1960

John F. Kennedy vs Richard Nixon

A 75-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%

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

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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 1960 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1960 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: in two sentences, what role do you think television plays in modern political campaigns? Where did that influence come from?
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1960 election was the first to feature televised presidential debates between the major-party nominees. John F. Kennedy, a 43-year-old Massachusetts senator, faced sitting Vice President Richard Nixon. Television viewers, polled afterward, tended to think Kennedy won the debates; radio listeners tended to favor Nixon. Beyond the medium, the campaign turned on religion (Kennedy was Catholic), Cold War anxiety (Cuba, the missile gap), and a Northern industrial coalition that turned out in close margins across Illinois, Michigan, and Pennsylvania. 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 1960 election tells you about the New Deal Coalition 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

Cold War
The 1947–1991 geopolitical contest between the U.S.-led NATO bloc and the Soviet-led Warsaw Pact, marked by proxy wars, arms racing, and ideological competition.

New Frontier
Kennedy's framing of his administration's domestic and foreign-policy goals. A deliberate Cold-War-era successor to FDR's New Deal as a presidential program-label.

Catholic question
The 1960 campaign concern that a Catholic president would be loyal to the Pope. Kennedy addressed it directly in his September 1960 Houston Ministerial Association speech.

Missile gap
The 1960 campaign claim that the Soviets had pulled ahead in nuclear missiles. Later intelligence showed the U.S. was actually ahead; Kennedy used the claim effectively anyway.

Televised debate
A candidate debate broadcast on television. The 1960 Kennedy–Nixon debates were the first; roughly 70 million Americans watched the first one.

Inaugural Address (excerpt)

JOHN F. KENNEDY, JANUARY 20, 1961

Kennedy took office during the deepest stretch of the Cold War. His inaugural was tightly focused on foreign policy and shared sacrifice; he barely addressed domestic issues.

> *"Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty. This much we pledge—and more. To those old allies whose cultural and spiritual origins we share, we pledge the loyalty of faithful friends. United, there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures. Divided, there is little we can do—for we dare not meet a powerful challenge at odds and split asunder."*

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

The 1960 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 Kennedy receive?

( ) A. 219
( ) B. 303
( ) C. 270
( ) D. 486

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

List two ways the 1960 campaign used television differently from prior cycles.

QUESTION 3 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which religion was a notable issue in 1960 because of Kennedy's background?

( ) A. Mormonism
( ) B. Catholicism
( ) C. Quakerism
( ) D. Lutheranism

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why were Illinois and Texas particularly consequential in 1960? Cite two reasons.

QUESTION 5 · MAP-READ

Looking at the 1960 state map, identify two regions where the Democratic and Republican strongholds diverged sharply from later cycles.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the exact phrase in the excerpt where Kennedy commits the United States to action regardless of cost. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 7 · SHORT-ANSWER

Kennedy's inaugural barely mentions domestic issues. Connect the focus of this excerpt to the 1960 context (Cold War, missile gap, Berlin). What does the emphasis tell you about what Kennedy treated as the defining question of his presidency?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

303

Kennedy won 303 electoral votes to Nixon's 219, with 15 for Harry Byrd.

QUESTION 2

Accept two of: televised debates, broadcast appearance coaching, paid TV ads, regional TV coverage of campaign events.

1960 introduced the four-debate televised format. Both campaigns also invested in coached appearance and televised speeches.

QUESTION 3

Catholicism

Kennedy was the second Catholic major-party nominee and the first to win, after Al Smith's 1928 loss.

QUESTION 4

Close vote margins (Illinois ~9k, Texas ~46k) and large electoral vote allocations (27 and 24, respectively) meant either state could have flipped the result.

A few thousand votes in two states represented the swing between presidencies. Texas in 1960 voted Democratic; both states have since shifted.

QUESTION 5

Acceptable answers: Deep South voted Democratic (since flipped to Republican); the Northeast and industrial Midwest were a Democratic coalition with strong Catholic and union turnout.

1960 is a window into the New Deal coalition. The realignment of the South toward Republicans does not begin until 1964–1972.

QUESTION 6

Accept the full phrase from "pay any price" through "the success of liberty." Award full credit for any verbatim quote that includes at least the terminal clause "in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty." Do not award full credit for a stop at "bear any burden" alone — without the survival-and-success clause, the student has named the burdens but not the commitment they secure.

The phrase became a touchstone for Cold War commitments and was later cited (sometimes critically) to justify Vietnam, the Bay of Pigs, and counterinsurgency programs.

QUESTION 7

Accept any of: (1) Kennedy frames the Cold War as the existential question of his time, so domestic issues become subordinate; (2) the "missile gap" claim he ran on would have collapsed if he opened with tax policy or housing; (3) inaugurating the New Frontier with a foreign-policy address commits the administration to an external-threat focus that defined his three years in office.

In practice the Kennedy administration was also active on civil rights, the space program, and economic policy — but the inaugural's focus reflects which crisis Kennedy considered most existential, not which he spent the most days working on.

Discussion prompts

1. Television vs radio gave audiences very different impressions of the same debate. What does that say about how new media reshape political judgment?

2. Kennedy was the first Catholic elected president. Why was religion a significant issue in 1960, and what does its near-absence in later elections suggest about American attitudes?

3. The margin in Illinois (~9,000 votes) and Texas (~46,000) was decisive. How does the Electoral College structure amplify or dampen close state results?