AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1920

Warren G. Harding vs James M. Cox

A 105-minute lesson on the 1920 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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

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2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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1920: Warren G. Harding vs James M. Cox

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

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 (19th Amendment 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: 116,516 American WWI military deaths; October 1918-April 1919 flu pandemic killing ~675,000 Americans; 1919-20 economic recession (17% industrial production decline); Summer 1919 race riots; 1919 labor strikes; 1919-20 Red Scare and Palmer Raids; Wilson incapacitated by September 1919 stroke; Senate rejection of the League of Nations. The Republican National Convention met in Chicago June 8-12, 1920 and nominated Harding on the tenth ballot after deadlock. Coolidge VP. The Democratic National Convention met in San Francisco June 28-July 6, 1920 and nominated Cox on the 44th ballot. FDR (38, Assistant Secretary of Navy) VP. The Socialist Party of America renominated Debs from federal prison. Harding's "front-porch campaign" echoed McKinley 1896. Approximately 600,000 visitors came to Marion. Republican fundraising approximately $5.4 million; Democratic approximately $2.2 million. Harding won 404 electoral votes to Cox's 127. Harding carried 37 states; Cox carried 11 (Solid South minus Tennessee). 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%). Harding-Cox popular-vote margin: 7,004,432. Harding was inaugurated March 4, 1921. He governed as a conservative Republican.

Major achievements: Revenue Acts 1921/1924/1926 (rates 77%'25%); Emergency Tariff 1921 + Fordney-McCumber Tariff 1922; Bureau of the Budget June 1921 (Budget and Accounting Act); 1921 Emergency Quota Act + 1924 Immigration Act ended mass-immigration era. Harding pardoned Debs December 25, 1921.

Harding died August 2, 1923 in San Francisco. Coolidge sworn in by his father at 2:47 AM August 3, 1923 - only U.S. president sworn in by a parent. The Teapot Dome Scandal emerged - Interior Secretary Albert Fall 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).

The 1920s Republican Era was defined structurally by: (1) Fiscal conservatism - tax reduction and budget surplus. (2) High-tariff protectionism. (3) Immigration restriction (1921 Emergency Quota + 1924 Immigration Act). (4) Isolationism - U.S. did not join League of Nations or World Court. (5) Pro-business judicial appointments. (6) Economic prosperity - GDP grew ~42% from 1922 to 1929. (7) Cultural changes - Prohibition (effective January 1920), women's suffrage, Harlem Renaissance, jazz, Hollywood, widespread automobile ownership.

The 1929 stock market crash and Great Depression ended the 1920s Republican Era. October 24-29, 1929 crash wiped out ~$30B in stock value. By 1933: unemployment 25%, industrial production declined 46%, ~9,000 banks failed. The 1932 FDR election (Roosevelt 472-59 EV over Hoover) inaugurated the New Deal era.

The Republican decade's structural framework can be analyzed as the operational opposite of Progressive Era governance. Progressive Era: active federal government, regulatory expansion, internationalism, federal welfare provision. 1920s Republican Era: limited federal government, regulatory retrenchment, isolationism, fiscal conservatism. The 1932 New Deal would restore many Progressive frameworks and substantially extend them.

The 19th Amendment's structural significance for 20th-century U.S. democracy: the amendment opened the formal franchise to women but did not by itself produce structural political change. Women voted at lower rates than men initially; women's partisan distribution was similar to men's; women did not produce a structural realignment. By the 1960s-70s, women would emerge as a distinct political constituency; by the 1980s, the "gender gap" (women voting more Democratic, men more Republican) had become a structural feature of U.S. politics. The 19th Amendment was thus a necessary but not sufficient condition for the 20th-century women's political mobilization.

20 min **Source A**

		Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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.

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.

Calvin Coolidge
The 30th U.S. president (1923-29). Succeeded Harding August 3, 1923.

