2004

George W. Bush vs John Kerry

A 20-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. Story (with a picture)
3. Three questions
4. Teacher notes

2004

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. 2,977 American + foreign deaths. Bush approval reached 92% post-9/11 - highest in U.S. history.

Bush 1st-term events: (1) October 7, 2001 began U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. (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) March 20, 2003 began U.S. invasion of Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom). (6) May 1, 2003 "Mission Accomplished" banner on USS Abraham Lincoln. (7) May 28, 2003 Jobs and Growth Tax Relief Reconciliation Act ($350B more tax cuts). (8) October-November 2003 Medicare Modernization Act (Medicare Part D). (9) Iraq insurgency 2003-04 + casualties + failure to find WMD. (10) April 2004 Abu Ghraib torture scandal exposed.

Democratic primary 2004 had front-runner Sen John Kerry (MA). Kerry was 60, Vietnam Navy lieutenant + 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). MA Sen since 1985. Faced challenges

from Howard Dean (former VT Governor, "Dean Scream" January 19, 2004 Iowa caucus loss); Sen John Edwards (NC); Wesley Clark (former NATO Supreme Allied Commander); Joe Lieberman; Rep Dick Gephardt; Al Sharpton; Carol Moseley Braun; Dennis Kucinich.

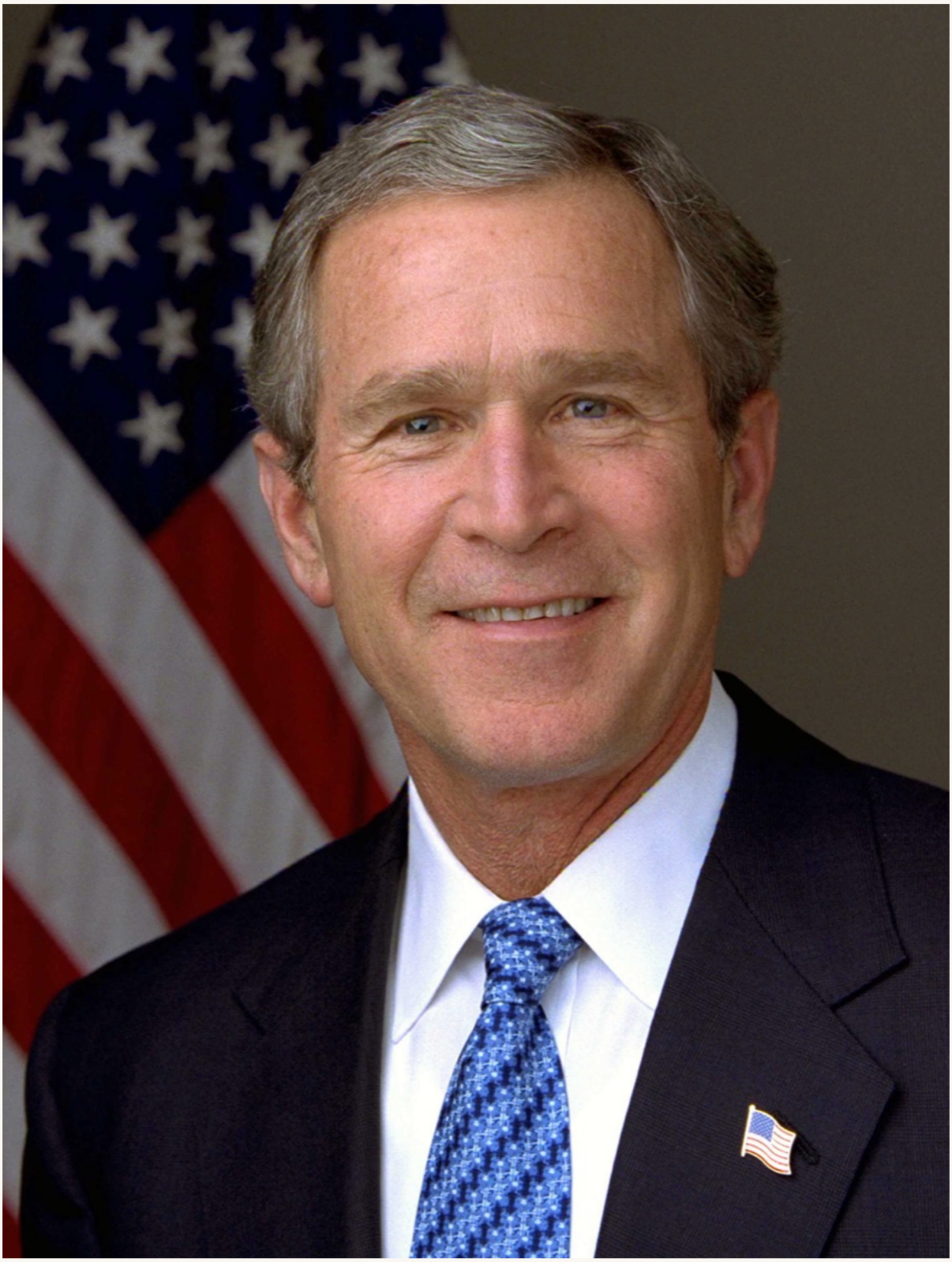
Kerry won Iowa caucuses January 19, 2004 (37%) - structural upset over Dean. Won New Hampshire January 27 + most Super Tuesday primaries. Secured nomination by March 2004. Selected Edwards (Sen from NC, "two Americas" populist) as VP July 6, 2004.

