

# 2004

## *George W. Bush vs John Kerry*

A 75-minute lesson on the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

<p><b>ERA</b> Modern Polarization</p>	<p><b>CYCLE</b> 2004 of 538 total EV</p>
<p><b>WINNER</b> George W. Bush (Republican) · 286 EV</p>	<p><b>RUNNER-UP</b> John Kerry (Democratic) · 251 EV</p>
<p><b>KEY ISSUE</b> Iraq War; War on Terror; 9/11 security; same-sex marriage ballot measures</p>	<p><b>TURNOUT</b> 60.1%</p>

### CONTENTS

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

# 2004: George W. Bush vs John Kerry

## 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 2004 map at [theamericanvote.com/elections/2004](http://theamericanvote.com/elections/2004) projected, or printed as a handout.

## Timing

<b>5 min</b>	<b>Warm-up</b>	Identify two structural conditions in 2001-04 America that would produce a Bush 43 re-election. For each identify the specific 2001-04 development most responsible.
<b>15 min</b>	<b>Reading + vocab</b>	<p>2004 election was 55th U.S. presidential election. Bush 286 EV / Kerry 251 EV. Bush 50.7% popular vote. First Republican popular vote victory since Bush 41 1988.</p> <p>Bush first term defined by 9/11. September 11, 2001 attacks killed 2,977. Bush approval 92% post-9/11.</p> <p>Bush first-term events: October 2001 Afghanistan invasion; October 2001 USA PATRIOT Act; 2001 + 2003 tax cuts (\$1.35T + \$350B); January 2002 No Child Left Behind; October 2002 Iraq War Authorization; March 2003 Iraq invasion; May 2003 "Mission Accomplished" speech; December 2003 Medicare Part D + Saddam Hussein capture; April 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal; ~1,100 American military deaths in Iraq by November 2004.</p> <p>Democratic primary 2004. Howard Dean anti-war front-runner mid-2003. Joe Trippi campaign manager. January 19, 2004 Iowa caucuses upset: Kerry 37.6%; Edwards 31.8%; Dean 18.5%. "Dean Scream" damaged Dean. John Kerry (60, MA Sen, Vietnam Navy + 3 Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Bronze Star) won Iowa + NH + Super Tuesday. Secured nomination March 2004. Sen John Edwards (NC) VP July 6, 2004.</p> <p>Democratic Convention Boston July 26-29, 2004 nominated Kerry-Edwards. Kerry "I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty" acceptance. Obama July 27, 2004 keynote: "There is no liberal America and a conservative America."</p> <p>Republican Convention NYC August 30-September 2, 2004 renominated Bush-Cheney.</p>

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth August 4, 2004 launched. ~250 Vietnam veterans questioning Kerry's Purple Hearts + Silver Star + Vietnam service. Politically devastating. ~\$22M ads. Karl Rove operationalized indirectly. Kerry initially failed to respond. "Swift-boating" cultural shorthand.

Bush framed Kerry "flip-flopper" (March 2004 "I actually did vote for the \$87 billion before I voted against it") + "Massachusetts liberal."

October 29, 2004 bin Laden video. Bush campaign framed as confirming leadership necessity.

Bush 286 EV / Kerry 251. Bush 31 states; Kerry 19 + DC. Ohio decisive (Bush +118,601; 20 EV). If Ohio flipped Kerry 271-266.

Bush second term 2005-09: February 2005 Social Security privatization failed; August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina; 2006 midterm Democrats gained House + Senate; February 2007 Iraq Surge; 2008 financial crisis; January 2009 Bush approval 22%.

2004 election structural significance: (1) First Republican popular vote victory since Bush 41 1988. (2) Demonstrated wartime incumbent advantage. (3) Swift Boat inaugurated cultural-attack independent expenditure era. (4) Obama 2004 keynote launched structural rise. (5) Last clean Republican popular vote victory until Trump 2024.

The Bush 2004 re-election can be analyzed retrospectively as the structural high point of post-9/11 Republican-conservative dominance. Bush 43 2000 + 2004 victories extended Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance from 1980-92 into 2001-09. The Iraq War + 2008 financial crisis would structurally damage Republican Party position by 2008 + produce Obama victory. Republican-conservative ascendance ended structurally with Obama 2008.

The 2004 Bush re-election was achieved through Karl Rove "Mayberry Machiavelli" strategy: combine wartime patriotism + cultural-conservative mobilization (anti-same-sex-marriage ballot initiatives in 11 states 2004) + Swift Boat-style attacks on Kerry + Bush's rural-Southern political identity. The strategy operationalized post-Reagan Republican coalition (Southern realignment + Mountain West + religious conservatives + suburban whites + working-class whites with cultural-conservative concerns). The strategy was structurally similar to Atwater 1988 + Trump 2016 strategies.

