1920

Warren G. Harding vs James M. Cox

A 50-minute lesson on the 1920 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

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

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1920: Warren G. Harding vs James M. Cox

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 structural conditions in 1918-20 America that would produce an extreme presidential landslide. For each, identify the specific post-war development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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 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. Labor unrest produced major 1919 strikes. The 1919-1920 "Red Scare" had seen Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer raid suspected radicals (the Palmer Raids), arrest thousands, and deport approximately 250. President Wilson had spent the last 18 months of his term incapacitated. His September 25, 1919 stroke had left him bedridden. Edith Wilson functionally governed. The Senate had rejected the League of Nations (November 1919 and March 1920) over Wilson's opposition to the Lodge Reservations. The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 8-12, 1920. The convention was deeply divided between three leading candidates: General Leonard Wood; Governor Frank Lowden of Illinois; and Senator Hiram Johnson of California. 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 nominated on the tenth ballot. Governor Calvin Coolidge of Massachusetts (famous for breaking the September 1919 Boston police strike with "There is no right to strike

against the public safety by anybody, anywhere, any time") was VP.

Harding was 55, a Republican senator from Ohio, former newspaper publisher (Marion Star), and former Lieutenant Governor of Ohio. He was handsome, dignified, and had a strong public-speaking style. Harding's campaign slogan was "A Return to Normalcy" - his coinage.

The Democratic National Convention met in San Francisco on June 28 - July 6, 1920. The convention nominated Governor James M. Cox of Ohio on the 44th ballot. Cox was 50, a former U.S. Representative and three-term governor of Ohio. Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York - the 38-year-old Assistant Secretary of the Navy under Wilson - was VP. FDR was Theodore Roosevelt's fifth cousin. Cox actively supported the League of Nations.

The Socialist Party of America renominated Eugene V. Debs from his federal prison cell at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. Debs (Prisoner #9653) had been imprisoned under the 1918 Sedition Act for his June 16, 1918 anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio - sentenced to 10 years. The Socialist Party campaign slogan: "From Atlanta Prison to the White House." Debs would win 913,693 votes (3.4%).

The Farmer-Labor Party nominated Parley P. Christensen of Utah - 265,398 votes (1.0%).

The campaign featured Harding's "front-porch campaign" echoing McKinley's 1896 strategy. Harding stayed home in Marion, Ohio, and gave speeches from his front porch. Approximately 600,000 visitors came to Marion. The Republican fundraising chair Will Hays raised approximately $5.4 million - a record. The Democratic campaign raised approximately $2.2 million.

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. Cox's defense made him appear committed to the unpopular past.

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 913,693 (3.4%); Christensen 265,398 (1.0%); Watkins

(Prohibition) 188,787 (0.7%). 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 since 1820.

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. Harding swept every state outside the 11 former Confederate states - even taking Tennessee (the Border State that had been Bryan's in 1908 and Wilson's in 1912 and 1916). The Republican coalition was even stronger than 1896-1908. The 1920 map established the 1920-1928 Republican-dominant pattern.

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

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 invited Debs to the White House.

Harding died suddenly on August 2, 1923 in San Francisco - apparently of a heart attack (cause never definitively established due to Florence Harding's refusal to permit an autopsy). Vice President Calvin Coolidge was at his father's farm in Plymouth Notch, Vermont. Coolidge was sworn in by his father (a justice of the peace) at 2:47 AM on August 3, 1923 - the only U.S. president sworn in by a parent. Coolidge became the 30th president.

The Teapot Dome Scandal emerged after Harding's death. Harding's Interior Secretary Albert Fall had leased federal oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming and Elk Hills, California to private oil companies (Sinclair Oil and Pan-American Petroleum) in exchange for approximately $400,000 in bribes ($7+ million in 2024 dollars). The Senate Public Lands Committee investigation began October 1923; Fall was convicted of accepting bribes in October 1929 and imprisoned (the first U.S. Cabinet member ever imprisoned for misconduct). The scandal damaged Harding's historical reputation - he was widely considered the worst U.S. president of the 20th century until the 1970s.

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	**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

Return to Normalcy

Warren G. Harding's 1920 campaign slogan promising a return to pre-WWI conditions. Harding's coinage. Reflected American exhaustion with war, pandemic, recession, Red Scare, and Wilson's incapacitation.

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. The phrase became a metaphor for backroom political deal-making.

Eugene V. Debs from prison

The 1920 Socialist Party presidential candidate ran from his federal prison cell at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary. Imprisoned for June 1918 Canton, Ohio anti-war speech under the 1918 Sedition Act. Won 913,693 votes (3.4%). Pardoned by Harding December 25, 1921.

Warren G. Harding

The 29th U.S. president (1921-23). Republican senator from Ohio. Won 1920 with 404-127 EV and 60.3% popular vote. Died August 2, 1923; VP Calvin Coolidge became 30th president.

19th Amendment

August 18, 1920 constitutional amendment prohibiting denial of the vote based on sex. First nationwide women's presidential election. Culmination of 70+ years of women's suffrage advocacy beginning 1848 Seneca Falls Convention.

Teapot Dome Scandal

The 1921-23 scandal in which Harding's Interior Secretary Albert Fall leased federal oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming and Elk Hills, California to private oil companies in exchange for approximately $400,000 in bribes. First U.S. Cabinet member ever imprisoned for misconduct (Fall convicted October 1929).