1924 Immigration Act (Johnson-Reed)
The May 1924 federal law establishing national-origin quotas restricting immigration. Set total immigration at approximately 165,000 per year (down from approximately 800,000 pre-1921). Quotas favored Northern/Western Europe over Southern/Eastern Europe and Asia. Operationalized the 1920s Republican immigration-restriction position.

Warren G. Harding
The 29th U.S. president (1921-23). 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.

Fordney-McCumber Tariff
The September 1922 federal law raising tariff rates substantially. The structural reversal of Wilson's 1913 Underwood Tariff reduction. Average rates rose from 27% to 38%. Operationalized the 1920s Republican high-tariff position.

Acceptance Speech for Republican Nomination

WARREN G. HARDING, JULY 22, 1920

Harding delivered this speech in Marion, Ohio on July 22, 1920. The "normalcy" passage articulates the structural Republican response to the post-WWI crisis.

> *"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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Acceptance Speech for Republican Nomination

WARREN G. HARDING, JULY 22, 1920

“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.

SOURCE B

Address to the National Woman Suffrage Association

CARRIE CHAPMAN CATT, MARCH 13, 1900

“The next great development of the suffrage movement will be the one for which we have so long labored — the political enfranchisement of women. The world has lifted its great wrongs to the level of the conscious, and one of the things which it has felt as deeply as anything has been the wrong done to woman by political institutions. Slavery is gone, and the time is fast coming when the disabilities of woman will be gone too. We have learned how to overcome difficulties. The fight goes on. The night will yet break into the morning. The day will come, and that very soon, when justice will gather to her bosom the women whom she has hitherto neglected. We have only to bide our time and watch and work.”

Catt, "Address to the National Woman Suffrage Association" (Washington, DC, March 13, 1900). Public domain.

The 1920 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Harding's 1920 acceptance) articulating the "normalcy" framework. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Catt's 1900 address) articulating predictive confidence in eventual suffrage victory. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address U.S. political transformation but from different historical positions. Identify the specific political function each source performs.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Catt's 1900 prediction "the day will come, and that very soon" was operationalized 20 years later by the August 1920 ratification. Identify three specific 1900-1920 developments that produced the amendment.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Harding's "normalcy" framework would shape the 1920s Republican decade. Identify three specific 1921-1928 federal policy operationalizations of the framework.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

On what date was the 19th Amendment ratified?

( ) A. August 18, 1920
( ) B. November 2, 1920
( ) C. January 16, 1920
( ) D. October 14, 1920

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Eugene V. Debs win in 1920 (running from federal prison)?

( ) A. 0
( ) B. 6
( ) C. 13
( ) D. 22

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1920 election about alignment-restoration, 19A-operationalization, or 1920s-decade-inauguration? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Harding's 1920 acceptance speech (Source A) articulated the structural Republican response to the post-WWI crisis - "not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy." Catt's 1900 suffrage address (Source B) articulated the predictive confidence that produced the August 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment - "the day will come, and that very soon." Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1900-1932 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1920 election's structural significance was (a) the demonstration of post-WWI Republican alignment restoration after the 1912-16 Wilson interruption, (b) the operationalization of the 19th Amendment's first national women's presidential election, or (c) the inauguration of the 1920s Republican prosperity decade that would end with the 1929 crash and 1932 New Deal realignment. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the alignment-vs-19A-operationalization-vs-1920s-decade axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Wilson 1913-16 New Freedom, the 1919-20 Red Scare, the Versailles Treaty, the 1922 Fordney-McCumber Tariff, the 1924 Immigration Act, the Teapot Dome Scandal, the 1929 stock market crash, the 1932 FDR election. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy", "not revolution, but restoration", "not experiment, but equipoise", "not submergence in internationality, but sustainment in triumphant nationality". The "not heroics, but healing; not nostrums, but normalcy" phrase is the most rhetorically distinctive.

Harding's framing established the "normalcy" framework.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "The day will come, and that very soon, when justice will gather to her bosom the women whom she has hitherto neglected", "We have only to bide our time and watch and work", "The night will yet break into the morning", "The fight goes on". The "day will come" phrase is the most rhetorically distinctive.

