2004

George W. Bush vs John Kerry

A 75-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

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2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

2004: George W. Bush vs John Kerry

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 2004 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-2004 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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. First Republican popular vote victory since Bush 41 1988. Bush first term defined by 9/11. September 11, 2001 attacks killed 2,977. Bush approval 92% post-9/11. Bush first-term events: October 2001 Afghanistan invasion; October 2001 USA PATRIOT Act; 2001 + 2003 tax cuts ($1.35T + $350B); January 2002 No Child Left Behind; October 2002 Iraq War Authorization; March 2003 Iraq invasion; May 2003 "Mission Accomplished" speech; December 2003 Medicare Part D + Saddam Hussein capture; April 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal; ~1,100 American military deaths in Iraq by November 2004. Democratic primary 2004. Howard Dean anti-war front-runner mid-2003. Joe Trippi campaign manager. January 19, 2004 Iowa caucuses upset: Kerry 37.6%; Edwards 31.8%; Dean 18.5%. "Dean Scream" damaged Dean. John Kerry (60, MA Sen, Vietnam Navy + 3 Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Bronze Star) won Iowa + NH + Super Tuesday. Secured nomination March 2004. Sen John Edwards (NC) VP July 6, 2004. Democratic Convention Boston July 26-29, 2004 nominated Kerry-Edwards. Kerry "I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty" acceptance. Obama July 27, 2004 keynote: "There is no liberal America and a conservative America." Republican Convention NYC August 30-September 2, 2004 renominated Bush-Cheney.

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth August 4, 2004 launched. ~250 Vietnam veterans questioning Kerry's Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Vietnam service. Politically devastating. ~$22M ads. Karl Rove operationalized indirectly. Kerry initially failed to respond. "Swift-boating" cultural shorthand.

Bush framed Kerry "flip-flopper" (March 2004 "I actually did vote for the $87 billion before I voted against it") + "Massachusetts liberal."

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

Bush 286 EV / Kerry 251. Bush 31 states; Kerry 19 + DC. Ohio decisive (Bush +118,601; 20 EV). If Ohio flipped Kerry 271-266.

Bush second term 2005-09: February 2005 Social Security privatization failed; August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina; 2006 midterm Democrats gained House + Senate; February 2007 Iraq Surge; 2008 financial crisis; January 2009 Bush approval 22%.

2004 election structural significance: (1) First Republican popular vote victory since Bush 41 1988. (2) Demonstrated wartime incumbent advantage. (3) Swift Boat inaugurated cultural-attack independent expenditure era. (4) Obama 2004 keynote launched structural rise. (5) Last clean Republican popular vote victory until Trump 2024.

The Bush 2004 re-election can be analyzed retrospectively as the structural high point of post-9/11 Republican-conservative dominance. Bush 43 2000 + 2004 victories extended Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance from 1980-92 into 2001-09. The Iraq War + 2008 financial crisis would structurally damage Republican Party position by 2008 + produce Obama victory. Republican-conservative ascendance ended structurally with Obama 2008.

The 2004 Bush re-election was achieved through Karl Rove "Mayberry Machiavelli" strategy: combine wartime patriotism + cultural-conservative mobilization (anti-same-sex-marriage ballot initiatives in 11 states 2004) + Swift Boat-style attacks on Kerry + Bush's rural-Southern political identity. The strategy operationalized post-Reagan Republican coalition (Southern realignment + Mountain West + religious conservatives + suburban whites + working-class whites with cultural-conservative concerns). The strategy was structurally similar to Atwater 1988 + Trump 2016 strategies.

The 2004 election's long-term structural significance for the Democratic Party: Kerry 2004 defeat (286-251 EV; 48.3% popular vote) was structurally close but politically devastating. Democrats had assumed Kerry's Vietnam service + Bush's Iraq War vulnerabilities would produce victory. The Swift Boat attacks + cultural-issue mobilization + Karl Rove turnout strategy produced Bush victory. Subsequent Democratic

		strategists emphasized: (1) Need to respond aggressively to character attacks (Kerry campaign's slow Swift Boat response was widely cited as structural failure). (2) Need to mobilize Democratic base voters + suburban swing voters simultaneously. (3) Need to address cultural-conservative concerns without abandoning Democratic policy framework. Obama 2008 + 2012 campaigns operationalized these lessons effectively. Hillary Clinton 2016 campaign was criticized for inadequate base mobilization in PA + MI + WI. Biden 2020 + Harris 2024 campaigns attempted varied applications of 2004 lessons. 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 2004 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

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

John Kerry
2004 Democratic presidential nominee. MA Senator. Vietnam Navy lieutenant.