Acceptance Speech for Republican Nomination

WARREN G. HARDING, JULY 22, 1920

Harding delivered this speech in Marion, Ohio on July 22, 1920 - six weeks after his June 1920 Republican nomination at the Chicago convention. The speech was Harding's formal acceptance of the nomination and articulation of his "Return to Normalcy" framework. The "normalcy" passage articulates the structural Republican response to the post-WWI crisis: limited government, fiscal conservatism, isolationism, restoration of pre-war conditions. The speech was the structural foundation of the 1920 Republican campaign and the 1920s Republican decade. Harding's coinage "normalcy" became a permanent addition to American political vocabulary.

> *"America's present need is not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy; not revolution, but restoration; not agitation, but adjustment; not surgery, but serenity; not the dramatic, but the dispassionate; not experiment, but equipoise; not submergence in internationality, but sustainment in triumphant nationality. It is one thing to battle successfully against world domination by military autocracy, because the infinite God never intended such a program, but it is quite another thing to revise human nature and remake the angry passions of mankind. Mankind needs a world-wide benediction of understanding. It is needed among individuals, among peoples, among governments, and it will inaugurate an era of good feeling most helpful in the great readjustment which all the peoples of the earth must undertake."*

Harding, "Acceptance Speech for Republican Nomination" (Marion, OH, July 22, 1920). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ≈150 words.

The 1920 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE
How many electoral votes did 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 what specific post-WWI conditions did it address?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER
How did the 19th Amendment shape the 1920 election?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Harding says in his acceptance speech that America's need is "not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy." What political philosophy does this articulate?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1920 election map, identify Harding's 37 states and Cox's 11 states. What structural alignment does the map reveal?

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%. Highest since 1820 (Monroe unopposed).

AP students should know the 60.3% figure.

QUESTION 3

Harding's "Return to Normalcy" slogan was Harding's coinage promising a return to pre-WWI conditions. Specific post-WWI conditions addressed: (1) World War I military trauma - 116,516 American military deaths plus tens of thousands wounded. (2) The October 1918 - April 1919 flu pandemic - approximately 675,000 American deaths. (3) The 1919-20 economic recession - 17% industrial production decline. (4) Summer 1919 race riots (Red Summer) - dozens dead in Chicago, Washington DC, East St. Louis, Tulsa. (5) Major 1919 labor strikes (Seattle general strike, Boston police strike, U.S. Steel strike). (6) The 1919-20 Red Scare and Palmer Raids - thousands arrested, ~250 deported. (7) Wilson's September 1919 stroke - leaving the executive branch effectively rudderless. (8) Senate rejection of the League of Nations - producing prolonged political conflict. "Normalcy" captured the structural exhaustion that voters felt. The slogan was politically masterful: Harding won 60.3%.

AP students should be able to articulate the specific post-WWI conditions.

QUESTION 4

The 19th Amendment shaped the 1920 election in four ways: (1) The amendment was ratified August 18, 1920 - just 2.5 months before Election Day. It was the first national women's presidential election. (2) The 1920 turnout was the highest in U.S. history up to that point: approximately 26.7 million votes cast. The 1916 turnout had been approximately 18.5 million; the addition of women voters approximately tripled the new-voter pool. (3) Women's votes were distributed similarly to men's by party - reflecting that women had been politically active in their households before having the formal right to vote. Women's suffrage did not produce a partisan realignment. (4) The amendment's passage culminated 70+ years of suffragist advocacy beginning with the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. Suffragists Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone, Carrie Chapman Catt, and Alice Paul had led the movement through multiple generations. The structural significance: U.S. democracy expanded to include half the population that had been excluded for 130 years. Subsequent voting rights expansions (1965 Voting Rights Act, 1971 26th Amendment lowering voting age to 18) would follow the 19th Amendment model of constitutional reform.

AP students should be able to articulate the 19th Amendment's impact.

QUESTION 5

Harding's "not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy" articulates conservative Republican post-war political philosophy. Core elements: (1) Political moderation - "not heroics" means rejecting bold ideological action. (2) Status quo restoration - "healing" and "normalcy" mean returning to pre-WWI conditions. (3) Anti-utopianism - "not revolution, but restoration" rejects radical political transformation. (4) Pragmatic adjustment - "not agitation, but adjustment" prefers small-step problem-solving to large-scale reform. (5) Isolationism - "not submergence in internationality, but sustainment in triumphant nationality" rejects Wilson's League of Nations and democratic internationalism. (6) Anti-experimentation - "not experiment, but equipoise" prefers tested approaches to innovation. The philosophy was the structural opposite of Progressive Era activism. It would shape the 1920s Republican decade (Harding-Coolidge-Hoover) and produce the federal-government retrenchment (lower taxes, lower regulation, higher tariffs, immigration restriction, isolationism) that defined the era. The philosophy would be largely abandoned during FDR's 1933-45 New Deal but would resurface in 1950s-60s Republican thought.

AP students should be able to articulate the conservative-Republican philosophy.

QUESTION 6

Harding states (37): everything outside the 11 former Confederate states. Including: all of New England, all of the Mid-Atlantic, all of the Old Northwest, all of the Mountain West, all of the West Coast, the Border States (Kentucky, Tennessee, Maryland, Missouri, Delaware, West Virginia, Oklahoma), and the Plains. Cox states (11): the Solid South (the 11 former Confederate states - Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Tennessee - wait, Tennessee went Harding). Actually Cox's 11 states: VA, NC, SC, GA, FL, AL, MS, LA, TX, AR, KY. Tennessee was the 36th state to ratify the 19A by a 1-vote margin and went Republican in 1920. The structural alignment: the 1896-1932 Republican-dominant alignment had reached its post-WWI peak. Republicans held everything outside the Solid South. The 1920 map would be replicated by Coolidge 1924 and Hoover 1928 - the structural 1920s Republican dominance.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural alignment.