AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1960

John F. Kennedy vs Richard Nixon

A 105-minute lesson on the 1960 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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: vocabulary + primary source A
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1960: John F. Kennedy vs Richard Nixon

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in 1960 that would have made the election close regardless of which candidates were running. For each, explain how it specifically constrained either Kennedy's or Nixon's options.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1960 election was the closest of the postwar period until 2000. It was also a turning point in American campaigning technology, in the demographic composition of the Democratic coalition, and in the role of religion in American political life. The result reshaped the next two decades of national politics. The Democratic nominee was John F. Kennedy, the forty-three-year-old senior senator from Massachusetts. The son of Joseph P. Kennedy - a wealthy financier and former U.S. ambassador to the United Kingdom - John Kennedy had served three terms in the House and was then in his second Senate term. He had narrowly lost his party's 1956 vice-presidential nomination to Estes Kefauver, an experience that shaped his 1960 strategy. The 1960 primary campaign was the first in which winning open primaries was strategically essential rather than ornamental. Kennedy entered the Wisconsin and West Virginia primaries to demonstrate that a Catholic could win Protestant states. His victory in West Virginia (which was 95 percent Protestant) effectively ended Hubert Humphrey's candidacy and locked up the nomination at the July 1960 Los Angeles convention. He selected Senate Majority Leader Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas as his running mate, an arrangement designed to lock down the South. The Republican nominee was Vice President Richard Nixon. Nixon had served as Dwight Eisenhower's deputy for eight years and was the most prominent national Republican below the presidency. He had pursued a low-risk strategy at the Republican convention in Chicago, accepting Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts as his running mate. Nixon's campaign turned on three commitments: continuing the Eisenhower administration's domestic and foreign policies, defending the U.S. Cold War posture against Kennedy's claim of a missile gap (a claim that turned out to be false, as Kennedy himself privately acknowledged after taking office), and demonstrating his foreign-policy experience. The campaign turned on three pivots. First, religion. Anti-Catholic sentiment was

strong in Protestant America. Kennedy's September 12, 1960, address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association is now treated as a model of religious-tolerance rhetoric: "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute." The address was structurally important not because it converted skeptics but because it defined Kennedy as a man who would speak about his religion under hostile questioning. Polling after Houston showed the religious-bias deficit shrinking sharply.

Second, the four televised debates. Seventy million Americans watched the September 26 debate at WBBM-TV in Chicago. Kennedy arrived rested, tanned, and accepted makeup; Nixon arrived recovering from a knee infection that had hospitalized him for twelve days, had lost weight, refused makeup, and sweated under the lights. Polls of radio listeners gave the substance to Nixon; polls of TV viewers gave the impression to Kennedy. Subsequent debates (October 7, 13, 21) were closer, but the first had already done its work. The 1960 debates established the visual primacy of presidential campaigning that has dominated every cycle since.

Third, civil rights. In October 1960, Martin Luther King Jr. was arrested at an Atlanta sit-in and sentenced - on a months-old traffic charge - to four months of hard labor at Reidsville State Prison. The sentence was widely understood as politically motivated. Kennedy phoned Coretta Scott King to express concern. Robert Kennedy phoned the sentencing judge. Nixon, who had a substantial civil-rights record (he had pushed Eisenhower to send federal troops to Little Rock in 1957), made no public statement. The Kennedy outreach produced a sharp swing of Black voters - many of whom had voted Eisenhower in 1956 - to the Democratic ticket. Recent quantitative work suggests the Black-voter swing was decisive in Illinois, New Jersey, and the Carolinas.

On election day Kennedy won 303 electoral votes to Nixon's 219, with 15 to Harry Byrd from faithless Southern electors. The popular margin was 0.17 percent - 113,000 votes of 68.8 million cast. Allegations of voter fraud centered on Mayor Richard J. Daley's Cook County, Illinois, and Lyndon Johnson's Texas. Investigations after the election produced indictments of 650 election officials in Chicago and several Texas counties, but no result was overturned. Nixon, on the advice of Eisenhower and his own calculation that a recount fight would tear the country apart, declined to contest the result formally. His 1962 memoir Six Crises devoted a chapter to explaining why.

Kennedy was inaugurated on January 20, 1961, his thousand-day administration combining triumph (the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Apollo program announcement, the Peace Corps) with failure (the Bay of Pigs invasion, the early escalation in Vietnam). His assassination in Dallas on November 22, 1963, left the unresolved business of the 1960 platform - particularly civil rights - to Lyndon Johnson. The 1960 election's most durable consequences were structural rather than personal:

		the televised debate as a fixed feature of every cycle since, the religious test's loss of force, and the Black-voter shift to Democrats that became permanent by 1964.
20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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

New Frontier
Kennedy's name for his domestic and foreign agenda, articulated in his July 15, 1960, acceptance speech at the Los Angeles Democratic convention. Echoed Roosevelt's New Deal as a generational call to action.

Missile gap
The claim, central to Kennedy's 1960 campaign, that the Eisenhower administration had allowed the Soviet Union to surpass the U.S. in intercontinental ballistic missile capability. Intelligence reviewed by Kennedy after the election showed the gap ran in the U.S. favor; Kennedy quietly dropped the claim.

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 in protest against the national Democratic civil-rights platform.

Twenty-Second Amendment
Ratified 1951. Limits any individual to two elected terms as president. Eisenhower was the first president limited by it; the 1960 election was the first in which an incumbent could not run.

