1960

John F. Kennedy vs Richard Nixon

A 50-minute lesson on the 1960 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA New Deal Coalition	ELECTORAL VOTES 537 total
WINNER John F. Kennedy (Democratic) · 303 EV	RUNNER-UP Richard Nixon (Republican) · 219 EV
KEY ISSUE Cold War; Cuba; civil rights; Kennedy's Catholicism; economic growth	TURNOUT 63.8%

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3. Background: key terms + source
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1960: John F. Kennedy vs Richard Nixon

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 issues that you think can divide voters by religion, race, region, or generation. For each, explain why it tends to produce that specific divide.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1960 election was the closest of the twentieth century until 2000. It was the first to feature televised debates, the first to elect a Catholic, and the first in which the postwar baby-boom generation came of age politically (the eldest were 14 in 1960). The result reshaped how American campaigns were conducted. The Democratic nominee was John F. Kennedy, a forty-three-year-old senator from Massachusetts. The son of a wealthy Boston Irish Catholic family, Kennedy had won the Pulitzer Prize for Profiles in Courage (1956, though Theodore Sorensen ghostwrote much of it). He was the youngest major-party nominee in American history. Kennedy locked up the nomination at the July 1960 Democratic convention in Los Angeles, defeating Lyndon Johnson (whom he then chose as his running mate to balance the ticket geographically). The Republican nominee was Richard Nixon, the forty-seven-year-old Vice President. Nixon had spent eight years as Eisenhower's deputy and had become the public face of American anti-communism. He had visited Moscow in 1959 and famously debated Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev in a model American kitchen at a Moscow exhibition. Eisenhower remained popular but was term-limited by the Twenty-Second Amendment. The campaign turned on three pivots. The first was religion. No Catholic had ever been elected president. Anti-Catholic sentiment was strong in Protestant America, especially in the South. Kennedy addressed it directly in a September 12, 1960, speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association: "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute, where no Catholic prelate would tell the President - should he be Catholic - how to act." The Houston speech largely defused the issue. The second pivot was the televised debate of September 26, 1960. Seventy million Americans watched - more than would watch any Super Bowl until the 1980s. Kennedy was photogenic, tan, well-rested, and wore makeup. Nixon was recovering

from a recent knee infection, had lost weight, refused makeup, and sweated visibly under the studio lights. People who heard the debate on the radio gave the substance to Nixon; people who saw it on TV gave the impression to Kennedy. The three subsequent debates - October 7, 13, and 21 - were closer, but the first had already done its work.

The third pivot was civil rights. In October 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested in Georgia and sentenced to four months of hard labor on a technicality. Kennedy phoned Coretta Scott King to express concern; his brother Robert phoned the judge. Nixon, who had a longer civil rights record, said nothing publicly. The Kennedy outreach produced a sharp swing of Black voters - many of whom had voted for Eisenhower in 1956 - to the Democratic ticket. The shift was decisive in close states like South Carolina, Illinois, and New Jersey.

On election day Kennedy won 303 electoral votes to Nixon's 219, with 15 going to Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia from faithless electors. The popular vote was 49.72 percent to 49.55 percent - a margin of only 113,000 votes out of 68.8 million cast. Allegations of voter fraud focused on Cook County, Illinois (Mayor Richard Daley's Chicago machine), and Lyndon Johnson's Texas. Nixon chose not to formally contest the result, calculating that a six-month recount fight would damage the country more than it would help him.

Kennedy's presidency lasted only 1,036 days. He was assassinated in Dallas on November 22, 1963. The 1960 election is remembered less for its policy outcomes than for what it changed about the process: television became central, religion ceased to be a serious bar to the presidency, and the Black-voter shift to Democrats begun in 1960 became permanent by 1964.

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

Twenty-Second Amendment

Ratified 1951. Limits any individual to two elected terms as president. Eisenhower was the first president limited by it; he could not seek a third term in 1960.

Televised debate

The 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debate was the first ever televised general-election presidential debate. Reshaped American campaigning by privileging visual impression over substantive argument.

Faithless elector

A presidential elector who casts a ballot for someone other than the candidate they were pledged to support. Fifteen Southern electors in 1960 voted for Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia instead of Kennedy.

Houston speech

John F. Kennedy's September 12, 1960, address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. Defused the Catholic question by affirming the absolute separation of church and state. Cited ever since as a model of religious-tolerance rhetoric.

