2000

George W. Bush vs Al Gore

A 50-minute lesson on the 2000 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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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2000: George W. Bush vs Al Gore

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 situations in which a very close election would be politically dangerous - that is, would generate dispute, distrust, or instability. For each, suggest one specific institutional safeguard that could reduce that danger.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2000 election was the closest in U.S. presidential history since 1876 and the first since 1888 in which the popular-vote winner did not become president. It exposed structural weaknesses in the American electoral system - inconsistent ballot designs, county-by-county recount procedures, partisan administration of elections, and the Electoral College's vulnerability to a tipping-point state. The 2002 Help America Vote Act attempted reforms, but the political bitterness produced by Bush v. Gore did not fade. The Democratic candidate was Vice President Al Gore, completing his second term as Bill Clinton's deputy. Gore had served two terms in the Senate and was a generation-defining technology-policy voice (he had been a key supporter of federal funding for the Internet). He chose Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut as his running mate - the first Jewish candidate on a major-party national ticket. The Republican candidate was George W. Bush, the 54-year-old governor of Texas. His father, George H.W. Bush, had been the 41st president (1989-1993). The younger Bush ran as a compassionate conservative, distancing himself from the Newt Gingrich-era confrontational Republicanism while preserving the party's conservative policy agenda. He selected former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney as his running mate. A third candidate, consumer advocate Ralph Nader, ran on the Green Party ticket. Nader received 2.74 percent of the popular vote - 2.88 million votes nationally and 97,488 in Florida alone. Many Democrats argued that Nader's candidacy threw the election to Bush; many Greens argued that Nader's issues (corporate influence, environmental protection) had been ignored by the Democratic Party and that the responsibility for Gore's loss rested with the Gore campaign itself. On election night November 7, 2000, the TV networks first called Florida for Gore at 7:50 p.m. ET, then retracted the call at 9:55 p.m. when actual returns showed it was

much closer, then called the state for Bush at 2:16 a.m. ET, then retracted that call at 3:57 a.m. The vote margin in Florida was within the automatic-recount threshold defined by state law.

Florida's ballot problems made the recount catastrophic. Palm Beach County had used a confusing butterfly ballot that caused some Gore supporters to vote for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan by mistake. Many counties used punch-card ballots requiring voters to push out small pieces of paper called chads. Many chads were left partially attached (hanging chads), partially detached (swinging chads), indented but not punched (dimpled chads), or bulging but not penetrated (pregnant chads). Whether each non-cleanly-punched chad counted as a vote required human judgment, and county standards varied.

For thirty-six days the campaigns fought in court. The Florida Supreme Court ordered statewide manual recounts on November 21 and again on December 8. The U.S. Supreme Court intervened twice. On December 12, 2000, in Bush v. Gore, the Court ruled 5-4 that the differing county-by-county recount standards violated the Constitution's equal-protection clause and that there was insufficient time to set uniform standards before the federal deadline (December 18) for states to certify their electors. The Court ordered the recount stopped. Bush's lead at that moment - 537 votes out of 5.96 million cast in Florida - became the final result. Gore conceded the next day, calling on Americans to accept the decision "for the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy."

Bush won 271 electoral votes to Gore's 266. One Gore elector (Barbara Lett-Simmons of DC) abstained as a protest against DC's lack of voting representation in Congress. Bush won 47.87 percent of the popular vote to Gore's 48.38 percent and Nader's 2.74 percent. Gore was the first popular-vote winner since 1888 to lose the presidency.

Bush's presidency began under partisan-bitterness conditions that intensified after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The attacks reshaped his agenda completely. Bush's domestic priorities - tax cuts, Medicare prescription drug coverage, No Child Left Behind education reform - moved through Congress, but his second term was consumed by the Iraq War, the response to Hurricane Katrina, and the 2008 financial crisis. The 2000 election's controversies - the Electoral College vs. popular vote disconnect, the Bush v. Gore decision's reasoning, and the partisan administration of state elections - have remained live political issues every cycle since.

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

Bush v. Gore

The December 12, 2000 U.S. Supreme Court decision that effectively decided the 2000 presidential election. The Court ruled 5-4 that the Florida recount's county-by-county procedures violated equal protection. Widely considered one of the most controversial Supreme Court decisions of the modern era.

Butterfly ballot

The 2000 Palm Beach County, Florida ballot design that placed candidate names on both sides of a central punch column. The design caused some Gore voters to mistakenly punch the chad for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan. The 3,407 Buchanan votes in Palm Beach were widely viewed as Gore-intended.

Hanging chad

The small piece of paper that remained partially attached to a punch-card ballot after the voter pushed only partway through. The decision whether a hanging chad counted as a vote varied by Florida county in the 2000 recount.

