2020

Joe Biden vs Donald Trump

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

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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 2020 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-2020 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: list two ways a presidential election could be conducted during a global pandemic. For each, identify a likely concern about fairness or accuracy.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2020 election was held during the worst global pandemic in a century and produced the highest voter turnout in U.S. history: roughly 158 million Americans cast ballots, about 66.8 percent of the voting-eligible population — the highest rate since 1900. Joe Biden won 306 electoral votes to incumbent President Donald Trump's 232 — the mirror image of the 2016 result. Biden flipped Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin, Arizona, and Georgia from their 2016 Republican margins. Margins were extraordinarily narrow: Trump-Biden differed by under 45,000 votes across the three closest states. The expansion of mail-in voting during COVID-19 produced significant counting delays in several swing states, contributing to a four-day window between Election Day and projected outcomes. After his loss, Trump refused to concede, contested the result through dozens of failed lawsuits, and his supporters attacked the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 during the certification of electoral votes — the first such breach in U.S. history. 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 2020 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

Mail-in ballot

A ballot cast by mail or drop-off rather than in person. 2020 saw mail-in voting expand dramatically because of COVID-19, especially in swing states without prior infrastructure.

Late shift

A change in apparent vote leads after Election Night as remaining mail ballots are counted. Mail ballots leaned heavily Democratic in 2020 because of partisan messaging about voting methods.

January 6

The January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol by a pro-Trump crowd attempting to disrupt the certification of electoral votes. The first such breach in U.S. history.

Pre-canvassing

The opening and verification (but not counting) of mail ballots before Election Day. Pennsylvania and Michigan banned it in 2020, contributing to slow counts.

Stop the Steal

Biden's victory was contested through the "Stop the Steal" movement, organized around false claims of widespread fraud. The movement drove the January 6, 2021 Capitol attack.

Peaceful transfer of power

The handover of executive authority from one administration to its political opponent without coercion. A two-century U.S. norm tested in 2020-21 when Trump refused to concede before January 6.

Inaugural Address (excerpt)

JOSEPH R. BIDEN JR., JANUARY 20, 2021

Biden's inaugural came two weeks after the January 6 Capitol attack and during the deadliest stretch of the COVID-19 pandemic. The address centered on "unity" as both theme and concrete policy commitment.

> *"To overcome these challenges – to restore the soul and to secure the future of America – requires more than words. It requires that most elusive of things in a democracy: Unity. Unity. In another January in Washington, on New Year's Day 1863, Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. When he put pen to paper, the President said, "If my name ever goes down into history it will be for this act and my whole soul is in it." My whole soul is in it. Today, on this January day, my whole soul is in this: Bringing America together. Uniting our people. And uniting our nation. I ask every American to join me in this cause. Uniting to fight the common foes we face: Anger, resentment, hatred. Extremism, lawlessness, violence. Disease, joblessness, hopelessness."*

Biden, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, January 20, 2021). Public domain.

The 2020 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 Joe Biden win in 2020?

( ) A. 270
( ) B. 294
( ) C. 306
( ) D. 332

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Name the five states Biden flipped from Trump's 2016 totals.

QUESTION 3 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Approximately what percentage of the voting-eligible population cast ballots in 2020?

( ) A. 54 percent
( ) B. 61 percent
( ) C. 67 percent
( ) D. 74 percent

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain in two sentences why mail-in voting expanded dramatically in 2020, and identify one consequence that affected the speed of result reporting.

QUESTION 5 · MAP-READ

On the 2020 state map, compare against 2016 (Clinton-Trump). Identify the two states that flipped from Trump to Biden but had not previously voted Democratic since the 1990s.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify two specific challenges Biden names in the catalog at the end of the excerpt. Quote each verbatim.

QUESTION 7 · SHORT-ANSWER

Trump in his 2017 inaugural described "American carnage" -- specific failures in inner cities and rusted-out factories assigned to a political establishment. Biden in this 2021 excerpt also catalogs failures (anger, extremism, disease, joblessness). Identify one similarity in how each speaker diagnoses the national situation and one major difference in what each proposes as the response. Cite a phrase from the Biden excerpt.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

306

Biden won 306 electoral votes to Trump's 232 — the mirror image of 2016. He won the popular vote by 7 million (51.3 to 46.9 percent).

QUESTION 2

Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin.

Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin returned to the Democratic column they had held from 1992 to 2012. Arizona had not voted Democratic since 1996; Georgia had not since 1992.

QUESTION 3

67 percent

Estimated turnout among the voting-eligible population was 66.8 percent — the highest since the 73.7 percent of 1900. About 158 million votes were cast.

QUESTION 4

Mail-in voting expanded because states adapted to COVID-19 by mailing absentee ballots automatically or relaxing excuse requirements. Counting consequences: several swing states (especially Pennsylvania and Michigan) banned pre-Election Day processing of mail ballots, so the count of mail ballots — which leaned heavily Democratic — extended past Election Night and produced the appearance of late shifts.

The pattern was foreseeable to observers but not the general public, and it became fuel for post-election disinformation about late shifts being suspicious. Future cycles will see the same dynamic unless state legislatures allow pre-canvassing.

QUESTION 5

Arizona (last Democratic 1996) and Georgia (last Democratic 1992).

Both flips reflected demographic and geographic change rather than a national wave: Phoenix and Atlanta metros had grown into Democratic-leaning suburbs over two decades. Georgia's flip in particular was the result of organized voter-registration work led by Stacey Abrams's organization Fair Fight, building on demographic shifts.

QUESTION 6

Accept any two verbatim items from the catalog: "Anger," "resentment," "hatred," "Extremism," "lawlessness," "violence," "Disease," "joblessness," or "hopelessness." Award credit for any pair of exact quotations from this final list.

The catalog stacking is itself the rhetorical choice; students should quote from the list rather than paraphrase.

QUESTION 7

Similarity (accept any of): (1) both inaugurals diagnose serious national challenges and resist the celebratory tone of most modern inaugurals; (2) both frame the moment as a break point rather than a continuation; (3) both itemize challenges rather than abstracting them. Difference (accept any of): (1) Trump's 2017 address framed the federal government as part of the problem; Biden's 2021 address framed the federal government as part of the response, e.g., "Uniting to fight the common foes we face"; (2) Trump named external blame (a political establishment, other nations); Biden named internal national conditions (extremism, lawlessness, hopelessness). Accept any quoted Biden phrase the student can anchor.

Both addresses break the unity-celebration tradition of inaugurals from 1981-2013. The diagnostic similarity is often noted; the prescriptive divergence is the contemporary partisan divide.

Discussion prompts

1. Turnout reached its highest level in 120 years during a pandemic. Identify two structural reasons turnout surged and one risk that the expanded-access measures used in 2020 might not persist in future cycles.

2. Biden’s margin across the three closest states was roughly 43,000 votes — almost identical in magnitude to Trump’s 2016 margin in his three closest states. What does that symmetry tell you about the structure of U.S. presidential elections today, and what would change it?

3. For the first time in modern history, the losing candidate refused to concede and the certification of electoral votes was disrupted by violence. Identify two long-term consequences of January 6 for American democratic institutions and one factor that might have been different.