2004

George W. Bush vs John Kerry

A 50-minute lesson on the 2004 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) · 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 (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

2004: George W. Bush vs John Kerry

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 structural conditions in 2001-04 America that would produce a Bush 43 re-election. For each identify the specific 2001-04 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	2004 election was 55th U.S. presidential election. Bush 286 EV / Kerry 251 EV. Bush 50.7% popular vote; Kerry 48.3%. Margin 3,012,166 votes. First Republican to win popular vote since Bush 41 1988. Bush first term defined by 9/11. September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attacks killed 2,977. Bush approval reached 92% post-9/11. Bush first-term events: (1) October 7, 2001 Afghanistan invasion. Taliban government fell November-December 2001. (2) October 26, 2001 USA PATRIOT Act. (3) June 7, 2001 Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act ($1.35T tax cuts). (4) January 8, 2002 No Child Left Behind Act. (5) October 16, 2002 Iraq War Authorization. (6) March 20, 2003 Iraq invasion. April 9, 2003 fall of Baghdad. (7) May 1, 2003 "Mission Accomplished" USS Abraham Lincoln speech - politically devastating in retrospect. (8) May 28, 2003 Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act ($350B more tax cuts). (9) December 8, 2003 Medicare Modernization Act (Medicare Part D). (10) December 13, 2003 capture of Saddam Hussein. (11) April 28, 2004 Abu Ghraib torture photos broadcast. (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. Internet-based grassroots organization (Joe Trippi campaign manager). January 19, 2004 Iowa caucuses upset: Kerry 37.6%; Edwards 31.8%; Dean 18.5%. Dean post-caucus "Dean Scream" politically damaging. John Kerry (60, MA Senator since 1985) emerged. Vietnam Navy lieutenant + 3 Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Bronze Star. Anti-war activist 1969-71 (Vietnam Veterans Against the War; April 22, 1971 Senate testimony "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"). Won Iowa + New Hampshire + most Super Tuesday primaries. Secured nomination March 2004. Selected Sen John Edwards (NC, 51) VP July 6, 2004.

Democratic Convention Boston July 26-29, 2004 nominated Kerry-Edwards. Kerry acceptance July 29: "I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty" - dramatic salute emphasizing Vietnam service.

Barack Obama (43, IL state senator + U.S. Senate candidate) delivered July 27, 2004 keynote address. "There is no liberal America and a conservative America - there is the United States of America." Politically masterful - launched Obama's structural rise to 2008 nomination.

Republican Convention NYC August 30 - September 2, 2004 renominated Bush-Cheney. NYC location structurally significant - 3 years after 9/11.

Campaign brutal. "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" August 4, 2004 launched. ~250 Vietnam veterans who served in Mekong Delta swift boat operations. Questioned Kerry's Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Vietnam service + April 1971 anti-war testimony. Politically devastating - attacked Kerry structural strength. Karl Rove operationalized indirectly. ~$22M ads August-October 2004. Kerry campaign initially failed to respond aggressively. "Swift-boating" became cultural shorthand.

"Mission Accomplished" + ongoing Iraq War + Abu Ghraib damaged Bush. But Bush campaign successfully framed Kerry as "flip-flopper" (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. September 30, 2004 first debate University of Miami - Kerry exceeded expectations. October 8 second debate town-hall Washington University St. Louis. October 13 third debate ASU Tempe.

October 29, 2004 Osama bin Laden video statement attacking Bush. Bush campaign framed video as confirming Bush leadership necessity.

Election Day November 2, 2004: Bush 286 EV / Kerry 251. Bush 50.7% / Kerry 48.3%. Margin 3,012,166. Bush 31 states; Kerry 19 + DC. Ohio (20 EV) decisive: Bush by 118,601 votes (2.1 percentage points). If Ohio flipped, Kerry would have won 271-266 EV.

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

Bush second term 2005-09: (1) February 2005 Social Security privatization proposal failed. (2) August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina - structurally devastating federal response failure. Bush approval fell ~50%'~35%. (3) 2006 midterm - Democrats gained House + Senate. (4) February 2007 Iraq Surge - 30,000 additional U.S. troops.

		Reduced violence through 2007-08. (5) 2008 financial crisis - Bear Stearns March 2008; Lehman Brothers September 15, 2008; AIG September 2008. October 3, 2008 TARP $700B. (6) Bush approval ended 22% (January 2009). 2004 election structural significance: (1) First Republican popular vote victory since Bush 41 1988. (2) Demonstrated wartime incumbent advantage. (3) Swift Boat Veterans inaugurated cultural-attack independent expenditure era. (4) Obama 2004 keynote launched structural rise. (5) Bush 2004 was last clean Republican popular-vote victory until Trump 2024.
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

George W. Bush
43rd U.S. president (2001-09).

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth
2004 independent expenditure organization questioning Kerry's Vietnam service.

9/11 attacks
September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attacks. 2,977 deaths. Bush approval reached 92%.

Obama 2004 keynote
July 27, 2004 Democratic Convention keynote address by IL state senator Barack Obama. "There is no liberal America and a conservative America - there is the United States of America." Launched Obama's structural rise.

John Kerry
2004 Democratic presidential nominee. MA Senator (1985-2013). Vietnam Navy lieutenant.

