1924

Calvin Coolidge vs John W. Davis

A 50-minute lesson on the 1924 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 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%

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2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1924: Calvin Coolidge vs John W. Davis

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 1923-24 America that would produce a successful Republican re-election after a major Cabinet scandal. For each, identify the specific 1923-24 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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. The 1924 result was a structural confirmation of the 1920s Republican prosperity decade. La Follette's 16.6% was the second-highest third-party percentage of the 20th century after Roosevelt 1912. The political conditions had been shaped by Harding's death and the Teapot Dome Scandal. Warren Harding had died on August 2, 1923. Coolidge had become the 30th president the next day. 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; Veterans Bureau Director Charles Forbes had embezzled approximately $200 million. Coolidge handled the scandals with cool competence. He demanded Daugherty's resignation. He cooperated with Senate investigations. He appointed Owen J. Roberts as special prosecutor. Coolidge himself was completely honest - his austere personal lifestyle distanced him from Harding's tarnished legacy. 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 VP. 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 KKK had reached its 1920s peak with approximately 3-5 million members. The 1924 convention's Resolutions Committee narrowly defeated (542.7 to 543.85) a proposal to explicitly condemn the KKK by name. The McAdoo-Smith deadlock lasted 99 ballots; the convention compromised on John W. Davis of West Virginia on the 103rd ballot. Davis was a former U.S. Representative, Solicitor General under Wilson, Ambassador to the U.K., and a Wall Street corporate lawyer. Charles W. Bryan of Nebraska (William Jennings Bryan's brother) was VP.

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. Burton K. Wheeler of Montana (a Democratic senator who endorsed La Follette) was 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, 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), intellectuals, and Progressive Republicans.

The campaign was structurally dominated by the Republican advantages. Republican fundraising approximately $4 million; Democratic approximately $900,000; Progressive approximately $250,000. Coolidge campaigned minimally. He 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.

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. Coolidge held everything outside the Solid South except Wisconsin (La Follette). 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); fiscal conservatism (federal budget surpluses every year); immigration restriction (the May 1924 Johnson-Reed Act); federal aid to flood relief (1927 Mississippi Flood); 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 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. Republican nominee in 1928: Herbert Hoover.

La Follette died June 18, 1925. The Progressive Party dissolved. Many of his 1924 supporters would join FDR's 1932 New Deal coalition.

The Ku Klux Klan's 1924 prominence was structurally significant. The KKK had been revived in 1915 (the original 1865 KKK had been suppressed in the 1870s). By 1924, the KKK had approximately 3-5 million members - one of the largest membership organizations in American history. The KKK's 1924 prominence reflected the 1920s anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, anti-Black backlash against the Great Migration and immigration. The KKK influence on the 1924 Democratic Convention demonstrated the deep divisions in the Democratic Party. The KKK would decline rapidly after 1925 due to internal scandals (David Curtiss Stephenson, Indiana Grand Dragon, convicted of rape and murder in 1925).

The 1924 election's structural significance was threefold. First, it confirmed the 1920s Republican prosperity decade. Second, the La Follette Progressive Party run was the final major Progressive Era third-party effort. Third, the Democratic Party's 103-ballot convention demonstrated the structural divisions that would prevent Democratic victories until 1932.

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

Calvin Coolidge
The 30th U.S. president (1923-29). Won 1924 with 382-136-13 EV and 54.0% popular vote.

Robert M. La Follette
Senator from Wisconsin (1906-25) and 1924 Progressive Party presidential candidate. Won 16.6% and 13 EV (Wisconsin) - second-highest third-party percentage of 20th century after TR 1912.

1920s KKK revival
The 1915 revival of the Ku Klux Klan by William J. Simmons in Stone Mountain, Georgia. By 1924, the KKK had approximately 3-5 million members - one of the largest membership organizations in American history. The 1924 Democratic Convention narrowly defeated (542.7 to 543.85) a proposal to explicitly condemn the KKK by name. KKK declined rapidly after 1925.

Silent Cal
Coolidge's nickname for his quietness. The most reserved U.S. president in history.

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). KKK influence was significant. Compromised on John W. Davis on the 103rd ballot.

Johnson-Reed Immigration Act (1924)
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.