Electoral College

The U.S. constitutional system in which each state appoints electors equal to its combined House and Senate representation. The first candidate to receive 270 electoral votes wins. The Electoral College / popular vote disconnect is one of the major institutional controversies of the modern era.

Help America Vote Act

The 2002 federal law passed in response to the 2000 election's ballot-counting problems. Replaced punch-card ballots with optical-scan or electronic voting in most jurisdictions. Required statewide voter registration databases.

Compassionate conservative

George W. Bush's 2000 campaign self-description. Distanced him from the Newt Gingrich-era confrontational Republicanism of the mid-1990s while preserving the party's conservative policy agenda on taxes, education, and social issues.

Concession Speech

AL GORE, DECEMBER 13, 2000

Gore conceded the election the day after the Supreme Court's Bush v. Gore decision ended the Florida recount. The address is widely cited as a model of democratic concession - acknowledging the loss while criticizing the decision that produced it.

> *"I accept the finality of this outcome which will be ratified next Monday in the Electoral College. And tonight, for the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy, I offer my concession. I also accept my responsibility, which I will discharge unconditionally, to honor the new President-elect and do everything possible to help him bring Americans together in fulfillment of the great vision that our Declaration of Independence defines and that our Constitution affirms and defends."*

Gore, "Concession Speech" (Washington, DC, December 13, 2000). Public domain.

The 2000 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

By how many votes did George W. Bush win Florida in the final 2000 result?

( ) A. 327
( ) B. 537
( ) C. 1,247
( ) D. 5,304

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How did the U.S. Supreme Court rule in Bush v. Gore?

( ) A. 5-4 to stop the recount
( ) B. 5-4 to continue the recount
( ) C. 7-2 to stop the recount
( ) D. 9-0 to remand to the Florida courts

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain in two sentences why the punch-card ballot caused such a problem in the 2000 Florida recount.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the popular vote differ from the electoral vote in 2000? Why does this matter?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Gore says in the excerpt that he accepts the outcome "for the sake of our unity as a people and the strength of our democracy." What political message was he sending, and to whom?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 2000 election map, identify the four states besides Florida that were decided by margins of less than 1 percent. Which candidate won each?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

537. Bush won Florida's 25 electoral votes by a margin of 537 popular votes out of 5.96 million cast.

The 537-vote margin is the smallest decisive state-level margin in U.S. presidential history. It is the textbook example of how a single state's outcome can swing the entire presidency.

QUESTION 2

5-4 to stop the recount. The Court ruled 5-4 that the Florida recount's county-by-county procedures violated the Constitution's equal-protection clause. The majority was Rehnquist, O'Connor, Scalia, Kennedy, Thomas.

The 5-4 split followed partisan appointment lines exactly. The dissent (Stevens, Souter, Ginsburg, Breyer) was furious; Justice Stevens wrote that "the identity of the loser is perfectly clear. It is the Nation's confidence in the judge as an impartial guardian of the rule of law."

QUESTION 3

Voters had to push out small pieces of paper called chads from punch-card ballots. Many voters did not push them all the way through, leaving chads partially attached (hanging), partially detached (swinging), indented (dimpled), or bulging (pregnant). Whether each non-cleanly-punched chad counted as a vote required human judgment, and county-by-county standards varied.

The chad ambiguity is the canonical example of how ballot design can produce contested outcomes. The 2002 Help America Vote Act replaced punch-card ballots specifically because of this problem.

QUESTION 4

Al Gore won the popular vote by 543,895 votes (48.38% to 47.87%). But George W. Bush won the electoral vote 271 to 266 because he won the right combination of states - especially Florida. It matters because it raises a fundamental democratic question: should the candidate with the most individual votes always become president, or should the state-by-state Electoral College system continue to weight some voters more than others?

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

QUESTION 5

Gore was signaling that even an obviously controversial outcome must be accepted to preserve democratic legitimacy. The audience was both his own supporters (asking them to accept the defeat) and the country as a whole (modeling the norm that political losers concede). The framing has been widely cited as a model of democratic concession - acknowledging the loss while criticizing the decision that produced it.

Gore's concession is one of the most-quoted examples of democratic norm preservation under conditions of partisan grievance. AP students should recognize it as a self-consciously norm-maintaining act.

QUESTION 6

New Mexico (Gore by 366 votes, 0.06%); Wisconsin (Gore by 5,708, 0.22%); Iowa (Gore by 4,144, 0.31%); Oregon (Gore by 6,765, 0.44%). Three of the four close states went to Gore; only Florida went to Bush. Florida's 25 electoral votes were the difference.

Gore came within 1 percent of winning in four other states. Any one of them flipping to Bush would have left the outcome unchanged; any one of them being safer for Gore could have rendered Florida's 537-vote margin irrelevant.