2020

Joe Biden vs Donald Trump

A 105-minute lesson on the 2020 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in 2020 that would have made the post-election transition more contested than any in modern history. For each, identify the specific 2017-2020 institutional change most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2020 election produced two distinct historical events. The first was the election itself - a high-turnout, high-stakes contest held during the worst public-health crisis since 1918 and the largest racial-justice protests since 1968. Joe Biden defeated incumbent Donald Trump 306-232 in the Electoral College and by 7 million votes nationally. The second event was the eleven-week post-election crisis culminating in the January 6, 2021 attack on the U.S. Capitol - the most serious assault on the formal transfer of presidential power in U.S. history. The COVID-19 pandemic dominated every aspect of the cycle. The first U.S. cases were confirmed in January 2020. By March, schools, offices, and most non-essential businesses had closed across the country. The April 2020 unemployment rate spiked to 14.7 percent - the highest since the Great Depression. By Election Day (November 3) more than 230,000 Americans had died; by the end of 2022 the death toll exceeded 1.1 million. The pandemic also enabled the largest expansion of mail-in voting in U.S. history. Many states temporarily modified election laws to expand mail voting; about 65 million Americans voted by mail, roughly double the 2016 share. The May 25, 2020 killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin triggered the largest racial-justice protest movement in U.S. history. Protests in support of the Black Lives Matter movement occurred in more than 2,000 American cities. Trump's response - particularly the June 1 forcible clearing of protesters from Lafayette Square for a photo opportunity - polarized opinion further. The protests reshaped the political landscape, contributing to a small but consequential shift among college-educated voters toward Biden. The Democratic primary that ran from February through April 2020 narrowed quickly. Joe 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. Buttigieg, Klobuchar, and Bloomberg withdrew and endorsed Biden 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. Harris was a former state attorney general and the first Black American woman selected on a major-party national ticket.

The Trump campaign emphasized economic recovery, conservative judicial appointments (Trump named three Supreme Court justices, including 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. Trump consistently undermined the legitimacy of mail-in voting throughout 2020, framing it as Democratic fraud and a threat to election integrity. The framing was structurally important: it pre-positioned Trump supporters to reject any result that depended on mail-ballot counting.

The campaign was conducted under pandemic conditions. Biden mostly stayed in Wilmington, Delaware, holding virtual rallies and small outdoor events. Trump continued in-person rallies. Trump tested positive for COVID-19 on October 2 and was hospitalized briefly at Walter Reed. The September 29 first presidential debate was chaotic; the second was canceled after Trump refused virtual participation; the October 22 third debate took place under new rules including muted microphones.

The 2020 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 81,283,501 votes (51.3 percent), more than any presidential candidate in U.S. history. Trump received 74,223,975 (46.8 percent) - more than any losing candidate in U.S. history.

The Electoral College count was 306 Biden to 232 Trump. Biden flipped Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin from the 2016 map. The decisive states by margin were Arizona (Biden won by 10,457), Georgia (11,779), and Wisconsin (20,682) - a combined three-state margin of 42,918 votes out of more than 17 million cast in those three states.

Donald Trump refused to concede. From November 4 through January 20, 2021, the Trump campaign and its allies filed more than 60 lawsuits in state and federal courts alleging widespread voter fraud. Nearly all were dismissed for lack of evidence, lack of standing, or procedural defect. Trump pressured state officials in Georgia, Michigan, and Arizona to overturn the results. The January 2, 2021 telephone 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. Trump and his allies also pursued a fake-electors strategy in seven states, having party officials sign documents falsely claiming to be the certified electors for their state.

On January 6, 2021, while a joint session of Congress met to 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 that evening and completed the count by 3:42 a.m. on January 7. The House impeached Trump for incitement of insurrection on January 13; the Senate acquitted 57-43 on February 13. The 2022 House Select Committee on January 6 documented the events in extensive public hearings; its final report was published December 22, 2022. The federal Special Counsel investigation led to multiple criminal indictments of Trump including a four-count federal indictment for conspiracy to defraud the United States and obstruct an official proceeding. The 2022 Electoral Count Reform Act clarified the vice president's ceremonial role in electoral certification, raised the threshold for congressional objections, and tightened state certification rules. The Biden administration delivered substantial legislation: the 2021 American Rescue Plan ($1.9 trillion COVID relief), the 2021 Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (the largest infrastructure package since the 1956 Interstate Highway System), 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. Biden withdrew from the 2024 race on July 21, 2024, after a poor June 27 debate performance against Trump. The 2020 cycle's structural legacies - the post-pandemic mail-voting infrastructure, the January 6 institutional damage, and the durable election-denial movement within the Republican Party - have continued to shape every subsequent cycle.
20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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

COVID-19 pandemic

The 2019-2023 global outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). By 2022 more than 1.1 million Americans had died. Structurally reshaped every aspect of the 2020 campaign and political life.

