2000

George W. Bush vs Al Gore

A 75-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%

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

2000: George W. Bush vs Al Gore

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 2000 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-2000 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: list two ways a presidential election could come down to a difference of fewer than a thousand votes in one state. For each, identify what role a recount could play in resolving it.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2000 election between Republican George W. Bush and Democratic Vice President Al Gore was the closest in modern history. Bush won 271 electoral votes to Gore's 266 — five above the 270 threshold, with one DC Gore elector abstaining. The result hinged on Florida, where Bush led by 537 votes out of nearly six million cast after the initial count. A 36-day legal battle over recounts, butterfly ballots, hanging chads, and counting standards ended on December 12, 2000, when the U.S. Supreme Court in Bush v. Gore halted the Florida recount on equal-protection grounds, effectively awarding Florida and the presidency to Bush. Gore conceded the next day, despite winning the national popular vote by about 540,000 votes. It was the first election since 1888 in which the popular-vote winner lost the presidency. 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 2000 election tells you about the Modern Polarization 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

Recount
A re-tabulation of ballots. Florida law in 2000 allowed candidates to request recounts in counties where margins were under 0.5 percent.

Butterfly ballot
The two-page Palm Beach County ballot design whose alignment appears to have caused intended Gore voters to record votes for Pat Buchanan instead.

Per curiam
Latin for "by the court" -- an unsigned judicial opinion issued in the name of the full court rather than a specific justice.

Hanging chad
A small piece of paper not fully detached from a punch-card ballot. The 2000 Florida recount turned partly on whether such ballots indicated clear voter intent.

Equal protection
The Fourteenth Amendment requirement that states treat similarly situated people similarly. The Court applied it to the lack of uniform recount standards.

Faithless elector
An electoral college elector who casts a vote different from the candidate they were pledged to. One Gore elector from DC abstained in 2000.

Bush v. Gore (per curiam opinion, excerpt)

U.S. SUPREME COURT, DECEMBER 12, 2000

The Court halted the Florida statewide manual recount on equal-protection grounds in a 5-4 decision that explicitly limited its reasoning to the present case. Gore conceded the next day despite winning the national popular vote.

> *"The recount mechanisms implemented in response to the decisions of the Florida Supreme Court do not satisfy the minimum requirement for non-arbitrary treatment of voters necessary to secure the fundamental right. Florida's basic command for the count of legally cast votes is to consider the "intent of the voter." This is unobjectionable as an abstract proposition and a starting principle. The problem inheres in the absence of specific standards to ensure its equal application. The formulation of uniform rules to determine intent based on these recurring circumstances is practicable and, we conclude, necessary. The want of those rules here has led to unequal evaluation of ballots in various respects."*

U.S. Supreme Court, "Bush v. Gore, 531 U.S. 98" (December 12, 2000). Public domain.

The 2000 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

What was George W. Bush's certified margin of victory in Florida in 2000?

( ) A. 78 votes
( ) B. 537 votes
( ) C. 1,784 votes
( ) D. 5,326 votes

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain in two sentences what a butterfly ballot is and why the design used in Palm Beach County, Florida became controversial.

QUESTION 3 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

On what constitutional grounds did the U.S. Supreme Court halt the Florida recount in Bush v. Gore?

( ) A. Federalism
( ) B. Equal protection
( ) C. Due process
( ) D. First Amendment

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Beyond the disputed Florida result, identify two reasons the 2000 election would still have been historically close even without the recount controversy.

QUESTION 5 · MAP-READ

On the 2000 state map, identify the geographic pattern of Bush states versus Gore states. Which three states most resembled the modern swing-state map that would emerge in subsequent 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 that names the constitutional ground on which the Court halted the recount. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 7 · SHORT-ANSWER

The per curiam states that its reasoning is "limited to the present circumstances." Explain in two sentences why the Court might have included that limit, and what the limit signals about how the Court expected the opinion to be cited in the future.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

537 votes

Out of 5.96 million Florida votes cast, Bush's certified margin was 537. Various partial and full recounts produced different margins; the final Supreme Court order halted further counting.

QUESTION 2

A butterfly ballot lists candidate names on both left and right pages of an open layout with punch holes down the middle. In Palm Beach County the design appears to have caused some intended Gore voters to accidentally punch the second hole, registering a vote for third-party candidate Pat Buchanan.

Buchanan received roughly 3,400 votes in Palm Beach, a county that demographically should have produced perhaps a few hundred. Buchanan himself said most of those votes were probably intended for Gore.

QUESTION 3

Equal protection

The majority held that the lack of uniform recount standards across Florida counties violated the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protection Clause. The decision was 5-4 and explicitly stated its reasoning was limited to the present circumstances.

QUESTION 4

Accept two of: Bush and Gore were within 0.5 percent in five states (Florida, New Mexico, Wisconsin, Iowa, Oregon); the national popular-vote margin was about 0.5 percent; both major parties had hold of one chamber of Congress so neither had a mandate; Nader's 2.7 percent depressed Gore's margins in multiple swing states.

New Mexico was decided by 366 votes for Gore. The closeness was systemic, not just Florida-specific.

QUESTION 5

Bush carried most of the South, Mountain West, and Plains; Gore carried the Northeast, Pacific Coast, and upper Midwest. Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania most resemble the modern swing-state map.

The 2000 map is the first to show the modern red-blue partisan geography. Florida and Ohio would remain decisive for the next three cycles; Pennsylvania began drifting Republican only in 2016.

QUESTION 6

Accept any verbatim phrase from the excerpt that names "equal protection" or the Fourteenth Amendment as the constitutional ground for halting the recount. Common acceptable spans: "equal protection of the laws," "Fourteenth Amendment," or any phrase identifying the failure to apply "uniform standards" across counties as the violation. The excerpt's operative phrase is: "The want of those rules here has led to unequal evaluation of ballots in various respects." Award credit for any verbatim quotation that captures the equal-protection rationale.

The opinion is a per curiam, so attributing the holding to a single justice is incorrect. The key clause about uniform standards is the operative holding language teachers should look for.

QUESTION 7

Accept any of: (1) the Court was wary of creating a precedent that could indict election procedures in every state where counties apply different standards; (2) the limit was an attempt to constrain future equal-protection challenges that could overwhelm federal courts; (3) the limit is itself evidence the majority recognized the doctrinal weakness of the holding -- if the reasoning were sound, it would generalize. Justice Stevens's dissent argues the limit shows the holding lacked principle.

Subsequent lower courts have largely cited Bush v. Gore narrowly, consistent with the Court's self-limit. Some recent voting-rights litigation has nonetheless invoked it as authority.

Discussion prompts

1. The 2000 election was settled by a 5-4 Supreme Court decision halting a state recount. Identify one argument that the Court acted appropriately and one that it overstepped, and explain which you find more persuasive.

2. Gore won the popular vote by roughly 540,000 votes but lost the presidency. Should the popular-vote winner always become president? Defend your answer and address one counter-argument.

3. Ralph Nader, the Green Party candidate, won 2.7 percent nationally and 97,488 votes in Florida — far more than Bush’s 537-vote margin. Identify one argument that Nader voters cost Gore the election and one argument that this framing is unfair.