1924

Calvin Coolidge vs John W. Davis

A 75-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%

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

1924: Calvin Coolidge vs John W. Davis

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 1924 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1924 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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. 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. Other Harding administration corruption was also exposed. 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. The 1923-24 economic conditions also favored Coolidge. The 1920s boom was beginning. The Republican National Convention met in Cleveland on June 10-12, 1924 and renominated Coolidge by acclamation. Charles G. Dawes of Illinois was VP. 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 bitterly divided between Northern urban Catholics (Smith), Southern rural Protestants (McAdoo), and Western Progressive Democrats. The 1924 Resolutions Committee narrowly defeated (542.7 to 543.85) a proposal to explicitly condemn the KKK by name. The convention compromised on John W. Davis on the 103rd ballot. Charles

W. Bryan was VP.

The Progressive Party held its convention in Cleveland on July 4-5, 1924 and nominated Senator Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin. Burton K. Wheeler of Montana was running mate. The Progressive platform: federal regulation of railroads and utilities; public ownership of waterpower; federal labor regulation; agricultural credit expansion; restriction of judicial review.

The La Follette campaign was a coalition of farmers, labor unions (AFL endorsement - first major labor endorsement of a third-party candidate), Socialists, intellectuals, and Progressive Republicans.

Coolidge won 382 electoral votes; Davis 136; La Follette 13. Coolidge carried 35 states; Davis 12; La Follette 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.

Coolidge was inaugurated to a second term on March 4, 1925. He governed as a conservative Republican: Revenue Act 1926; fiscal conservatism; Johnson-Reed Immigration Act May 1924; federal aid to flood relief; pro-business policies. Coolidge declared "the business of America is business" January 1925.

On August 2, 1927, Coolidge issued his statement: "I do not choose to run for President in 1928." 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 1920s KKK revival was structurally significant. The KKK had been revived in 1915. By 1924, the KKK had approximately 3-5 million members - one of the largest membership organizations in American history. The KKK's 1920s peak reflected the anti-immigrant, anti-Catholic, anti-Black backlash against the Great Migration and immigration. The KKK declined rapidly after 1925 due to internal scandals.

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.

The Coolidge presidency would be remembered for the "Coolidge Prosperity" - GDP growth 5%+ per year, unemployment below 4%, federal budget surpluses every year, no major foreign-policy crises. But the prosperity was built on structural weaknesses: speculative stock market expansion, unsustainable consumer debt,

		agricultural depression in farm states, weak banking regulation. The 1929 Hoover succession and October 1929 stock market crash would expose these weaknesses. The 1932 FDR realignment can be analyzed retrospectively as the structural correction to the 1920s Republican governance. Many specific 1920s policies would be reversed: high tariffs (1934 Reciprocal Trade Agreements Act); restrictive immigration (eventually 1965 Immigration Act); banking deregulation (1933 Glass-Steagall Act); weak labor regulation (1935 Wagner Act); fiscal austerity (1935-37 deficit spending); pro-business judicial appointments (1937 court-packing controversy). The 1924 election can thus be analyzed as the peak of 1920s Republican governance before the 1929-32 collapse. 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 1924 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

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 and 1924 Progressive Party presidential candidate. Won 16.6% and 13 EV.

1920s KKK revival
The 1915 revival of the Ku Klux Klan. By 1924, the KKK had approximately 3-5 million members - one of the largest membership organizations in American history.

Coolidge Prosperity
The 1923-29 economic boom under Coolidge's presidency. GDP growth 5%+ per year; unemployment below 4%; federal budget surpluses every year. Built on structural weaknesses (speculative stock expansion, unsustainable consumer debt, agricultural depression, weak banking regulation) that would produce the 1929 crash.

Silent Cal
Coolidge's nickname for his quietness.

1924 Democratic Convention
The 16-day, 103-ballot convention bitterly divided between Northern urban Catholics (Smith), Southern rural Protestants (McAdoo), and Western Progressive Democrats.

Johnson-Reed Immigration Act (1924)
The May 1924 federal law establishing national-origin quotas restricting immigration.

The Business of America is Business (address to ASNE)

CALVIN COOLIDGE, JANUARY 17, 1925

Coolidge delivered this speech to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Washington, DC on January 17, 1925. The "business of America is business" passage articulated the structural Republican economic philosophy of the 1920s.

> *"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). Public domain.

The 1924 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 Coolidge win in 1924?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many ballots did the 1924 Democratic 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?

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the 1920s KKK revival shape the 1924 Democratic Convention?

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1924 election map, identify Coolidge's 35 states, Davis's 12 states, and La Follette's 1 state. 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 demanded Daugherty's resignation, cooperated with Senate investigations, and appointed Owen J. Roberts as special prosecutor. Coolidge himself was completely honest; his austere personal lifestyle distanced him from Harding's tarnished legacy.

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: capitalism is the primary concern of American life; business prosperity is the foundation of American well-being; government policy should facilitate business expansion; federal regulation should be minimal; wealth and material prosperity are legitimate American values. Operationally implemented through 1920s tax reduction, high tariffs, immigration restriction, pro-business judicial appointments.

AP students should be able to articulate the philosophy.

QUESTION 5

La Follette's success had three structural sources: (1) Personal prominence - 69 years old, leading Progressive Republican of 1900s-1910s. (2) Democratic Party weakness - the 16-day, 103-ballot convention had produced conservative Davis, leaving Progressive voters with no viable Democratic alternative. (3) Coalition strength - 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 La Follette's 1924 supporters.

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

QUESTION 6

The 1920s KKK revival shaped the 1924 Democratic Convention in three ways: (1) The KKK had approximately 3-5 million members by 1924 - one of the largest membership organizations in American history. (2) The KKK's Southern and rural Protestant base supported William Gibbs McAdoo for the Democratic nomination - against Northern urban Catholic Al Smith. (3) The 1924 Resolutions Committee narrowly defeated (542.7 to 543.85) a proposal to explicitly condemn the KKK by name. The KKK's structural influence on the Democratic Party demonstrated the depth of 1920s racial and religious divisions. The KKK declined rapidly after 1925 due to internal scandals (David Curtiss Stephenson, Indiana Grand Dragon, convicted of rape and murder).

AP students should be able to articulate the KKK influence.

QUESTION 7

Coolidge states (35): everything outside the Solid South except Wisconsin. 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).

AP students should be able to articulate the structural alignment.

Discussion prompts

1. La Follette won 16.6% in 1924 - the second-highest third-party percentage of the 20th century. Identify three structural reasons the La Follette coalition would not be sustained as a third party and would instead be absorbed by FDR's 1932 New Deal coalition.

2. The 1924 Democratic Convention lasted 16 days and 103 ballots. Identify three structural reasons the Democratic Party was divided in 1924 and assess whether the divisions could have been bridged with a different candidate.