2020

Joe Biden vs Donald Trump

A 35-minute lesson on the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Modern Polarization	ELECTORAL VOTES 538 total
WINNER Joe Biden (Democratic) · 306 EV	RUNNER-UP Donald Trump (Republican) · 232 EV
KEY ISSUE COVID-19 pandemic; racial justice (George Floyd protests); democracy and election integrity	TURNOUT 66.6%

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

2020: Joe Biden vs Donald Trump

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	A big crisis - like a war or a sickness - often becomes the biggest issue in a presidential election. Why do you think a crisis is so important to voters?
15 min	**Reading**	The 2020 election was held during the worst public-health crisis in American history since 1918. The COVID-19 pandemic had begun spreading in early 2020. By Election Day in November, more than 230,000 Americans had died. Stores, schools, and offices had closed for weeks at a time. The unemployment rate had spiked to 14.7 percent in April 2020 before recovering to 6.7 percent by Election Day. Donald Trump, the incumbent Republican president, ran for re-election. His campaign emphasized economic recovery, conservative judicial appointments (Trump had named three Supreme Court justices), and a tough stance on China, which Trump blamed for the pandemic. He held large in-person rallies even though public health officials warned they could spread the virus. The Democratic primary that ran from February to April 2020 was unusually competitive. Twenty-eight candidates filed at some point. The field eventually narrowed to former Vice President Joe Biden, Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, former South Bend Mayor Pete Buttigieg, Senator Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota, and entrepreneur Michael Bloomberg. Biden's campaign struggled in the first three contests but he won decisively in the South Carolina primary on February 29 - powered by Black voters - and then swept Super Tuesday on March 3. Sanders dropped out on April 8. Biden chose Senator Kamala Harris of California as his running mate. Harris was a former state attorney general and the first Black American woman selected on a major-party national ticket. The campaign looked unlike any in modern history. Biden mostly stayed home in Wilmington, Delaware, holding virtual rallies and small outdoor events. Trump continued in-person rallies. The first presidential debate on September 29 was widely viewed as chaotic; the second debate was canceled after Trump tested positive for COVID-19 on October 2 and was hospitalized briefly. The third and final debate took place on October 22 with new rules. Mail-in voting expanded dramatically in 2020 due to the pandemic. About 65 million Americans voted by mail - roughly double the 2016 mail-ballot share. Total turnout reached 158 million - the highest in absolute numbers in U.S. history and 66.8 percent of eligible voters, the highest rate since 1900. Biden received 81 million votes (51.3 percent), more than any presidential candidate in U.S. history. Trump received 74 million votes (46.8 percent) - more than any losing candidate in U.S. history.

The Electoral College count was 306 for Biden to 232 for Trump - the same margin (in reverse) as Trump's 2016 victory. Biden flipped Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin from the 2016 map. The decisive states were Arizona (Biden won by 10,457), Georgia (11,779), and Wisconsin (20,682).

Donald Trump refused to concede. He alleged widespread voter fraud in court (more than 60 lawsuits filed; nearly all dismissed for lack of evidence) and pressured state officials in Georgia, Michigan, and Arizona to overturn the results. On January 6, 2021, while Congress met to formally count the electoral votes, a crowd of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol building. Five people died in connection with the events of that day. Congress reconvened the same night and certified Biden's victory.

Joe Biden was inaugurated on January 20, 2021. Kamala Harris became the first woman, the first Black American, and the first Asian American ever elected vice president. Biden's presidency passed the 2021 American Rescue Plan, the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act, the 2022 CHIPS Act, and the largest-scale Ukraine military aid program. Biden withdrew from the 2024 race in July 2024.

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 2020 Election

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Key words

Pandemic	A sickness that spreads to many countries at the same time. The COVID-19 pandemic began in late 2019 and killed more than a million Americans by 2022.
Incumbent	A person who already holds the position they are running for. Donald Trump was the incumbent president in 2020 because he was already president and running to keep the job.
Mail-in voting	Voting by sending in a ballot through the mail instead of going to a polling place. About 65 million Americans voted by mail in 2020 - roughly twice the number in 2016 - because of the pandemic.
Big Lie	A nickname for the false claim that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump. More than sixty lawsuits filed by the Trump campaign were dismissed for lack of evidence. Election officials of both parties certified the results.
January 6	The day in 2021 when a crowd of Trump supporters broke into the U.S. Capitol building while Congress was meeting to count the electoral votes. Five people died in connection with the events of that day.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Joe Biden win in 2020?

( ) A. 270
( ) B. 290
( ) C. 306
( ) D. 332

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the COVID-19 pandemic change how Americans voted in 2020?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Kamala Harris's election as vice president historically important?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What happened on January 6, 2021, and why was it a serious moment for American democracy?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

306. Biden won 306 electoral votes; Trump won 232. The same margin in reverse as Trump's 2016 win.

Biden flipped Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin from the 2016 map. The 306-232 split is structurally identical to 2016 but with the parties reversed.

QUESTION 2

About 65 million Americans voted by mail in 2020 - roughly twice the number in 2016 - because of the pandemic. Many states changed their rules to make mail voting easier so people would not have to stand in line at polling places. Total turnout reached 66.8 percent of eligible voters, the highest rate since 1900. Mail-ballot counting takes longer than in-person ballot counting, which is why some states took several days to finish counting after election night.

The 2020 mail-vote expansion is one of the most consequential procedural shifts in modern American elections. Many states have since rolled back temporary expansions.

QUESTION 3

Kamala Harris became the first woman, the first Black American, and the first Asian American ever elected vice president of the United States. Three demographic barriers were broken at the same time.

Harris is the daughter of a Jamaican father and Indian mother. She was a U.S. senator from California and California's attorney general before joining the Biden ticket.

QUESTION 4

On January 6, 2021, while Congress was meeting in the Capitol building to formally count the electoral votes, a crowd of Donald Trump supporters broke into the Capitol. They wanted to stop Congress from certifying Joe Biden's win. Police pushed them out; five people died in connection with the events of that day. The Capitol break-in was a serious moment for American democracy because it was the first time the formal transfer of presidential power had been violently disrupted at the Capitol. Congress reconvened the same night and finished certifying Biden's victory.

The January 6 attack is widely treated as the most serious threat to the American constitutional order since the Civil War. The 2022 House Select Committee's findings reshaped subsequent legal and political discourse.