coinage (critics complained that "normality" was the proper English word). It promised a return to pre-World War I conditions of stability, prosperity, and limited government. The slogan resonated because of structural exhaustion: (1) World War I had ended just two years earlier with 116,516 American military deaths. (2) The October 1918 - April 1919 flu pandemic had killed approximately 675,000 Americans. (3) The 1919-20 economic recession had reduced industrial production by 17%. (4) The summer 1919 race riots (Red Summer) had killed dozens. (5) Major 1919 labor strikes. (6) The 1919-20 Red Scare and Palmer Raids. (7) Wilson's September 1919 stroke had left him incapacitated; Edith Wilson functionally governed. Americans were exhausted with Wilson, war, crisis, and Progressive activism. "Normalcy" captured what voters wanted: peace, prosperity, fewer government interventions, less ideological politics. The slogan was politically masterful: Harding won 60.3% of the popular vote.

AP students should be able to articulate the slogan's power.

## QUESTION 4

Eugene V. Debs ran for president in 1920 from his federal prison cell at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. He was Prisoner #9653. Debs had been imprisoned under the 1918 Sedition Act for a June 16, 1918 anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio. Sentence: 10 years federal prison. The Socialist Party of America nominated Debs by acclamation in 1920. The campaign slogan: "From Atlanta Prison to the White House." Debs could not personally campaign; the campaign was run by Socialist Party functionaries. Debs won 913,693 votes (3.4%) - more votes than he had received in any prior election except 1912 (901,551). The 1920 vote was structurally significant as the largest popular vote for a Socialist candidate since 1912 and as a political protest against the wartime suppression of dissent. President Harding commuted Debs's sentence to time served on December 25, 1921 - Christmas Day. Debs walked out of prison and visited Harding at the White House before returning home to Indiana. Debs died October 20, 1926.

AP students should be able to articulate Debs's prison candidacy.