Catt's framing articulated predictive confidence.

QUESTION 3

Source A is Harding's 1920 presidential commitment to the "normalcy" framework - articulated as the Republican nominee to define his administration's approach to post-WWI governance. The function is to commit the Republican Party to limited-government, fiscal-conservative, isolationist policy that would dominate the 1920s. Source B is Catt's 1900 movement-leader commitment to women's suffrage - articulated as the new president of NAWSA to mobilize and motivate her movement. The function is to articulate strategic patience and predictive confidence in the eventual amendment. Together, the sources show two structural transformations: Harding's "normalcy" framework operationalized the rejection of Wilson-era Progressive activism; Catt's suffragist mobilization produced the August 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment. The 1920 election was the structural moment when both transformations converged.

AP students should be able to articulate both transformations.

QUESTION 4

Three specific 1900-1920 developments produced the 19th Amendment: (1) The 1916 NAWSA "Winning Plan" - Carrie Chapman Catt's coordinated state-and-federal campaign that strategically focused suffragist resources on the most winnable states and the federal amendment. (2) Western state suffrage - by 1916, fifteen states (mostly in the West) had granted women full suffrage; women voters in these states could pressure federal candidates. (3) World War I women's mobilization - women's wartime service in factories, government, and military auxiliary roles (e.g., the Yeomanettes, Hello Girls) demonstrated women's political legitimacy and reduced anti-suffrage arguments. Additional 1916-20 developments: Alice Paul's 1917 picketing of the White House (the "Silent Sentinels") and 1917-18 hunger strikes after their arrests; Wilson's January 1918 endorsement of the federal amendment; the May 1919 House passage and June 1919 Senate passage; state-by-state ratification campaign 1919-20; Tennessee ratification August 18, 1920 by one-vote margin. The cumulative effect: by 1920, the political conditions for the 19th Amendment had been built through 70+ years of advocacy. Catt's 1900 confidence proved well-founded.

AP students should be able to articulate the suffrage-movement strategy.

QUESTION 5

Three specific 1921-1928 federal policy operationalizations of the "normalcy" framework: (1) Revenue Acts 1921/1924/1926 - federal income tax rates reduced from 77% (1918 wartime peak) to 25% on top incomes. Operationalized the "no nostrums" / fiscal-conservative principle. (2) Fordney-McCumber Tariff (September 1922) - raised average tariff rates from 27% (Wilson Underwood Tariff 1913) to 38%. Operationalized the "no experiment" / pro-business protectionism principle. (3) Immigration Acts 1921/1924 - the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and 1924 Immigration Act established national-origin quotas restricting immigration. Set total immigration at approximately 165,000 per year (down from approximately 800,000 pre-1921). Operationalized the "sustainment in triumphant nationality" / restrictionist principle. Additional operationalizations: Budget and Accounting Act (June 1921) creating the Bureau of the Budget; Bonus Bill veto (1922, 1924 Coolidge); McNary-Haugen Farm Relief Bill vetoes (1927, 1928 Coolidge); Federal Reserve policy of maintaining tight money. The cumulative effect: by 1928, the federal government had been structurally rolled back from its Progressive Era and Wilsonian peak. The "normalcy" framework had been operationalized.

AP students should be able to articulate multiple operationalizations.

QUESTION 6

August 18, 1920. The 36th state (Tennessee) ratified the 19th Amendment by a one-vote margin in the Tennessee House of Representatives. Tennessee Representative Harry T. Burn changed his vote from "no" to "yes" after receiving a letter from his mother urging support.

AP students should know the August 18, 1920 ratification date.

QUESTION 7

0. Debs won 913,693 popular votes (3.4%) but 0 electoral votes. The Socialist Party did not carry any state.

AP students should know the 0-EV Debs result.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the alignment-vs-19A-vs-1920s-decade axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source.

The thesis sketch is preparatory.