# 1920

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

A 20-minute lesson on the 1920 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

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| 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% |

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# 1920

World War I had ended in November 1918 - just two years before the 1920 election. But the war's aftermath was hard for Americans. The 1918-1919 flu pandemic killed over 675,000 Americans. There was a post-war economic recession. Race riots broke out in cities. Labor strikes shut down industries. The "Red Scare" of 1919-1920 saw the government arrest and deport thousands of suspected radicals.

President Wilson had spent the last year of his term very sick. He had a stroke in September 1919 and could barely function as president. His wife Edith handled most White House work. Americans were tired of Wilson, tired of war, tired of crisis.

The Republicans picked Senator Warren G. Harding of Ohio - a quiet, friendly newspaper publisher. Harding was 55 years old, handsome, and had won the nomination because he was acceptable to multiple Republican factions. Harding's campaign slogan was "A Return to Normalcy" - meaning a return to the way things had been before World War I.

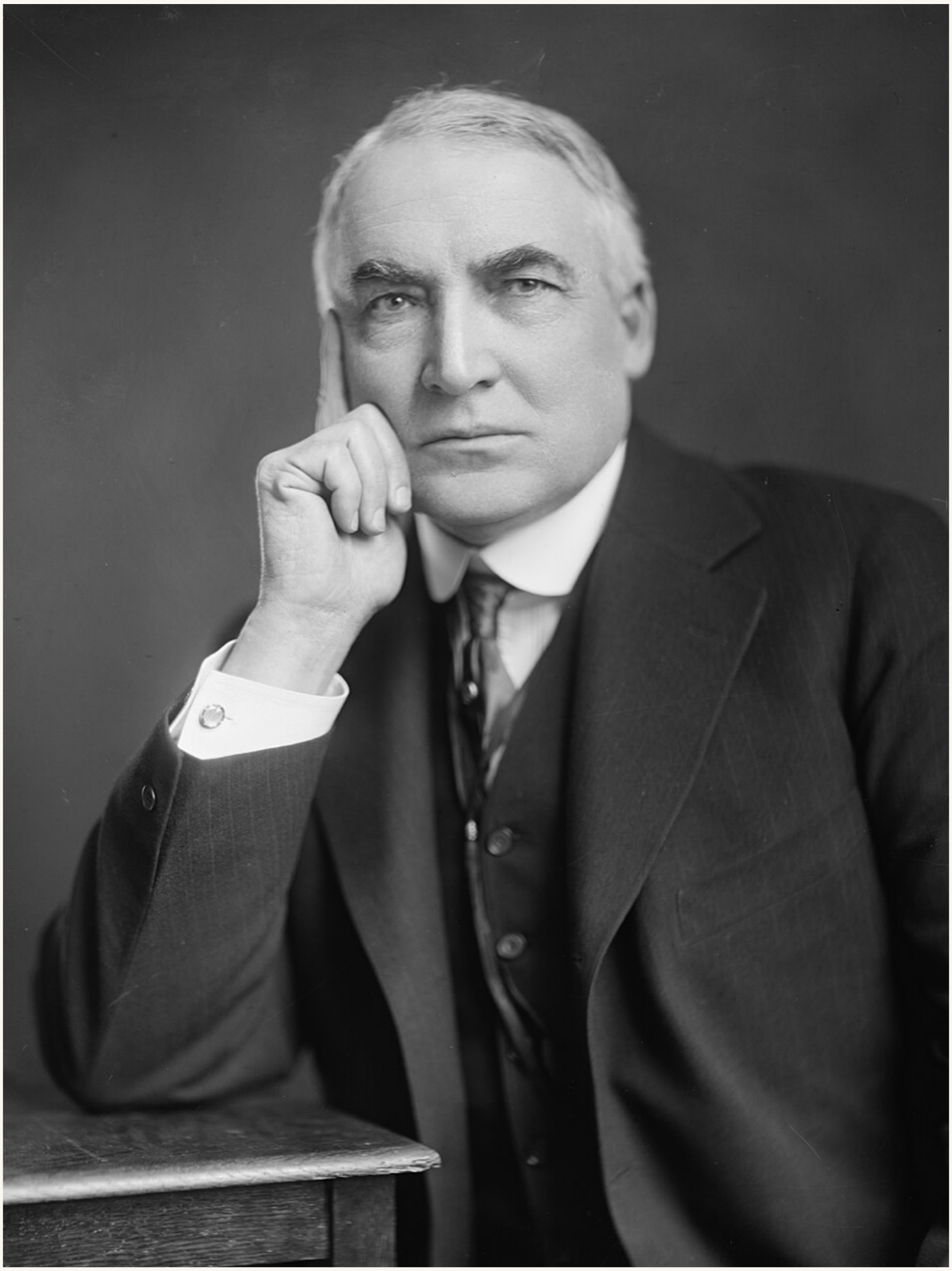
Look at the picture. That is Warren G. Harding - the man who would win the biggest popular-vote margin in U.S. history up to that point.

