3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

2004

George W. Bush vs John Kerry

A 35-minute lesson on the 2004 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) · 286 EV	RUNNER-UP John Kerry (Democratic) · 251 EV
KEY ISSUE Iraq War; War on Terror; 9/11 security; same-sex marriage ballot measures	TURNOUT 60.1%

CONTENTS

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

2004: George W. Bush vs John Kerry

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a wartime president faces re-election, what political conditions favor or disfavor his victory?
15 min	**Reading**	2004 election was 55th U.S. presidential election. Produced George W. Bush's 286-251 EV re-election victory over Democrat John Kerry. Bush won popular vote 50.7% to Kerry's 48.3% (margin 3,012,166 votes) - first Republican to win popular vote since Bush 41 1988. Election structurally shaped by 9/11 aftermath + Iraq War + Swift Boat Veterans for Truth attacks + Karl Rove campaign strategy. Bush had been president 4 years. First term defined by 9/11. September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attacks on World Trade Center + Pentagon + Flight 93 (forced down in PA by passenger revolt). 2,977 American + foreign deaths. Bush approval reached 92% post-9/11 - highest in U.S. history. Bush first-term events: (1) October 7, 2001 began U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom). Taliban government collapsed November-December 2001 + replaced by Hamid Karzai's government December 2001. Al-Qaeda leadership scattered to Pakistan. War continued 2001-2021 (Biden's August 2021 withdrawal). (2) October 26, 2001 USA PATRIOT Act - expanded federal surveillance + investigation powers + structural framework for War on Terror. (3) June 7, 2001 Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act - $1.35T tax cuts over 10 years. (4) January 8, 2002 No Child Left Behind Act - federal education standards + testing. (5) March 20, 2003 began U.S. invasion of Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom). U.S. justification: Iraqi WMD program. Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime fell April 9, 2003 (fall of Baghdad). (6) May 1, 2003 "Mission Accomplished" banner on USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier off San Diego. Bush flew onto carrier in Navy S-3B Viking jet wearing flight suit. Declared "major combat operations in Iraq have ended." Politically masterful in May 2003 but politically devastating in retrospect. (7) May 28, 2003 Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act - $350B more tax cuts. (8) October-December 2003 Medicare Modernization Act (Medicare Part D prescription drug benefit). (9) Iraq insurgency emerging 2003-04 with civilian deaths + American casualties. December 13, 2003 capture of Saddam Hussein in spider hole near Tikrit. (10) April 28, 2004 60 Minutes II broadcast Abu Ghraib torture photographs. Politically devastating - showed U.S. military personnel abusing Iraqi prisoners. (11) September 8, 2004 U.S. failed to find Iraqi WMD - structurally undermined Iraq War justification. (12) ~1,100 American military deaths in Iraq by November 2004. Democratic primary 2004. Howard Dean (former VT Governor) emerged as anti-war front-runner mid-2003. Dean's opposition to Iraq War + Internet-based grassroots

organization (Joe Trippi campaign manager) mobilized progressive base. Dean led national Democratic primary polls through January 2004. But January 19, 2004 Iowa caucuses produced structural upset: John Kerry won 37.6%; Edwards 31.8%; Dean 18.5%; Gephardt 10.6%. Dean's post-caucus concession speech "Dean Scream" - high-pitched enthusiastic listing of states he would still win - was widely mocked + politically damaging.

Kerry (60, MA Senator since 1985) emerged as Democratic nominee. Kerry was Vietnam Navy lieutenant (1966-69) + 3 Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Bronze Star. Returned from Vietnam 1969 + became anti-war activist (Vietnam Veterans Against the War; April 22, 1971 Senate testimony famous: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"). MA Lieutenant Governor (1983-85). MA Senator since 1985. Kerry's structural campaign advantage: Vietnam service contrasted with Bush's Texas Air National Guard (1968-74) non-combat service.

Kerry won Iowa caucuses January 19, 2004 + New Hampshire January 27 + most Super Tuesday primaries (February 3 + March 2 + March 9). Secured nomination by March 2004. Selected Sen John Edwards (NC, 51, former trial lawyer, "two Americas" populist framework) as VP July 6, 2004.

Democratic Convention Boston July 26-29, 2004 nominated Kerry-Edwards. Kerry acceptance July 29, 2004: "I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty" - dramatic salute emphasizing Vietnam service. The framing was intentional structural contrast with Bush's Texas Air National Guard service.

Barack Obama (43, IL state senator + U.S. Senate candidate) delivered Democratic Convention July 27, 2004 keynote address. Famous lines: "There is no liberal America and a conservative America - there is the United States of America." Politically masterful - elevated Obama to national prominence + launched his structural rise to 2008 Democratic presidential nomination + victory.

