3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1924

Calvin Coolidge vs John W. Davis

A 35-minute lesson on the 1924 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Roaring Twenties	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Calvin Coolidge (Republican) · 382 EV	RUNNER-UP John W. Davis (Democratic) · 136 EV
KEY ISSUE Teapot Dome scandal fallout; Ku Klux Klan influence; prosperity and Coolidge conservatism	TURNOUT 48.9%

CONTENTS

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

1924: Calvin Coolidge vs John W. Davis

Timing

5 min	Warm-up	When a vice president inherits a scandal-plagued presidency, what political mechanisms allow him to win his own term despite the scandals?
15 min	Reading	The 1924 election was the 35th U.S. presidential election. It produced Calvin Coolidge's 382-136-13 electoral-vote victory over Democrat John W. Davis and Progressive Robert M. La Follette - Coolidge's first election as president in his own right (he had succeeded to the presidency after Harding's August 1923 death). Coolidge's 25.9% popular-vote margin (54.0% vs 28.8%) was the largest since Harding's 1920. The election was a structural confirmation of the 1920s Republican prosperity decade. The political conditions had been shaped by Harding's death and the Teapot Dome Scandal. Warren Harding had died suddenly on August 2, 1923 in San Francisco. Coolidge had become the 30th president on August 3, 1923 - sworn in by his justice-of-the-peace father at 2:47 AM. The Teapot Dome Scandal had emerged through Senate investigations in late 1923: Interior Secretary Albert Fall had leased federal oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming and Elk Hills, California to private oil companies in exchange for approximately $400,000 in bribes. Other Harding administration corruption was also exposed: Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty was forced to resign in March 1924 for failure to prosecute war fraud cases; Veterans Bureau Director Charles Forbes had embezzled approximately $200 million in veteran services contracts. Coolidge handled the scandals with cool competence. He demanded Daugherty's resignation. He cooperated fully with Senate investigations. He appointed Owen J. Roberts as special prosecutor for the Teapot Dome cases. Coolidge himself was completely honest - his austere personal lifestyle (he and Florence Harding wife Grace lived modestly) and his demonstrated commitment to honest government distanced him from Harding's tarnished legacy. By mid-1924, Coolidge had effectively absorbed the credit for cleaning up corruption while distancing himself from the corrupt officials. The 1923-24 economic conditions also favored Coolidge. The 1919-20 recession had ended; the 1920s boom was beginning. GDP was growing approximately 5% per year. Industrial production was expanding rapidly. The Federal Reserve's loose-money policy was supporting credit expansion. Unemployment was below 4%. The "Coolidge prosperity" was the dominant political narrative. The Republican National Convention met in Cleveland on June 10-12, 1924 and

renominated Coolidge by acclamation. Charles G. Dawes of Illinois - a banker, former Comptroller of the Currency, and creator of the 1924 Dawes Plan (the international agreement to restructure Germany's WWI reparations payments) - was the vice presidential candidate. The Republican platform endorsed tax reduction, immigration restriction, prohibition enforcement, and high tariffs.

The Democratic National Convention met at Madison Square Garden in New York City on June 24 - July 9, 1924 - sixteen days and 103 ballots. The convention was a structural disaster, bitterly divided between three factions: (1) The Northern urban Democrats led by Governor Al Smith of New York - representing immigrants, Catholics, and labor. (2) The Southern rural Democrats led by William Gibbs McAdoo of California (Wilson's Treasury Secretary and son-in-law) - representing Protestants, Prohibitionists, and (covertly) Ku Klux Klan supporters. (3) The Western Progressive Democrats. The McAdoo-Smith deadlock lasted 99 ballots; the convention finally compromised on John W. Davis of West Virginia on the 103rd ballot. Davis was a former U.S. Representative (1911-13), Solicitor General under Wilson (1913-18), Ambassador to the U.K. (1918-21), and now a Wall Street corporate lawyer (the senior partner at Davis, Polk and Wardwell). Davis was a conservative Democrat - the worst possible choice to compete with La Follette's Progressive Party. Charles W. Bryan of Nebraska (William Jennings Bryan's brother) was the vice presidential candidate.