Black Lives Matter

The racial-justice movement that grew dramatically following the May 25, 2020 killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police. The summer 2020 protests in more than 2,000 American cities are widely considered the largest protest movement in U.S. history.

Raffensperger call

The January 2, 2021 telephone call from Donald Trump to Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger, in which Trump asked Raffensperger to find 11,780 votes (one more than Biden's Georgia margin). Recorded by Georgia officials and released to the Washington Post.

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 to one-fifth of each chamber the threshold for congressional objections to a state's electoral votes, and tightened rules for state certification of electors.

Chiafalo v. Washington

2020 Supreme Court decision upholding state laws that bind presidential electors to vote for the candidate who won their state. Removed the constitutional ambiguity around faithless electors that had been visible in 2016 (seven faithless electors that year).

Mail-in voting

Voting by sending a ballot through the postal service rather than appearing in person. About 65 million Americans voted by mail in 2020 - roughly double 2016 - due to the pandemic. The expansion was the structural condition that enabled both the historic-high turnout and Trump's subsequent fraud allegations.

Fake-electors scheme

The post-2020 Trump campaign strategy of having Republican party officials in seven states sign documents falsely claiming to be the certified electors for their state. Led to state and federal criminal indictments of multiple Republican officials. Central element of the federal Special Counsel investigation.

Stop the Steal

The 2020 Trump campaign slogan and post-election movement framing the result as fraudulent. The movement organized the January 6, 2021 rally that preceded the Capitol attack. Documented extensively in the House January 6 Committee's 2022 report.

Insurrection

A violent attempt to overthrow a government or its lawful processes. The January 6 Capitol attack is frequently described as an insurrection or attempted insurrection. The House impeached Trump on January 13, 2021 for "incitement of insurrection"; the Senate acquitted 57-43 on February 13.

Inaugural Address

JOE BIDEN, JANUARY 20, 2021

Biden took the oath on the West Front of the U.S. Capitol on January 20, 2021 - the same location that had been overrun by Trump supporters two weeks earlier. The address explicitly framed the new administration as a restoration of constitutional norms damaged by the 2020 election denial and the January 6 attack.

> *"Few periods in our nation's history have been more challenging or difficult than the one we're in now. A once-in-a-century virus silently stalks the country. It's taken as many lives in one year as America lost in all of World War II. Millions of jobs have been lost. Hundreds of thousands of businesses closed. A cry for racial justice some 400 years in the making moves us. The dream of justice for all will be deferred no longer. A cry for survival comes from the planet itself. A cry that can't be any more desperate or any more clear. And now, a rise of political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that we must confront and we will defeat."*

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

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Inaugural Address

JOE BIDEN, JANUARY 20, 2021

“Few periods in our nation's history have been more challenging or difficult than the one we're in now. A once-in-a-century virus silently stalks the country. It's taken as many lives in one year as America lost in all of World War II. Millions of jobs have been lost. Hundreds of thousands of businesses closed. A cry for racial justice some 400 years in the making moves us. The dream of justice for all will be deferred no longer. A cry for survival comes from the planet itself. A cry that can't be any more desperate or any more clear. And now, a rise of political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that we must confront and we will defeat.”

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

SOURCE B

Address at the Ellipse (Stop the Steal rally)

DONALD TRUMP, JANUARY 6, 2021

“We will never give up, we will never concede. It doesn't happen. You don't concede when there's theft involved. Our country has had enough. We will not take it anymore. And that's what this is all about. To use a favorite term that all of you people really came up with, we will stop the steal. We're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue - I love Pennsylvania Avenue - and we're going to the Capitol, and we're going to try and give our Republicans, the weak ones, because the strong ones don't need any of our help. We're going to try and give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country.”

Trump, "Address at the Ellipse" (Washington, DC, January 6, 2021). Public domain.

The 2020 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Biden's Inaugural) that names domestic political violence as a continuing threat. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Trump's Ellipse speech) that frames the 2020 result as theft requiring extra-procedural correction. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address the legitimacy of the 2020 result, but they make incompatible claims about it. Identify the specific claim each source makes.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B was delivered before the Capitol attack; Source A was delivered two weeks after. What does the ordering tell you about how the post-election crisis transformed the political stakes of the inauguration?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A names "a rise of political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism." Identify one specific 2020-2021 development that supports this claim and explain its relevance.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many lawsuits did the Trump campaign and its allies file alleging 2020 voter fraud?