Republican Convention NYC August 30 - September 2, 2004 renominated Bush-Cheney. NYC location was structurally significant - 3 years after 9/11. Convention emphasized Bush's War on Terror leadership + Iraq War commitment.

Campaign brutal. "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" August 4, 2004 launched. ~250 Vietnam veterans who served in Mekong Delta swift boat operations (Kerry had commanded swift boats). Group questioned Kerry's Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Vietnam service + April 1971 anti-war testimony. Politically devastating - attacked Kerry's structural strength. Karl Rove (Bush political strategist) operationalized indirectly through independent expenditure structure. Ads ran ~$22M August-October 2004. Kerry campaign initially failed to respond aggressively. Most of the Swift Boat allegations were structurally exaggerated or false (subsequent analyses by historians + Kerry biographers + military records); but the political damage was real. "Swift-boating" became cultural shorthand for character-attack independent

expenditures.

May 1, 2003 "Mission Accomplished" framing + ongoing Iraq War (~1,100 American military deaths by November 2004) + April 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal damaged Bush politically. But Bush campaign successfully framed Kerry as "flip-flopper" (especially $87B Iraq War supplemental funding: Kerry voted for then against; March 2004 "I actually did vote for the $87 billion before I voted against it" - politically devastating) + "Massachusetts liberal" (cultural-coastal framing).

October 2004 debates. First debate September 30, 2004 University of Miami. Kerry exceeded expectations + Bush appeared shaky. Second debate October 8, 2004 town-hall format Washington University St. Louis. Third debate October 13, 2004 ASU Tempe Arizona. Kerry performed competently but didn't break through.

October 29, 2004 (4 days before election) Osama bin Laden released video statement attacking Bush. Bush campaign successfully framed video as confirming War on Terror commitment + Bush leadership necessity.

Election Day November 2, 2004: Bush 286 EV vs Kerry 251. Bush 50.7% popular vote vs Kerry 48.3% (margin 3,012,166 votes). Bush carried 31 states; Kerry 19 states + DC. Ohio (20 EV) was decisive: Bush won Ohio by 118,601 votes out of 5.6M cast (2.1 percentage points). If Ohio had flipped, Kerry would have won 271-266 EV.

Geographic pattern: Bush expanded 2000 coalition. Gained Iowa + New Mexico from Gore 2000 coalition. Lost New Hampshire to Kerry. Bush's 31 states: most of South + Plains + Mountain West + parts of Midwest (OH, IN). Kerry's 19 + DC: Northeast + West Coast + selected Midwest (IL, MI, MN, WI, IA - wait IA went Bush 2004) + HI + DC.

Bush second term 2005-09: (1) February 2005 Social Security privatization proposal - failed structurally. (2) August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina - structurally devastating federal response failure. Bush approval fell from ~50% to ~35%. (3) 2006 midterm elections - Democrats gained control of House + Senate. (4) February 2007 Iraq Surge - 30,000 additional U.S. troops. Operationalized through 2007-08 + reduced violence. (5) 2008 financial crisis - structural collapse of Bear Stearns (March 2008), Lehman Brothers (September 15, 2008), AIG (September 2008). October 3, 2008 TARP (Troubled Asset Relief Program) $700B. (6) Bush approval ended at 22% (January 2009) - among lowest in U.S. history. (7) January 20, 2009 Obama inauguration.

2004 election's structural significance: (1) First Republican to win popular vote since Bush 41 1988. (2) Demonstrated wartime incumbent advantage + national-security framing effectiveness. (3) Swift Boat Veterans inaugurated cultural-attack independent expenditure era. (4) Obama 2004 keynote launched his structural rise. (5) Bush 2004 victory was last clean Republican popular-vote victory until Trump

		2024 - intervening Republican EV victories (Bush 43 2000 disputed; Trump 2016 lost popular by 2.86M; Trump 2024 won popular by 1.5%) operated within different electoral conditions.
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 2004 Election

2004 election was 55th U.S. presidential election. Produced George W. Bush's 286-251 EV re-election victory over Democrat John Kerry. Bush won popular vote 50.7% to Kerry's 48.3% (margin 3,012,166 votes) - first Republican to win popular vote since Bush 41 1988. Election structurally shaped by 9/11 aftermath + Iraq War + Swift Boat Veterans for Truth attacks + Karl Rove campaign strategy.

