2020

Joe Biden vs Donald Trump

A 50-minute lesson on the 2020 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 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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2020: Joe Biden vs Donald Trump

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 2020 that would have made an incumbent president's re-election more difficult. For each, suggest one specific 2020 development that fits the pattern.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2020 election was held during the worst public-health crisis since the 1918 flu pandemic. By Election Day in November, COVID-19 had killed more than 230,000 Americans; by the end of 2022, more than 1.1 million Americans were dead. The economy had cratered, then partially recovered. The country was simultaneously confronting the largest racial-justice protests since the 1960s following the May 25, 2020 killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. The 2020 cycle was one of the most consequential and most contested in modern American history. Donald Trump entered the cycle as the incumbent Republican president. His approval rating had been remarkably stable for four years, oscillating between 38 and 47 percent without ever rising above 50. His campaign emphasized the pre-pandemic economy (record-low unemployment in February 2020), the appointment of three Supreme Court justices (Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, and the rushed September 2020 confirmation of Amy Coney Barrett after Ruth Bader Ginsburg's September 18 death), the renegotiated USMCA trade agreement, and a tough stance on China. He blamed China for the pandemic and accused Democrats of using COVID-19 as a pretext for expanded mail-in voting that he claimed would enable fraud. The Democratic primary that ran from February to April 2020 was unusually competitive. 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 lost the first three contests (Iowa caucuses, New Hampshire primary, Nevada caucuses) but won the South Carolina primary on February 29 with overwhelming Black voter support. The South Carolina win triggered a rapid coalescence: Klobuchar, Buttigieg, and Bloomberg dropped out before Super Tuesday on March 3. Biden swept Super Tuesday. Sanders dropped out on April 8. Biden selected Senator Kamala Harris of California as his running mate on August 11 - the first Black American woman selected on a major-party national ticket.

The campaign was structurally unlike any modern election. Biden mostly remained in Wilmington, Delaware, holding virtual rallies, small outdoor events, and a heavily-mediated final-month bus tour. Trump continued in-person rallies; he tested positive for COVID-19 on October 2 and was hospitalized briefly at Walter Reed. The September 29 first presidential debate was widely considered chaotic. The second presidential debate was canceled after Trump refused to participate virtually following his diagnosis. The October 22 third debate took place under new rules including muted microphones.

Mail-in voting expanded dramatically. Many states temporarily modified their election laws to make mail voting easier during the pandemic. About 65 million Americans voted by mail - roughly double the 2016 share. Total turnout reached 158 million votes - 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); Trump received 74 million (46.8 percent). Both candidates received more votes than any presidential candidate in U.S. history except each other.

The Electoral College count was 306 Biden to 232 Trump - the same margin (in reverse) as Trump's 2016 win. Biden flipped Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin from the 2016 map. The decisive states by margin were Arizona (Biden by 10,457), Georgia (11,779), and Wisconsin (20,682). The combined three-state margin was 42,918 votes - smaller than Trump's 77,744-vote 2016 Rust Belt margin.

Donald Trump refused to concede. His campaign filed more than 60 lawsuits in state and federal courts alleging widespread voter fraud; nearly all were dismissed for lack of evidence. Trump pressured state officials in Georgia, Michigan, and Arizona to overturn the results. The January 2, 2021 phone call to Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger - in which Trump asked Raffensperger to find 11,780 votes (one more than Biden's Georgia margin) - was recorded and later released.

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. The Capitol Police evacuated members of Congress. The chamber reconvened the same evening and completed the electoral count by 3:42 a.m. on January 7. Joe Biden was inaugurated on January 20, 2021. Kamala Harris became the first woman, first Black American, and first Asian American ever elected vice president.

The Biden administration passed the 2021 American Rescue Plan ($1.9 trillion COVID relief), the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (the largest U.S. climate-policy investment in history), the 2022 CHIPS Act (semiconductor manufacturing), and the largest-scale Ukraine military aid program

		since World War II. Trump's post-2020 election denial reshaped Republican politics through 2024 and beyond.
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

Pandemic

A disease outbreak that spreads to multiple countries simultaneously. The COVID-19 pandemic began in late 2019 and had killed more than 1.1 million Americans by 2022.

Mail-in voting

Voting by sending a ballot through the postal service rather than appearing at a polling place. About 65 million Americans voted by mail in 2020 - roughly double 2016. The Trump campaign challenged the practice in court without success.

January 6

The 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol by a crowd of Trump supporters seeking to disrupt Congress's certification of the Electoral College vote. Five deaths connected to the events; more than 1,500 federal criminal cases brought; the 2022 House Select Committee documented the events in extensive public hearings.

Incumbent

A person currently holding the office they are running for. Trump was the incumbent in 2020. Of postwar incumbents, only Carter (1980) and Trump (2020) lost re-election before Biden's 2024 withdrawal.

Election denial

The unsupported claim that the 2020 election was stolen from Donald Trump. More than 60 lawsuits were dismissed for lack of evidence. Election officials of both parties certified the results. The Big Lie became a defining feature of Republican politics through 2024.