Mission Accomplished banner
May 1, 2003 Bush USS Abraham Lincoln speech.

Iraq War Authorization
October 16, 2002 congressional resolution authorizing Iraq War. House 297-133; Senate 77-23. Senators who voted yes included Hillary Clinton + John Kerry + Joe Biden + John Edwards. Many subsequently regretted vote.

Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention

JOHN KERRY, JULY 29, 2004

Kerry delivered this acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention at FleetCenter in Boston on July 29, 2004. The "reporting for duty" opening was dramatic structural framing emphasizing Kerry's Vietnam Navy service - intended structural contrast with Bush's Texas Air National Guard non-combat service. The speech's structural focus on military service was politically risky: it invited Swift Boat Veterans for Truth attacks that would launch six days later (August 4, 2004). The Swift Boat attacks neutralized Kerry's structural Vietnam-service advantage + damaged his political position throughout the fall campaign. Kerry's structural lesson: even strong biographical attributes can be politically attacked when made campaign focal point.

> *"I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty. We are here tonight because we love our country. We are here tonight because we believe that this can be a better America. As President, I will bring back this nation's time-honored tradition: the United States never goes to war because we want to, we only go to war because we have to. That is the standard of our nation. I know what kids go through when they are carrying an M-16 in a dangerous place and they can't tell friend from foe. I know what they go through when they're out on patrol at night and they don't know what's coming around the next bend."*

Kerry, "Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention" (Boston, July 29, 2004). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ≈150 words.

The 2004 Election

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

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

Kerry says "I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty." What is the rhetorical purpose, and how did it backfire?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 2004 election map, identify Bush's 31 states and Kerry's 19 states + DC. What does the geographic pattern reveal about the Bush-era Republican coalition?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

286. Bush 286; Kerry 251.

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).

AP students should know Ohio.

QUESTION 3

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth: 2004 independent expenditure organization ~250 Vietnam veterans questioning Kerry's Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Vietnam service. Launched August 4, 2004. Politically effective: (1) Attacked Kerry's structural strength (Vietnam service). (2) Veterans' authentic-voice framing structurally credible. (3) ~$22M ads. (4) Kerry campaign failed to respond aggressively. Karl Rove operationalized indirectly. Most Swift Boat allegations structurally exaggerated/false but political damage real. "Swift-boating" cultural shorthand.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

Kerry's "I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty" uses four rhetorical strategies: (1) Military salute framing - dramatic salute physically embodied Vietnam service. (2) "Reporting for duty" military terminology positioned Kerry as service-oriented + duty-bound. (3) Structural contrast with Bush. Kerry's Vietnam Navy lieutenant service contrasted with Bush's Texas Air National Guard non-combat service. The framing was intended to position Kerry as more authentic military leader. (4) Service-as-character framing - military service became metaphor for political character. The framing backfired structurally in five ways: (1) Made Kerry's Vietnam service the campaign focal point + invited Swift Boat Veterans counter-attack. (2) Swift Boat Veterans for Truth August 4, 2004 launch neutralized Kerry's structural Vietnam advantage. (3) Veterans' authentic-voice attacks were structurally credible regardless of accuracy. (4) Kerry's 1971 anti-war Senate testimony provided Swift Boat Veterans additional attack material - "Genghis Khan" allegations + war crimes allegations + dishonoring veterans framings. (5) Kerry's campaign initially failed to respond aggressively to Swift Boat attacks. The structural lesson: candidates should not make biographical strengths into campaign focal points unless prepared to defend them aggressively. Subsequent candidates (Obama 2008+12; Biden 2020; Harris 2024) generally avoided making single biographical attribute campaign focal point. Trump 2016 + 2024 attacked opponents' biographical strengths directly (Hillary Clinton's experience; Biden's age; Harris's prosecutorial record).

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy + backfire.

QUESTION 5

9/11 affected Bush 43 in five structural ways: (1) Approval rating peak 92% post-9/11. (2) Wartime president framing dominated 2004 campaign. (3) Republican Party coalitional consolidation through patriotism + national security. (4) Democratic Party defensive position - had to support 9/11 response. (5) Long-term political-economic costs of Iraq + Afghanistan wars eventually damaged Bush second-term position + contributed to 2008 Obama victory.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

Bush states (31): most South + Plains + Mountain West + parts Midwest (OH, IN, IA). Kerry states (19 + DC): Northeast + West Coast + selected Midwest (IL, MI, MN, WI) + HI + DC. Geographic pattern reveals Bush-era Republican coalition: (1) Solid South consolidated. (2) Plains + Mountain West structurally Republican. (3) Industrial Midwest contested - Bush won OH + IN + IA (gains from Gore 2000); Kerry won IL + MI + MN + WI. (4) Northeast + West Coast structurally Democratic. (5) The 2004 map confirmed post-1992 Democratic coastal-Midwest coalition vs Republican Southern-Mountain-Plains coalition. Bush 2004 expanded 2000 coalition by ~3 EV (gained IA + NM; lost NH). The structural template would persist with adjustments through Obama 2008 + Trump 2016 + Biden 2020 + Trump 2024. Industrial Midwest swing states (OH, MI, WI, PA, IA) would be structurally decisive in subsequent elections.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural pattern.