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Key words

George W. Bush	43rd U.S. president (2001-09). George H.W. Bush's son. Texas Governor (1995-2000). Won 2000 disputed Florida result (271-266 EV; lost popular vote by 543,816). Won 2004 re-election 286-251 EV. 9/11 defined first term; Iraq + Katrina + 2008 financial crisis defined second term.
John Kerry	2004 Democratic presidential nominee. MA Senator (1985-2013). Vietnam Navy lieutenant - 3 Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Bronze Star. Lost 286-251 EV.
Swift Boat Veterans for Truth	2004 independent expenditure organization questioning Kerry's Vietnam service. Politically devastating attack on Kerry's structural strength.
Mission Accomplished banner	May 1, 2003 Bush speech on USS Abraham Lincoln. Politically devastating in retrospect.
9/11 attacks	September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attacks on World Trade Center + Pentagon + Flight 93. 2,977 deaths. Bush approval reached 92% post-9/11.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Bush win in 2004?

( ) A. 271
( ) B. 286
( ) C. 301
( ) D. 321

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which state was the decisive 2004 state?

( ) A. Florida
( ) B. Ohio
( ) C. Pennsylvania
( ) D. Iowa

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and why was it politically effective?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did 9/11 affect Bush 43's political position?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

286. Bush 286; Kerry 251. Bush carried 31 states; Kerry 19 + DC. Popular vote: Bush 50.7% vs Kerry 48.3%. Margin 3,012,166 votes. First Republican popular vote victory since Bush 41 1988.

AP students should know the 286-251 split.

QUESTION 2

Ohio. Bush won Ohio by 118,601 votes out of 5.6M cast (2.1 percentage points). Ohio had 20 EV. If Ohio had flipped to Kerry, Kerry would have won 271-266 EV.

AP students should know Ohio.

QUESTION 3

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth was 2004 independent expenditure organization formed by ~250 Vietnam veterans who served in Mekong Delta swift boat operations. Launched August 4, 2004 with TV ad questioning John Kerry's Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Vietnam service + April 1971 anti-war Senate testimony. Politically effective for four reasons: (1) Attacked Kerry's structural strength. Kerry's Vietnam Navy service had been intended to contrast with Bush's Texas Air National Guard non-combat service. Swift Boat attacks neutralized that contrast. (2) Used veterans' authentic-voice framing. The veterans' testimony was structurally credible regardless of accuracy - they had been there. (3) ~$22M in advertising August-October 2004. The independent expenditure structure allowed coordination + amplification without direct Bush campaign attribution. Karl Rove operationalized indirectly. (4) Kerry campaign initially failed to respond aggressively. Kerry's "I'll handle it myself" approach was politically inadequate. By the time Kerry responded forcefully, structural damage had been done. Most Swift Boat allegations were structurally exaggerated or false (subsequent analyses by historians + Kerry biographers + military records confirmed his service); but the political damage was real. "Swift-boating" became cultural short-hand for character-attack independent expenditures targeting candidate's strengths. Subsequent campaigns have studied + replicated the Swift Boat model. McCain 2008 + Romney 2012 campaigns avoided direct character attacks on Obama (partly to avoid Swift-Boat-style backlash). Trump 2016 + 2024 campaigns used various Swift-Boat-style independent expenditure attacks on Hillary Clinton + Biden + Harris.

AP students should be able to articulate Swift Boat.

QUESTION 4

9/11 affected Bush 43's political position in five structural ways: (1) Approval rating peak. September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attacks killed 2,977 people. Bush approval reached 92% post-9/11 - highest in U.S. history (previous peak: George H.W. Bush 89% after Persian Gulf War March 1991). The approval rating provided political capital for Afghanistan invasion (October 2001), USA PATRIOT Act (October 2001), homeland security expansion (creation of DHS 2002), + eventually Iraq War (March 2003). (2) Wartime president framing. Bush positioned himself as wartime commander-in-chief - the framing dominated 2004 campaign. The "wartime incumbent advantage" structurally benefited Bush 2004 re-election. (3) Republican Party coalitional consolidation. 9/11 produced structural Republican coalitional unity through patriotism + national-security focus. Republican Congress + Bush administration coordinated on War on Terror policies. (4) Democratic Party defensive position. Democrats had to support 9/11 response (Afghanistan + USA PATRIOT Act + Iraq War initial authorization October 2002). Many Democrats subsequently regretted Iraq War authorization vote. The 2004 Democratic primary attempted to recover anti-war progressive base (Howard Dean primary success); Kerry won nomination but had voted for 2002 Iraq War Authorization. (5) Long-term political-economic costs. Iraq War 2003-2011 + Afghanistan War 2001-2021 produced ~$2T in direct U.S. costs + ~7,000 American military deaths + ~50,000+ wounded + ~200,000+ civilian deaths. The wars' costs eventually structurally damaged Bush 43 second-term political position + contributed to 2008 Obama victory.

AP students should be able to articulate 9/11's impact.