The Progressive Party held its convention in Cleveland on July 4-5, 1924 and nominated Senator Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin by acclamation. La Follette was 69, a Republican U.S. Senator (1906-25) and the leading Progressive Republican of the 1900s-1910s. He had been the Progressive Republican alternative to Taft in 1908 and to Hughes in 1916. His 1924 third-party run was the final major attempt to revive Progressive Era reforms. Burton K. Wheeler of Montana (a Democratic senator who endorsed La Follette) was the running mate. The Progressive platform: federal regulation of railroads and utilities; public ownership of waterpower resources; federal labor regulation; agricultural credit expansion; restriction of judicial review; direct election of presidential candidates through primaries.

The La Follette campaign was a coalition of farmers (especially the agrarian distress in the wheat states), labor unions (the American Federation of Labor formally endorsed La Follette - first major labor endorsement of a third-party presidential candidate in U.S. history), Socialists (the Socialist Party endorsed La Follette rather than running its own candidate), intellectuals, and Progressive Republicans.

The campaign was structurally dominated by the Republican advantages. The "Coolidge prosperity" message resonated. Republican fundraising approximately $4 million; Democratic approximately $900,000; Progressive approximately $250,000. Coolidge campaigned minimally - his "Silent Cal" style discouraged active campaigning. Coolidge gave the first presidential radio address (December 6, 1923 State of the Union) - inaugurating the era of radio politics.

Coolidge won 382 electoral votes; Davis 136; La Follette 13. Coolidge carried 35 states; Davis carried 12; La Follette carried 1 (Wisconsin). The popular vote: Coolidge 15,723,789 (54.0%); Davis 8,386,242 (28.8%); La Follette 4,831,706 (16.6%); plus minor candidates. Coolidge-Davis popular-vote margin: 7,337,547. La Follette's 16.6% was the second-highest third-party percentage of the 20th century after Roosevelt 1912 (27.4%).

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. Coolidge held everything outside the Solid South except Wisconsin (which La Follette carried). Davis held only the 11 former Confederate states plus Oklahoma. La Follette carried Wisconsin and ran competitively in the Mountain West, Pacific Northwest, and Upper Midwest - winning more than 25% in Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, Nevada, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Washington.

Coolidge was inaugurated to a second term on March 4, 1925. He governed as a conservative Republican: tax reduction (the Revenue Act of 1926 reduced federal income tax rates further); fiscal conservatism (the federal budget had surpluses every year of his presidency); immigration restriction (the May 1924 Johnson-Reed Act established national-origin quotas); federal aid to flood relief (1927 Mississippi Flood relief); pro-business policies. Coolidge declared "the business of America is business" in January 1925.

On August 2, 1927 - the fourth anniversary of Harding's death - Coolidge issued his famous statement: "I do not choose to run for President in 1928." The statement was structurally unusual: Coolidge declined to seek another term despite his enormous popularity. Various explanations: (1) Coolidge believed in the unwritten two-term tradition (the Harding term plus his own 1925-29 term effectively counted as two). (2) Coolidge had been emotionally devastated by the July 1924 death of his son Calvin Jr. (16 years old) from sepsis. (3) Coolidge's wife Grace was uncomfortable with continuing political life. (4) Coolidge may have anticipated economic problems and chosen to leave office before they emerged. Republican nominee in 1928: Herbert Hoover.

La Follette died June 18, 1925 - eight months after the election. The Progressive Party dissolved after his death. Many of his 1924 supporters would join FDR's 1932 New Deal coalition.

The 1924 election's structural significance was twofold. First, it confirmed the 1920s Republican prosperity decade and demonstrated that the 1920s structural Republican alignment was stable despite the Harding scandals. Second, the La Follette Progressive Party run was the final major Progressive Era effort - the structural transition from the 1900-1920 Progressive movement to the 1932 New Deal would occur through the Republican prosperity decade and the 1929-32 Great Depression rather than through third-party Progressive politics.

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 1924 Election

The 1924 election was the 35th U.S. presidential election. It produced Calvin Coolidge's 382-136-13 electoral-vote victory over Democrat John W. Davis and Progressive Robert M. La Follette - Coolidge's first election as president in his own right (he had succeeded to the presidency after Harding's August 1923 death). Coolidge's 25.9% popular-vote margin (54.0% vs 28.8%) was the largest since Harding's 1920. The election was a structural confirmation of the 1920s Republican prosperity decade.