( ) A. More than 30
( ) B. More than 60
( ) C. More than 100
( ) D. More than 200

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 2022 federal law passed in response to the January 6 attack was the:

( ) A. Voting Rights Restoration Act
( ) B. Electoral Count Reform Act
( ) C. For the People Act
( ) D. Insurrection Prevention Act

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 2020-2021 crisis a unique rupture, a continuation, or a structural fragility? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Trump's January 6 Ellipse speech (Source B) frames the 2020 result as the theft of a legitimate election that requires extra-procedural correction. Biden's 2021 Inaugural (Source A) frames the same 2020 result as the legitimate restoration of constitutional democracy against a rising tide of political extremism. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 2020-2021 transition, evaluate the extent to which the post-election crisis represented a unique institutional rupture caused by Trump's specific choices, a continuation of pre-existing partisan polarization, or a structural fragility of the U.S. Electoral Count Act and related election infrastructure. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the rupture-vs-continuation-vs-fragility axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the 60+ failed lawsuits, the Raffensperger call, the fake-electors scheme, the Capitol attack, the Electoral Count Reform Act. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent - rupture vs. continuation vs. fragility - rather than treating them as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "a rise of political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that we must confront and we will defeat", "Few periods in our nation's history have been more challenging or difficult than the one we're in now". The first phrase is the most explicit.

The 2021 Inaugural's explicit naming of domestic political violence is unusual for a U.S. presidential inaugural address. AP students should recognize the rhetorical choice as a direct response to the January 6 events.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "We will never give up, we will never concede", "You don't concede when there's theft involved", "we will stop the steal", "we're going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue ... and we're going to the Capitol". The "you don't concede when there's theft involved" phrase is the clearest articulation.

The Ellipse speech is one of the most-analyzed pieces of recent American political rhetoric. The 2022 House January 6 Committee's report quoted it extensively. The federal Special Counsel's indictment relied on its specific phrases.

QUESTION 3

Source A claims the 2020 result was the legitimate constitutional restoration of democratic norms against the threat of political extremism. Source B claims the 2020 result was the theft of a legitimate election requiring extra-procedural correction. The two claims are mutually exclusive: if one is true, the other must be false. The 2020-21 crisis was structurally a contest over which framing would prevail in American public life.

The two framings represent the structural cleavage of post-2020 American politics. AP students should recognize that the disagreement is not merely tactical but ontological - about what the 2020 election actually was.

QUESTION 4

The Ellipse speech preceded the Capitol attack by approximately three hours. The Biden Inaugural followed it by two weeks, with the same West Front having been overrun on January 6. The temporal ordering tells you that the Biden Inaugural was not the procedural transfer it would have been in any other postwar cycle but a post-crisis restoration of constitutional norms. The two speeches together show how rapidly the political stakes of the inauguration transformed: from a regular transition into a contested defense of constitutional democracy.

The before-and-after temporal ordering is structurally important. AP students should be able to identify the 2021 inauguration as institutionally different from any prior postwar inauguration because of what preceded it.

QUESTION 5

Accept any of: (1) The January 6 Capitol attack itself. (2) The growing visibility of white supremacist groups (Proud Boys, Oath Keepers) in 2020 protests. (3) The August 2017 Charlottesville rally and Trump's "very fine people on both sides" response. (4) The 2018 Pittsburgh Tree of Life synagogue shooting. (5) The 2019 El Paso shooting targeting Hispanic-Americans. (6) The 2020 federal investigation of the Michigan kidnapping plot against Governor Gretchen Whitmer. The January 6 attack is the most directly relevant.

AP students should be able to identify specific 2017-2021 incidents of domestic political violence and connect them to the broader rise of extremism that Biden's Inaugural names.

QUESTION 6

More than 60.

The Trump campaign and its allies filed more than 60 lawsuits in state and federal courts after the 2020 election. Nearly all were dismissed for lack of evidence, lack of standing, or procedural defect. The litigation record has been extensively documented; AP students should know the rough order of magnitude.

QUESTION 7

Electoral Count Reform Act.

The 2022 Electoral Count Reform Act clarified the vice president's ceremonial role in electoral certification, raised the threshold for congressional objections to one-fifth of each chamber, and tightened state certification rules. It is the direct legislative response to the January 6 attack.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the rupture-vs-continuation-vs-fragility axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric on the next page evaluates the full essay.