Civil rights movement

The mass nonviolent campaign (roughly 1954-1968) for Black voting rights, school desegregation, and equal protection under the law. The October 1960 King arrest and Kennedy's phone call to Coretta Scott King were a turning point in the Democratic Party's alignment with the movement.

Cold War

The decades-long competition between the United States and the Soviet Union (1947-1991). Nixon's 1960 campaign emphasized his Cold War experience; Kennedy successfully countered by arguing the Eisenhower administration had allowed a missile gap.

Inaugural Address

JOHN F. KENNEDY, JANUARY 20, 1961

Kennedy took the oath at the East Front of the U.S. Capitol on a bitterly cold January day. The address is one of the most quoted in American political history. It contains both a generational claim ("the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans") and the famous closing call to civic responsibility.

> *"Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike, that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans - born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage - and unwilling to witness or permit the slow undoing of those human rights to which this Nation has always been committed, and to which we are committed today at home and around the world. And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country."*

Kennedy, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, January 20, 1961). Public domain.

The 1960 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did John F. Kennedy receive in 1960?

( ) A. 219
( ) B. 303
( ) C. 395
( ) D. 447

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which famous line comes from Kennedy's inaugural address?

( ) A. The only thing we have to fear is fear itself
( ) B. Ask not what your country can do for you
( ) C. Speak softly and carry a big stick
( ) D. The buck stops here

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain in two sentences why people who listened to the first 1960 debate on the radio thought Nixon won, while people who watched on TV thought Kennedy won.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Kennedy's handling of Martin Luther King Jr.'s October 1960 arrest help him win the election?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Kennedy says in the excerpt that the torch has been passed to a new generation. What political message was he sending, and why was it especially relevant to the 1960 campaign?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1960 election map, identify the regional pattern of Kennedy vs. Nixon support. Which states' results were challenged as possibly fraudulent, and why?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

303. Kennedy 303; Nixon 219; Harry Byrd 15 (from faithless Southern electors).

The 15 faithless votes came from Mississippi (8) and Alabama (6), plus 1 from Oklahoma. They voted for Byrd, an anti-civil-rights Senator, as a protest against the national Democratic platform.

QUESTION 2

Ask not what your country can do for you. The phrase comes from the closing paragraph of the 1961 Inaugural.

The line is one of the most quoted in American political rhetoric. It defined the civic-republican aspiration of the Kennedy administration.

QUESTION 3

Nixon spoke clearly and made substantive arguments, so radio listeners thought he won the debate. On TV, viewers also saw the candidates. Kennedy was tan, photogenic, and well-rested; Nixon was recovering from a knee infection, had lost weight, refused makeup, and sweated under the studio lights. TV viewers thought Kennedy won decisively.

The 1960 first debate is the canonical case study of how television privileges visual impression over substance. Subsequent debates were closer because Nixon corrected for the visual problem.

QUESTION 4

King was arrested in Georgia on a minor traffic violation and sentenced to four months of hard labor - an unusually harsh penalty that signaled Southern authorities were treating him as a political threat. Kennedy phoned Coretta Scott King to express concern; Robert Kennedy phoned the judge. Nixon, despite a longer civil rights record, said nothing publicly. Black voters who had supported Eisenhower in 1956 shifted decisively to Kennedy in 1960. The swing was decisive in close states like South Carolina, Illinois, and New Jersey.

The King phone call is a textbook example of symbolic outreach producing electoral consequences. The Black-voter shift to Democrats begun in 1960 became permanent by 1964 and reshaped both parties' coalitions.

QUESTION 5

Kennedy was 43 years old when he took office - the youngest person ever elected president. The "new generation" framing emphasized his contrast with Eisenhower (70 in 1960) and Nixon (47 but a longtime political insider). The political message was that the postwar generation now had its moment of leadership, and that a younger generation would handle the Cold War with vigor.

The generational framing was central to Kennedy's appeal. It would be echoed later by Reagan (against Carter in 1980), Clinton (against Bush in 1992), and Obama (against McCain in 2008).

QUESTION 6

Kennedy carried the urban North and most of the South (with the exception of states whose electors went to Harry Byrd). Nixon carried the West, the Midwest, and the Plains states. The contested states were Illinois (Mayor Daley's Chicago machine produced suspiciously late returns) and Texas (Lyndon Johnson's home state, with reports of irregularities in counties Johnson controlled). The combined electoral votes of those two states (51) exceeded Kennedy's margin, so a flip would have changed the result.

The 1960 fraud allegations have never been fully resolved. Nixon's decision not to contest is one of the most-cited examples of an incumbent yielding the disputed result for the good of the country.