1920

Warren G. Harding vs James M. Cox

A 75-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%

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

1920: Warren G. Harding vs James M. Cox

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 1920 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1920 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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. Labor unrest produced major 1919 strikes. The 1919-1920 "Red Scare" had seen Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer raid suspected radicals. 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. The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 8-12, 1920 and nominated Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio on the tenth ballot after the convention deadlocked through nine ballots. Governor Calvin Coolidge of Massachusetts was VP. The Democratic National Convention met in San Francisco on June 28 - July 6, 1920 and nominated Governor James M. Cox of Ohio on the 44th ballot. Franklin D. Roosevelt of New York - the 38-year-old Assistant Secretary of the Navy - was VP. 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. The Socialist Party campaign slogan: "From Atlanta Prison to the White House." Debs would win 913,693 votes (3.4%).

The campaign featured Harding's "front-porch campaign" echoing McKinley's 1896 strategy. Approximately 600,000 visitors came to Marion. Republican fundraising approximately $5.4 million; Democratic approximately $2.2 million.

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 1920 turnout was approximately 26.7 million votes cast.

Harding won 404 electoral votes to Cox's 127. Harding carried 37 states; Cox carried 11 states (the Solid South minus Tennessee which went Harding). The popular vote: Harding 16,144,093 (60.3%); Cox 9,139,661 (34.1%); Debs 913,693 (3.4%); Christensen (Farmer-Labor) 265,398 (1.0%). Harding-Cox popular-vote margin: 7,004,432 - the largest in U.S. history up to that point.

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%); tariff increases (1921 Emergency Tariff and 1922 Fordney-McCumber Tariff); federal budget reduction (Bureau of the Budget June 1921); immigration restriction (1921 Emergency Quota Act and 1924 Immigration Act).

Harding pardoned Eugene V. Debs on December 25, 1921. Debs walked out of prison on Christmas Day 1921 and visited Harding at the White House.

Harding died suddenly on August 2, 1923 in San Francisco. Vice President Calvin 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. The Teapot Dome Scandal emerged after Harding's death - Interior Secretary Albert Fall had leased federal oil reserves to private oil companies in exchange for bribes; he was convicted October 1929 (first U.S. Cabinet member ever imprisoned for misconduct).

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. 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.

The 1920s Republican Era would be defined structurally by: (1) Fiscal conservatism - tax reduction and budget surplus. (2) High-tariff protectionism (1922 Fordney-Mc-

		Cumber, 1930 Smoot-Hawley). (3) Immigration restriction - the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and 1924 Immigration Act ended the 1880-1920 mass-immigration era. (4) Isolationism - U.S. did not join the League of Nations or the World Court. (5) Pro-business judicial appointments - Taft as Chief Justice 1921-30; Pierce Butler (1922), George Sutherland (1922), Edward Sanford (1923) joined the Court. (6) Economic prosperity - GDP grew approximately 42% from 1922 to 1929. (7) Cultural changes - Prohibition (18th Amendment ratified January 1919, effective January 1920); women's suffrage; the Harlem Renaissance; jazz music; Hollywood; widespread automobile ownership. The 1929 stock market crash and subsequent Great Depression would end the 1920s Republican Era. The October 24-29, 1929 crash wiped out approximately $30 billion in stock value. By 1933, unemployment had reached 25%, industrial production had declined by 46%, and approximately 9,000 banks had failed. The 1932 FDR election (Roosevelt 472-59 EV over Hoover) would inaugurate the New Deal era that would dominate U.S. politics until 1980. 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 1920 election tells you about the Roaring Twenties era 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

Return to Normalcy
Harding's 1920 campaign slogan promising a return to pre-WWI conditions. Harding's coinage.

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.

Eugene V. Debs from prison
The 1920 Socialist Party presidential candidate ran from his federal prison cell. Won 913,693 votes (3.4%).

Calvin Coolidge
The 30th U.S. president (1923-29). Massachusetts governor before being VP. Famous for breaking the September 1919 Boston police strike. Succeeded Harding August 3, 1923 - sworn in by his justice-of-the-peace father at 2:47 AM. Won the 1924 election in his own right (382-136 EV over Davis). Declined to run in 1928.

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.

19th Amendment
August 18, 1920 constitutional amendment prohibiting denial of the vote based on sex.