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Key words

Calvin Coolidge	The 30th U.S. president (1923-29). Republican governor of Massachusetts before becoming Harding's VP. Won 1924 with 382-136-13 EV and 54.0% popular vote.
Keep Cool with Coolidge	Coolidge's 1924 campaign slogan. Pun on Coolidge's name plus the "Coolidge prosperity" of the 1920s.
Silent Cal	Coolidge's nickname for his quietness. The most reserved U.S. president in history.
Robert M. La Follette	Senator from Wisconsin (1906-25) and 1924 Progressive Party presidential candidate. Won 4.8M votes (16.6%) and 13 EV (Wisconsin) - second-highest third-party percentage of 20th century after TR 1912. Died June 18, 1925.
1924 Democratic Convention	The 16-day, 103-ballot convention at Madison Square Garden bitterly divided between Northern urban Catholics (Al Smith) and Southern rural Protestants (William Gibbs McAdoo). Eventually compromised on John W. Davis of West Virginia.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Calvin Coolidge win in 1924?

( ) A. 292
( ) B. 356
( ) C. 382
( ) D. 404

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many ballots did the 1924 Democratic National Convention require to nominate Davis?

( ) A. 46
( ) B. 72
( ) C. 103
( ) D. 155

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Coolidge handle the Teapot Dome Scandal he inherited from Harding?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Robert M. La Follette's 1924 Progressive Party run the second-most successful third-party campaign of the 20th century?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

382. Coolidge 382; Davis 136; La Follette 13. Coolidge's 246-EV margin over Davis was decisive.

AP students should know the 382-136-13 split.

QUESTION 2

103. The 1924 Democratic Convention lasted 16 days at Madison Square Garden and required 103 ballots to nominate John W. Davis. The convention was bitterly divided between Northern urban Catholics (Al Smith) and Southern rural Protestants (William Gibbs McAdoo).

AP students should know the 103-ballot figure.

QUESTION 3

Coolidge handled the Teapot Dome Scandal with three structural actions: (1) He demanded the resignation of Attorney General Harry M. Daugherty (March 1924) who had been forced to resign for failure to prosecute war fraud cases. (2) He cooperated fully with Senate investigations of Interior Secretary Albert Fall's leasing of federal oil reserves. (3) He appointed Owen J. Roberts as special prosecutor for the Teapot Dome cases. Coolidge himself was completely honest. His austere personal lifestyle and demonstrated commitment to honest government distanced him from Harding's tarnished legacy. By mid-1924, Coolidge had effectively absorbed the credit for cleaning up corruption while distancing himself from the corrupt officials. The political strategy worked: Coolidge's 1924 victory was decisive despite the Harding scandals. The lesson: a vice president who succeeds to a scandal-plagued presidency can win his own term by demonstrating decisive cleanup action and personal probity.

AP students should be able to articulate Coolidge's scandal management.

QUESTION 4

Robert M. La Follette's 1924 Progressive Party run won 4.8 million votes (16.6%) - second-highest third-party percentage of the 20th century after Theodore Roosevelt 1912 (27.4%). Three structural reasons for the run's success: (1) La Follette's personal prominence. He was 69 years old and had been the leading Progressive Republican of the 1900s-1910s; he had run for the Republican nomination in 1908 and 1916. His personal credibility was unmatched among reform-minded voters. (2) Democratic Party weakness. The Democrats' 16-day, 103-ballot convention had produced the conservative Davis - leaving Progressive voters with no viable Democratic alternative. La Follette filled the structural vacuum. (3) Coalition strength. La Follette's coalition included farmers (agrarian distress in wheat states), labor unions (AFL endorsed - first major labor endorsement of a third-party presidential candidate), Socialists (who endorsed La Follette rather than running their own), intellectuals, and Progressive Republicans. But the coalition could not be sustained: La Follette died June 1925; the Progressive Party dissolved; the same demographic groups would join FDR's 1932 New Deal coalition.

AP students should be able to articulate the La Follette success.