The Business of America is Business (acceptance address)

CALVIN COOLIDGE, JANUARY 17, 1925

Coolidge delivered this speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington, DC on January 17, 1925 - six weeks before his March 4, 1925 second-term inauguration. The "business of America is business" passage articulated the structural Republican economic philosophy of the 1920s: pro-business, fiscal conservatism, limited government, prosperity through business expansion. The speech was the structural foundation of the 1920s "Coolidge Prosperity" decade. The popular abbreviation "the business of America is business" is actually a simplification - Coolidge's exact phrase was "the chief business of the American people is business." The speech also articulated Coolidge's commitment to capitalism, free enterprise, and the structural relationship between business prosperity and American character.

> *"After all, the chief business of the American people is business. They are profoundly concerned with producing, buying, selling, investing and prospering in the world. I am strongly of the opinion that the great majority of people will always find these the moving impulses of our life. We make no concealment of the fact that we want wealth, but there are many other things that we want very much more. We want peace and honor, and that charity which is so strong an element of all civilization. The chief ideal of the American people is idealism. I cannot repeat too often that America is a nation of idealists. That is the only motive to which they ever give any strong and lasting reaction. No newspaper can be a success which fails to appeal to that element of our national life."*

Coolidge, "Address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors" (Washington, DC, January 17, 1925). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ≈150 words.

The 1924 Election

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

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?

( ) 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

Coolidge says "the chief business of the American people is business." What political philosophy does this articulate?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1924 election map, identify Coolidge's 35 states, Davis's 12 states, and La Follette's 1 state (Wisconsin). What structural alignment does the map reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

382. Coolidge 382; Davis 136; La Follette 13.

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

QUESTION 2

103. The 1924 Democratic Convention required 103 ballots over 16 days.

AP students should know the 103-ballot figure.

QUESTION 3

Coolidge handled the Teapot Dome Scandal with three structural actions: (1) He demanded Attorney General Daugherty's resignation. (2) He cooperated fully with Senate investigations. (3) He appointed Owen J. Roberts as special prosecutor. Coolidge himself was completely honest. His austere personal lifestyle and commitment to honest government distanced him from Harding's tarnished legacy. By mid-1924, Coolidge had absorbed credit for cleanup while distancing from the corrupt officials.

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

QUESTION 4

Coolidge's "the chief business of the American people is business" articulates the structural Republican economic philosophy of the 1920s. Core elements: (1) Capitalist economic activity is the primary concern of American life. (2) Business prosperity is the structural foundation of American well-being. (3) Government policy should facilitate business expansion. (4) Federal regulation of business should be minimal. (5) Wealth and material prosperity are legitimate American values. (6) Idealism and business prosperity are compatible - even mutually reinforcing. The philosophy was operationally implemented through the 1920s Republican governance: tax reduction (Revenue Acts 1921/24/26), high tariffs (Fordney-McCumber 1922), immigration restriction (Johnson-Reed 1924), pro-business judicial appointments. The philosophy was the structural opposite of Progressive Era activism and would be displaced by FDR's 1933 New Deal.

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

QUESTION 5

Three structural reasons for La Follette's success: (1) La Follette's personal prominence. He was 69 and had been the leading Progressive Republican of the 1900s-1910s. (2) Democratic Party weakness. The 16-day, 103-ballot convention had produced the conservative Davis. Progressive voters had no viable Democratic alternative. (3) Coalition strength. La Follette's coalition included farmers, labor unions (AFL endorsement - first major labor endorsement of a third-party candidate), Socialists, intellectuals. But the coalition could not be sustained: La Follette died June 1925; Progressive Party dissolved; FDR's 1932 coalition absorbed many of La Follette's 1924 supporters.

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

QUESTION 6

Coolidge states (35): everything outside the Solid South except Wisconsin. Including all of New England, Mid-Atlantic, Old Northwest (except WI), Mountain West, West Coast, Border States. Davis states (12): the 11 former Confederate states plus Oklahoma. La Follette state (1): Wisconsin. The structural alignment: the 1920s Republican-dominant alignment had reached peak strength. La Follette's 13 EV in Wisconsin was the only third-party EV breakthrough between 1912 (Roosevelt 88 EV) and 1968 (Wallace 46 EV). The Wisconsin breakthrough reflected La Follette's decades-long control of Wisconsin Republican politics.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural alignment.