3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

2000

George W. Bush vs Al Gore

A 35-minute lesson on the 2000 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Modern Polarization	ELECTORAL VOTES 538 total
WINNER George W. Bush (Republican) · 271 EV	RUNNER-UP Al Gore (Democratic) · 266 EV
KEY ISSUE Contested Florida recount; Supreme Court intervention; Nader spoiler effect; Clinton fatigue	TURNOUT 54.2%

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1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

2000: George W. Bush vs Al Gore

Timing

5 min **Warm-up**

Imagine your class is voting on a class trip. The vote is so close that nobody can tell who won. What is the fair way to figure out the right answer? What rules should the class agree on first?

15 min **Reading**

The 2000 election was one of the closest in U.S. history. It was decided not on election night, but in the courts, more than five weeks after the polls closed.

The Democratic candidate was Al Gore, who had been Vice President under Bill Clinton for the past eight years. The Republican candidate was George W. Bush, the governor of Texas. His father, George H.W. Bush, had been the 41st president from 1989 to 1993. A third candidate, Ralph Nader, ran on the Green Party ticket as a left-wing alternative to Gore.

On election night - November 7, 2000 - the TV networks first called Florida for Gore, then for Bush, then took it back and said it was too close to call. The race was so close in Florida that the law required an automatic recount of the entire state's ballots.

Florida used a paper ballot called a butterfly ballot in one county (Palm Beach) and punch-card ballots in many others. Voters had to push out small pieces of paper called chads. Some voters had pushed only partway, leaving chads still attached. Florida election workers had to look at each ballot under a magnifying glass to decide what the voter intended. The 2000 election introduced an entire new vocabulary: hanging chads, dimpled chads, pregnant chads.

The argument over how to count the disputed ballots went on for thirty-six days. Both campaigns sent teams of lawyers and observers to Florida. Different counties used different rules. Court cases moved up through the Florida state courts, then to the U.S. Supreme Court.

On December 12, 2000, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled 5-4 in the case Bush v. Gore that the recount methods Florida was using violated the Constitution's equal-protection clause. The Court ordered the recount stopped. Bush's lead at that moment - 537 votes - became the final result. Al Gore conceded the next day.

George W. Bush won 271 electoral votes to Gore's 266 (one Gore elector abstained as a protest). But Gore had won the popular vote by 543,895 votes - one of only five times in U.S. history that the popular-vote winner did not become president. Bush's presidency began under a cloud of partisan bitterness that intensified after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks reshaped his agenda completely.

10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 2000 Election

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Key words

Electoral College	The system the U.S. uses to pick the president. Each state has electoral votes equal to its Congress members. The first candidate to reach 270 wins. In 2000 Bush won 271 to Gore's 266.
Popular vote	The total count of individual voters across the country. In 2000, Al Gore won the popular vote by about half a million votes but still lost the presidency.
Recount	When workers count the ballots again because the first count was very close. Florida law required an automatic recount in 2000 because the margin was so small.
Chad	The small piece of paper that voters punched out of a punch-card ballot. Hanging chads (partly attached) and dimpled chads (not fully punched) caused enormous disagreement in 2000.
Bush v. Gore	The December 12, 2000 Supreme Court decision that ended the Florida recount and effectively decided the election. The Court split 5-4. Critics said the Court should not have intervened; supporters said the Constitution required it.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did George W. Bush win in 2000?

( ) A. 257
( ) B. 271
( ) C. 291
( ) D. 307

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the popular vote differ from the electoral vote in 2000?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What is a chad, and why did it matter so much in 2000?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the U.S. Supreme Court get involved in the 2000 election?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

271. Bush won 271 electoral votes; Gore won 266 (one Gore elector abstained as a protest). 270 are needed to win.

Bush's 271-vote total is the smallest electoral-vote winning margin since 1876. A flip of one elector would have changed the result.

QUESTION 2

Al Gore won the popular vote by about 543,895 votes out of more than 105 million cast. But George W. Bush won the electoral vote 271 to 266 because he won the right combination of states - especially Florida. The popular-vote winner does not always become president when the Electoral College system gives more weight to state-by-state results.

2000 was one of only five times in U.S. history (1824, 1876, 1888, 2000, 2016) that the popular-vote winner did not become president. The Electoral College / popular vote disconnect was a major political controversy of the 2000-era.

QUESTION 3

A chad is the small piece of paper that voters punched out of a punch-card ballot. Some voters had pushed only partway through, leaving chads still attached. Workers had to decide whether a hanging chad (mostly detached), a dimpled chad (just indented), or a pregnant chad (bulging but not detached) counted as a valid vote. The decisions changed which candidate won, which is why chads mattered so much.

2000 made "hanging chad" a household phrase. The 2002 Help America Vote Act replaced punch-card ballots with optical-scan and electronic voting in most jurisdictions specifically because of the chad problem.

QUESTION 4

The argument over how to recount ballots in Florida moved up through the Florida state courts, then to the U.S. Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled 5-4 on December 12, 2000 that the recount methods Florida was using violated the Constitution's equal-protection clause and ordered the recount stopped. The court intervened because the recount procedures varied by county, and the Court majority decided this violated the principle that all voters in the same state must be treated equally.

Bush v. Gore remains one of the most controversial Supreme Court decisions of the modern era. The majority's reasoning has been criticized as ad hoc and inconsistent with the Court's usual federalism jurisprudence.