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

Look at picture. That George W. Bush - won 2004 re-election + faced second-term troubles.

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 with Kerry ques-



George W. Bush, the 43rd U.S. president. He won the 2004 election in a campaign dominated by 9/11, Iraq War, and Swift Boat Veterans attacks.

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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 43rd U.S. president in 2001?

2.

What was Swift Boat Veterans for Truth?

3.

What was the "Mission Accomplished" banner?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 2004 George W. Bush won re-election over Sen John Kerry. Bush 286-251 EV. Iraq War + 9/11 dominated campaign. "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" attacks damaged Kerry. Bush's second term would face Hurricane Katrina + 2008 financial crisis.

Answer key

1.

George W. Bush. 43rd U.S. president (2001-09). George H.W. Bush's son. Texas Governor (1995-2000). Won 2000 disputed Florida result over Gore (271-266 EV; lost popular vote by 543,816). Won 2004 re-election 286-251 EV over Kerry. 9/11 defined first term; Iraq + Katrina + 2008 financial crisis defined second term.

AP students should know Bush 43 as 43rd president.

2.

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth was 2004 independent expenditure organization. ~250 Vietnam veterans who served with John Kerry. Launched August 4, 2004 with TV ad questioning Kerry's Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Vietnam service. Politically devastating - attacked Kerry's structural strength (his decorated Vietnam Navy lieutenant service vs Bush's Texas Air National Guard non-combat service). Republican strategist Karl Rove operationalized indirectly (technically not Bush campaign-coordinated; functionally aligned). The ads ran approximately $22M of advertising August-October 2004. Kerry campaign initially failed to respond aggressively + the ads damaged him in swing states. Vietnam veterans were split: some Swift Boat Veterans had served close to Kerry + questioned his record; others (including most who had served directly under his command) defended his service. Subsequent analyses suggest most of the Swift Boat allegations were structurally exaggerated or false but the political damage was real. "Swift-boating" became cultural shorthand for character-attack independent expenditures targeting candidate's strengths. Subsequent campaigns have studied + replicated the Swift Boat model.

AP students should know Swift Boat Veterans.

3.

The "Mission Accomplished" banner was May 1, 2003 White House display behind President Bush on USS Abraham Lincoln aircraft carrier off San Diego. Bush flew onto the carrier in a Navy S-3B Viking jet wearing flight suit (the "Top Gun" landing) - landed at 3:06 PM PST May 1, 2003. He addressed the nation from the carrier deck at 6:00 PM PST. The banner above him read "Mission Accomplished" - a White House Communications Office decision. Bush declared: "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed." The declaration was politically masterful in May 2003 - Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime had fallen 21 days earlier (April 9, 2003 fall of Baghdad). But the declaration was politically devastating in retrospect: (1) Iraq War continued 2003-2011 with insurgency + civilian deaths + ~4,400 American military deaths. (2) Most American military casualties occurred AFTER "Mission Accomplished" (~140 before May 1, 2003; ~4,260 after). (3) Banner became cultural shorthand for premature political declarations of victory. (4) Subsequent presidents have generally avoided "Mission Accomplished"-style declarations (though Obama May 2, 2011 "We got him" after bin Laden killing was structurally similar success-declaration). The 2004 Bush re-election was structurally constrained by the "Mission Accomplished" framing - Democrats invoked it throughout the campaign. The 2008 Obama victory was partly attributable to ongoing Iraq War costs + Bush "Mission Accomplished" framing.

AP students should know the Mission Accomplished banner.