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth
2004 independent expenditure organization.

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

9/11 attacks
September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attacks.

Iraq War Authorization
October 16, 2002 congressional resolution.

Obama 2004 keynote
July 27, 2004 Democratic Convention keynote. Launched Obama's structural rise.

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.

> *"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 (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

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?

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how the Bush 2004 re-election was the structural high point of post-9/11 Republican-conservative dominance.

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

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

Answer key

QUESTION 1

286.

AP students should know the 286-251 split.

QUESTION 2

Ohio.

AP students should know Ohio.

QUESTION 3

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth 2004 independent expenditure organization. Politically effective: attacked Kerry structural strength; veterans authentic-voice framing; ~$22M ads; Kerry failed to respond aggressively; Karl Rove indirect operationalization.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

Kerry's "reporting for duty" rhetorical purpose: military salute framing; "reporting for duty" service-oriented framing; structural contrast with Bush; service-as-character framing. Backfired: made Vietnam service campaign focal point; invited Swift Boat counter-attack; Veterans' authentic-voice attacks credible; Kerry 1971 anti-war testimony provided attack material; Kerry campaign failed to respond aggressively.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 5

9/11 affected Bush 43: approval 92% peak; wartime president framing dominated 2004; Republican Party coalitional consolidation; Democratic Party defensive position; long-term political-economic costs eventually damaged Bush second term + contributed to 2008 Obama victory.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

The Bush 2004 re-election was the structural high point of post-9/11 Republican-conservative dominance for five reasons: (1) Coalition assembly. Bush 43 2000 + 2004 victories operationalized post-Reagan Republican coalition: Southern realignment + Mountain West + religious conservatives + suburban whites + working-class whites with cultural-conservative concerns. (2) Ideological dominance. Bush 43 era operationalized Reagan-era conservative framework: tax cuts (2001 + 2003); foreign-policy assertiveness (Afghanistan + Iraq + War on Terror); cultural-conservative judicial appointments (Roberts 2005 + Alito 2006); federalism + regulatory rollback. (3) Republican Congressional majorities. Republicans controlled House 1995-2007 + Senate 1995-2001 + 2003-07 + presidency 2001-09. Structural Republican governmental dominance. (4) Cultural mobilization. 2004 anti-same-sex-marriage ballot initiatives in 11 states + cultural-conservative voter mobilization. Karl Rove "values voters" strategy. (5) End in 2008. Iraq War + 2008 financial crisis structurally damaged Republican Party position. Obama 2008 365-173 EV victory ended Republican-conservative ascendance. The 2004 high point was 4 years before structural collapse. Subsequent Republican presidential victories (Trump 2016 + 2024) operated within different framework: anti-establishment + populist + culture-war Republican rather than Reagan-Bush establishment Republican. The 2004 election was last election of post-Reagan Republican ascendance + last classic Republican-establishment victory.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural peak.

QUESTION 7

Bush states (31): most South + Plains + Mountain West + parts Midwest. Kerry states (19 + DC): Northeast + West Coast + selected Midwest + HI + DC. Pattern: Solid South consolidated; Plains + Mountain West Republican; Industrial Midwest contested; Northeast + West Coast Democratic. The 2004 map confirmed post-1992 Democratic coastal-Midwest coalition vs Republican Southern-Mountain-Plains coalition. Industrial Midwest swing states would be structurally decisive in subsequent elections.

AP students should be able to articulate.

Discussion prompts

1. Bush 2004 was first Republican popular vote victory since Bush 41 1988 (16-year gap). Identify three structural reasons Republicans had difficulty winning popular vote 1988-2004.

2. Swift Boat Veterans for Truth attacked Kerry's structural strength (Vietnam service). Identify three structural reasons attacks on candidate's strengths can be more politically effective than attacks on weaknesses.