The Democrats picked James M. Cox - the governor of Ohio. His running mate was Franklin Delano Roosevelt - the 38-year-old Assistant Secretary of the Navy under Wilson. Yes - the same FDR who would later become the 32nd president. Cox supported Wilson's League of Nations.

A SOCIALIST also ran from PRISON. Eugene V. Debs had been imprisoned for opposing the World War I draft. The 1918 Sedition Act made it illegal to criticize the war effort. Debs gave a speech against the war and got 10 years in federal prison. In 1920, Debs ran for president from his prison cell at the Atlanta Federal Penitentiary - Prisoner #9653. He won 913,693 votes!

The 19th Amendment had been ratified on August 18, 1920 - just 2.5 months before Election Day. For the first time, American women could vote in a presidential election everywhere in the country (some states had already given women the vote).

On Election Day, Harding won 404 electoral votes to Cox's 127. Harding won 60.3% of the popular vote - the largest popular-vote margin in U.S. history up to that point. Harding became the 29th president. He would die in office in 1923, and Vice President Calvin Coolidge would become the 30th president.



*Warren G. Harding, the 29th U.S. president. He won the 1920 election by the largest popular-vote margin in U.S. history up to that point.*

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## Let's talk about the story

**1.**

Who became the 29th U.S. president after the 1920 election?

**2.**

What was special about the 1920 election for American women?

**3.**

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

## Warm-up (5 min)

In 1920 American women voted for president for the FIRST TIME in U.S. history! The 19th Amendment had been ratified August 18, 1920 - just 2.5 months before Election Day. Republicans won a HUGE landslide.

## Answer key

**1.**

Warren G. Harding. He won 404 electoral votes to James M. Cox's 127. Harding won 60.3% of the popular vote - the largest popular-vote margin in U.S. history up to that point. Harding was a Republican senator from Ohio.

AP students should know the 60.3% record.

**2.**

The 1920 election was the first in U.S. history in which American women could vote for president nationwide. The 19th Amendment had been ratified on August 18, 1920 - just 2.5 months before Election Day. The amendment prohibited denial of the vote based on sex. The 19th Amendment had been 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 but not all American women voted in 1920 - the amendment opened the right but did not guarantee turnout. The actual partisan voting pattern of women in 1920 was difficult to determine because most states did not record gender of voters; subsequent studies estimated women voted similarly to men by party.

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

**3.**

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 opposing the World War I draft - specifically for a June 1918 anti-war speech in Canton, Ohio. He was sentenced to 10 years in federal prison. The Socialist Party of America nominated Debs by acclamation in 1920. Debs could not campaign personally; the campaign ran without him. Debs won 913,693 votes - 3.4% of the total - more votes than he had received in any prior election except 1912 (901,551). President Harding commuted Debs's sentence to time served on December 25, 1921; Debs walked out of prison on Christmas Day 1921. Debs visited Harding at the White House before returning home to Indiana. Debs would die October 20, 1926 - five years after his release.

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