Electoral Count Reform Act

The 2022 federal law passed in response to the January 6 attack. Clarified the vice president's ceremonial role in electoral certification, raised the threshold for congressional objections, and tightened rules for state certification of electors.

Victory Speech

JOE BIDEN, NOVEMBER 7, 2020

Biden delivered this speech on the evening of November 7, 2020 - four days after Election Day - after the Associated Press and major networks called the election in his favor. He spoke in Wilmington, Delaware, with Vice President-elect Kamala Harris in attendance. The address explicitly framed his presidency in unifying terms after a polarizing campaign.

> *"I sought this office to restore the soul of America, to rebuild the backbone of this nation, the middle class, and to make America respected around the world again. And to unite us here at home. It's the honor of my lifetime that so many millions of Americans have voted for that vision. And now the work of making that vision real is the task of our time. Folks, as I said many times before: I'm Jill's husband. I would not be here without the love and tireless support of Jill, Hunter, Ashley, all our grandchildren and their spouses, and all our family. They're my heart. Jill's a mom, a military mom, an educator. She has dedicated her life to education, but teaching isn't just what she does, it's who she is."*

Biden, "Victory Speech" (Wilmington, DE, November 7, 2020). Public domain.

The 2020 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Joe Biden win in 2020?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

What was the combined margin of Biden's three closest decisive states (Arizona, Georgia, Wisconsin)?

( ) A. 18,237
( ) B. 42,918
( ) C. 77,744
( ) D. 127,489

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific ways the COVID-19 pandemic changed how the 2020 campaign was conducted.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Donald Trump's campaign filed more than 60 lawsuits alleging voter fraud after the 2020 election. Why did nearly all of them fail?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Biden says in the excerpt that he sought the office "to restore the soul of America" and "to unite us here at home." What political message was he sending, and how did it contrast with the 2017 Trump inaugural?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 2020 election map, identify the five states Biden flipped from the 2016 Trump map. What pattern do they share, and what does it tell you about the Biden coalition?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

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

The 306-232 symmetry is one of the most-cited coincidences in modern American electoral history. The 2020 map flipped Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin from the 2016 map.

QUESTION 2

42,918. Biden won Arizona by 10,457, Georgia by 11,779, Wisconsin by 20,682 - combined 42,918.

The 42,918-vote three-state margin is smaller than Trump's 77,744-vote 2016 Rust Belt margin. The 2020 result, despite Biden's 7-million-vote popular-vote win, was structurally close at the swing-state level.

QUESTION 3

Accept any three of: (1) Mail-in voting expanded dramatically - about 65 million votes, roughly double 2016. (2) Biden mostly stayed in Wilmington, Delaware, replacing rallies with virtual events. (3) Trump's October 2 COVID diagnosis interrupted his campaign for a week and led to cancellation of the October 15 debate. (4) Total turnout reached 66.8 percent of eligible voters, the highest rate since 1900. (5) Many states temporarily modified election laws to ease pandemic voting. (6) Ballot counting took several days because mail ballots take longer to process than in-person ballots.

The pandemic's structural effects on the campaign were unprecedented. AP students should be able to identify multiple specific changes.

QUESTION 4

The lawsuits failed because there was no credible evidence of widespread voter fraud. State and federal courts - including judges appointed by Trump himself - dismissed nearly every lawsuit for lack of evidence, lack of standing, or procedural defect. Election officials of both parties in every state certified the results. The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, then run by Trump appointee Christopher Krebs, called the 2020 election "the most secure in American history" - a statement that led Trump to fire Krebs.

The legal record on 2020 fraud claims is unambiguous. AP students should recognize that the failure of the legal challenges was not partisan but evidentiary.

QUESTION 5

Biden was framing his presidency as a restoration of unifying democratic norms after the partisanship of the Trump era. The audience was both his own supporters (validating their vote) and Trump voters (signaling that he would govern for all Americans). The contrast with Trump's 2017 inaugural is direct: where Trump treated the federal establishment as a hostile entity ("Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth"), Biden treated Americans as fundamentally united by shared democratic commitments. The two framings exemplify the partisan polarization of the 2017-2024 period.

The Biden-vs-Trump rhetorical contrast is structurally important for understanding the 2020 cycle. AP students should be able to identify the two framings as ideologically distinct rather than merely stylistic.

QUESTION 6

Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin. Pattern: a mix of Sun Belt growth states (Arizona, Georgia) and Rust Belt manufacturing states (Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin). Arizona and Georgia were not on most pre-election analysts' lists of likely Democratic flips. The Biden coalition combined college-educated suburbanites, Black voters (particularly in Georgia), and Hispanic voters (particularly in Arizona) with Rust Belt non-college whites who had voted Trump in 2016 but returned to Biden in 2020. The combination tells you the Obama coalition had partially repaired itself by 2020 while also expanding to new Sun Belt growth states.

The 2020 coalition is a hybrid of the Obama coalition and a new Sun Belt coalition. AP students should be able to identify the demographic combination as structurally different from any prior Democratic coalition.