Houston speech
Kennedy's September 12, 1960, address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association affirming the absolute separation of church and state. Defused the Catholic question and is now treated as a model of religious-tolerance rhetoric.

Kitchen Debate
Nixon's July 1959 exchange with Soviet Premier Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in Moscow. Conducted in a model American kitchen, the debate became a Cold War set piece and the basis of Nixon's 1960 foreign-policy credentials.

Realigning election
A presidential election that produces a durable shift in partisan coalitions, lasting one or more generations. 1960 is sometimes called a half-realignment: the Black-voter shift was permanent, but the white Southern shift was delayed until 1964 and 1968.

Open primary
A presidential primary election in which the result is binding on convention delegates rather than ornamental. The 1960 Wisconsin and West Virginia primaries were structurally important; Kennedy entered them strategically to prove a Catholic could win Protestant states.

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 is structurally a Cold War manifesto, framed by a generational claim and ending with a civic-republican call to action.

> *"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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Inaugural Address

JOHN F. KENNEDY, JANUARY 20, 1961

“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.

SOURCE B

Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association

JOHN F. KENNEDY, SEPTEMBER 12, 1960

“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, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote; where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference; and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.”

Kennedy, "Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association" (Houston, TX, September 12, 1960). Public domain.

The 1960 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Kennedy's Inaugural) that signals a generational claim on the presidency. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Houston speech) that affirms the constitutional separation of church and state. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources frame the 1960 victory in terms of breaking with old constraints, but they identify different constraints. Identify the specific constraint each source addresses.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B was delivered before the election; Source A was delivered after the inauguration. What does this ordering tell you about how Kennedy moved from defending his candidacy to defining his administration?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B promises that no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote. Identify one specific 1928 development that would have made this commitment concrete to a 1960 audience.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many faithless Southern electors voted for Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia in 1960?

( ) A. 8
( ) B. 15
( ) C. 23
( ) D. 37

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which 1960 primary was strategically important for Kennedy because it proved a Catholic could win a Protestant state?

( ) A. New Hampshire
( ) B. Wisconsin
( ) C. West Virginia
( ) D. California

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: did Kennedy's 1960 victory remove durable barriers to national participation or substitute one form of identity politics for another? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Kennedy's Inaugural Address (Source A, January 1961) frames the 1960 election's result as a generational mandate. His Houston speech (Source B, September 1960) frames the same candidacy as the dissolution of a specific historical bar to office. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1960 campaign, evaluate the extent to which Kennedy's 1960 victory removed durable barriers to participation in American national politics or merely substituted one form of identity politics (generational) for another (religious). Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the durable-removal-vs-substitution axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the West Virginia primary, the four televised debates, the King phone call, the faithless Southern electors, the 0.17 percent popular margin. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent - removal vs. substitution - rather than treating them as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "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". Each phrase grounds Kennedy's legitimacy in a generational rather than partisan or ideological claim.

The generational framing was the central rhetorical innovation of the Kennedy campaign. The Inaugural's opening locks it in as the administration's self-understanding.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "the separation of church and state is absolute", "no Catholic prelate would tell the President - should he be Catholic - how to act", "no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs". The first phrase is the most explicit.

The Houston speech is one of the founding texts of modern American religious-tolerance rhetoric. The absolute separation line is its operative commitment.

QUESTION 3

Source A addresses generational succession - the elderly Eisenhower-era political establishment yielding to a new postwar generation. Source B addresses religious succession - the unwritten rule against electing a Catholic that had blocked Al Smith in 1928 and seemed likely to block Kennedy in 1960. The first frames the change as time-driven and inevitable; the second frames it as an explicit constitutional commitment.

The two framings are different in kind. Source A treats generational turnover as natural; Source B treats religious tolerance as a deliberate constitutional choice.

QUESTION 4

Source B was the precondition for Source A. Without the Houston speech defusing the Catholic question, there would have been no Inaugural to deliver. The September address was the negative work of removing a specific bar to office; the January Inaugural was the positive work of defining what the office would now be for. The ordering tells you that defining what an administration means follows from securing the right to deliver one.

This ordering is structurally important. AP students should be able to articulate that legitimacy claims often come AFTER barrier-removal, not before.

QUESTION 5

In 1928, Democratic nominee Al Smith - the first Catholic major-party presidential candidate - had lost in a 444-87 electoral landslide to Herbert Hoover. The anti-Catholic campaign against Smith had been overwhelming: Klan-organized cross burnings, sermons against him from Protestant pulpits, and explicit warnings that the Pope would govern America through him. Kennedy's 1960 audience remembered Smith. The Houston speech directly addressed that memory.

The Smith parallel was always implicit in the 1960 campaign. Kennedy's strategists believed that without the Houston speech, the 1928 outcome would repeat.

QUESTION 6

15.

Fifteen faithless Southern electors voted for Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia: 8 from Mississippi, 6 from Alabama, 1 from Oklahoma. The protest was against the national Democratic civil-rights platform, not against Kennedy personally.

QUESTION 7

West Virginia.

West Virginia was 95 percent Protestant. Kennedy's May 1960 victory there - which his campaign engineered with extensive door-to-door outreach and a heavy paid-media buy - effectively ended Hubert Humphrey's candidacy and proved to other Democratic state parties that a Catholic could win Protestant states.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the removal-vs-substitution axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one specific piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. Full credit at the worksheet level requires only a clear position with two pieces of source evidence. The LEQ rubric on the next page evaluates the full essay.