Teapot Dome Scandal
The 1921-23 scandal in which Harding's Interior Secretary Albert Fall leased federal oil reserves to private oil companies in exchange for bribes. First U.S. Cabinet member ever imprisoned for misconduct.

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. The speech was Harding's formal acceptance and articulation of his "Return to Normalcy" framework.

> *"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 (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 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?

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how the 1920 Republican landslide established the 1920s Republican decade and its eventual end in 1929-32.

QUESTION 7 · 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.

AP students should know the 404-127 split.

QUESTION 2

60.3%. Highest since 1820.

AP students should know the 60.3% figure.

QUESTION 3

Harding's "Return to Normalcy" slogan promised a return to pre-WWI conditions. Specific post-WWI conditions addressed: (1) WWI military trauma - 116,516 American military deaths. (2) The October 1918-April 1919 flu pandemic - ~675,000 American deaths. (3) The 1919-20 economic recession - 17% industrial production decline. (4) Summer 1919 race riots (Red Summer). (5) Major 1919 labor strikes. (6) The 1919-20 Red Scare and Palmer Raids. (7) Wilson's September 1919 stroke. (8) Senate rejection of the League of Nations. "Normalcy" captured the structural exhaustion.

AP students should be able to articulate the specific conditions.

QUESTION 4

The 19th Amendment shaped the 1920 election in four ways: (1) Ratified August 18, 1920 - just 2.5 months before Election Day. First national women's presidential election. (2) The 1920 turnout was approximately 26.7 million votes cast - highest in U.S. history up to that point. (3) Women's votes were distributed similarly to men's by party - no partisan realignment. (4) Culminated 70+ years of suffragist advocacy beginning 1848 Seneca Falls. The structural significance: U.S. democracy expanded to include half the population that had been excluded for 130 years.

AP students should be able to articulate the 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. (2) Status quo restoration. (3) Anti-utopianism. (4) Pragmatic adjustment. (5) Isolationism. (6) Anti-experimentation. The philosophy was the structural opposite of Progressive Era activism. It would shape the 1920s Republican decade (Harding-Coolidge-Hoover).

AP students should be able to articulate the philosophy.

QUESTION 6

The 1920 Republican landslide established the 1920s Republican decade through: (1) Harding 1921-23 - tax reduction, tariff increases, federal budget reduction, immigration restriction. (2) Coolidge 1923-29 - "the business of America is business"; further tax reduction; isolationism; small government. (3) Hoover 1929-33 - Stanford engineer, technocratic Republican; faced 1929 crash and Great Depression. The decade's end came in 1929-32: (1) October 24-29, 1929 stock market crash wiped out ~$30B in stock value. (2) By 1933, unemployment 25%, industrial production declined 46%, ~9,000 banks failed. (3) The 1932 FDR election (Roosevelt 472-59 EV over Hoover) inaugurated the New Deal era that would dominate U.S. politics until 1980. The structural lesson: the 1920s Republican prosperity was built on (a) federal-government retrenchment, (b) high tariff protection, (c) immigration restriction, (d) loose financial regulation. When the underlying economic conditions collapsed in 1929, the Republican governance framework could not respond - producing the structural realignment of 1932.

AP students should be able to articulate the decade's rise and fall.

QUESTION 7

Harding states (37): everything outside the 11 former Confederate states minus Tennessee. Including: all of New England; the Mid-Atlantic; the Old Northwest; the Mountain West; the West Coast; the Border States (KY, TN, MD, MO, DE, WV, OK); the Plains. Cox states (11): VA, NC, SC, GA, FL, AL, MS, LA, TX, AR, KY (Solid South minus Tennessee which flipped Republican). The structural alignment: 1896-1932 Republican-dominant alignment reached post-WWI peak. The 1920 map replicated by Coolidge 1924 and Hoover 1928.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural alignment.

Discussion prompts

1. Harding's 60.3% popular vote was the highest of any presidential candidate since 1820. Identify three structural reasons the 1920 election produced such an extreme Republican landslide.

2. The 19th Amendment (ratified August 1920) was the most consequential of the four Progressive Era constitutional amendments. Identify three specific 1848-1920 developments that produced the amendment and assess whether its passage was inevitable by 1920.