1924

Calvin Coolidge vs John W. Davis

A 20-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. Story (with a picture)
3. Three questions
4. Teacher notes

1924

After Warren Harding died suddenly on August 2, 1923, Vice President Calvin Coolidge became the 30th president. Coolidge was very different from Harding. Harding had been friendly and outgoing. Coolidge was quiet, plain, and serious.

Coolidge was so quiet that he was nicknamed "Silent Cal." Stories said that a White House dinner guest once told Coolidge: "Mr. President, I have made a bet that I can get you to say more than two words tonight." Coolidge replied: "You lose."

Look at the picture. That is Calvin Coolidge - the most quiet U.S. president in history.

Coolidge had inherited two big problems from Harding: (1) The Teapot Dome Scandal. Interior Secretary Albert Fall had taken bribes from oil companies. (2) Several other Harding cabinet officials had been involved in corruption. But Coolidge himself was completely honest. He cleaned up the corruption. The American people trusted him.

The Republicans nominated Coolidge for his own term in 1924. The campaign slogan was "Keep Cool with Coolidge." His running

mate was Charles G. Dawes - a banker who had created the Dawes Plan to help Germany pay its WWI reparations.

The Democrats had a HUGE problem. Their convention in 1924 lasted 16 days and took 103 ballots! The party was bitterly divided between Northern urban Catholics (who supported Al Smith, the governor of New York) and Southern rural Protestants (who supported William Gibbs McAdoo, Wilson's Treasury Secretary). After 16 days of deadlock, the convention finally compromised on John W. Davis - a West Virginia lawyer who had been Solicitor General under Wilson. The campaign was already lost before it started.

A THIRD party also ran. Senator Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin - a famous Progressive Republican - ran on his own Progressive Party ticket. La Follette wanted to revive Progressive Era reforms. He won 4.8 million votes (16.6%) - the second-highest third-party percentage of the 20th century after Teddy Roosevelt 1912.

On Election Day, Coolidge won 382 electoral votes to Davis's 136 and La Follette's 13. The 1920s prosperity continued. Coolidge would serve until March 4, 1929 - just months before the stock market crash.



Calvin Coolidge, the 30th U.S. president. He was nicknamed "Silent Cal" for his famous quietness.
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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who won the 1924 U.S. presidential election?

2.

What was Calvin Coolidge's nickname and why?

3.

Why is Robert M. La Follette's 1924 Progressive Party run historically significant?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1924 President Calvin Coolidge ran for his own full term. He had become president when Warren Harding died in 1923. Coolidge was famous for being quiet. People called him "Silent Cal." His campaign slogan was "Keep Cool with Coolidge."

Answer key

1.

Calvin Coolidge. He won 382 electoral votes to John W. Davis's 136 and Robert M. La Follette's 13. Coolidge had been Harding's VP and had become president when Harding died on August 2, 1923. The 1924 election was Coolidge's first as president in his own right.

AP students should know Coolidge won 382-136-13.

2.

Calvin Coolidge's nickname was "Silent Cal" - because of his famous quietness. He was widely regarded as the most reserved U.S. president in history. Famous story: a White House dinner guest told Coolidge "I have made a bet that I can get you to say more than two words tonight." Coolidge replied "You lose." Coolidge was actually a skilled public speaker - he gave the first presidential radio address (the State of the Union, December 6, 1923) and was known as a master of brevity. But personally he was reserved and introverted. The nickname reflected both his genuine character and the public's sense of his presidential style.

AP students should know the Silent Cal nickname.

3.

Robert M. La Follette's 1924 Progressive Party run is historically significant for three reasons: (1) La Follette won 16.6% of the popular vote and 13 electoral votes (Wisconsin) - the second-highest third-party percentage of the 20th century after Theodore Roosevelt 1912 (27.4%). (2) La Follette had been the leading Progressive Republican of the 1900s-1910s; his 1924 run was the final major attempt to revive Progressive Era reforms after the 1920s Republican prosperity decade had eroded their political momentum. (3) La Follette's coalition was structurally significant: farmers, labor unions, intellectuals, Socialists - the same demographic groups that FDR would mobilize for the 1932 New Deal coalition. La Follette died June 18, 1925 - eight months after the election. The Progressive Party dissolved after his death. Many of La Follette's 1924 supporters would join FDR's 1932 coalition.

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