The 2004 election's long-term structural significance for the Democratic Party: Kerry 2004 defeat (286-251 EV; 48.3% popular vote) was structurally close but politically devastating. Democrats had assumed Kerry's Vietnam service + Bush's Iraq War vulnerabilities would produce victory. The Swift Boat attacks + cultural-issue mobilization + Karl Rove turnout strategy produced Bush victory. Subsequent Democratic

strategists emphasized: (1) Need to respond aggressively to character attacks (Kerry campaign's slow Swift Boat response was widely cited as structural failure). (2) Need to mobilize Democratic base voters + suburban swing voters simultaneously. (3) Need to address cultural-conservative concerns without abandoning Democratic policy framework. Obama 2008 + 2012 campaigns operationalized these lessons effectively. Hillary Clinton 2016 campaign was criticized for inadequate base mobilization in PA + MI + WI. Biden 2020 + Harris 2024 campaigns attempted varied applications of 2004 lessons. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.

<b>15 min</b>	<b>Primary source</b>	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
<b>15 min</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	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.
<b>20 min</b>	<b>Assessment</b>	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
<b>5 min</b>	<b>Closure</b>	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

## Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 2004 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

### George W. Bush

43rd U.S. president (2001-09).

### John Kerry

2004 Democratic presidential nominee. MA Senator. Vietnam Navy lieutenant.

### Swift Boat Veterans for Truth

2004 independent expenditure organization.

### Mission Accomplished banner

May 1, 2003 Bush USS Abraham Lincoln speech.

### 9/11 attacks

September 11, 2001 al-Qaeda attacks.

### Iraq War Authorization

October 16, 2002 congressional resolution.

### Obama 2004 keynote

July 27, 2004 Democratic Convention keynote. Launched Obama's structural rise.

## Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention

JOHN KERRY, JULY 29, 2004

*Kerry delivered this acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention at FleetCenter in Boston on July 29, 2004.*

*"I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty. We are here tonight because we love our country. We are here tonight because we believe that this can be a better America. As President, I will bring back this nation's time-honored tradition: the United States never goes to war because we want to, we only go to war because we have to. That is the standard of our nation. I know what kids go through when they are carrying an M-16 in a dangerous place and they can't tell friend from foe. I know what they go through when they're out on patrol at night and they don't know what's coming around the next bend."*

Kerry, "Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention" (Boston, July 29, 2004). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, 150 words.

# The 2004 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 Bush win in 2004?

- A. 271
- B. 286
- C. 301
- D. 321

**QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE**

Which state was the decisive 2004 state?

- A. Florida
- B. Ohio
- C. Pennsylvania
- D. Iowa

**QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER**

What was Swift Boat Veterans for Truth and why was it politically effective?

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**QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Kerry says "I'm John Kerry, and I'm reporting for duty." What is the rhetorical purpose, and how did it backfire?

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**QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER**

How did 9/11 affect Bush 43's political position?

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

**QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER**

Explain how the Bush 2004 re-election was the structural high point of post-9/11 Republican-conservative dominance.

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**QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ**

On the 2004 election map, identify Bush's 31 states and Kerry's 19 states + DC. What does the geographic pattern reveal?

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# Answer key

**QUESTION 1**

286.

AP students should know the 286-251 split.

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**QUESTION 2**

Ohio.

AP students should know Ohio.

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**QUESTION 3**

Swift Boat Veterans for Truth 2004 independent expenditure organization. Politically effective: attacked Kerry structural strength; veterans authentic-voice framing; ~\$22M ads; Kerry failed to respond aggressively; Karl Rove indirect operationalization.

AP students should be able to articulate.

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**QUESTION 4**

Kerry's "reporting for duty" rhetorical purpose: military salute framing; "reporting for duty" service-oriented framing; structural contrast with Bush; service-as-character framing. Backfired: made Vietnam service campaign focal point; invited Swift Boat counter-attack; Veterans' authentic-voice attacks credible; Kerry 1971 anti-war testimony provided attack material; Kerry campaign failed to respond aggressively.

AP students should be able to articulate.

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**QUESTION 5**

9/11 affected Bush 43: approval 92% peak; wartime president framing dominated 2004; Republican Party coalitional consolidation; Democratic Party defensive position; long-term political-economic costs eventually damaged Bush second term + contributed to 2008 Obama victory.

AP students should be able to articulate.

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**QUESTION 6**

The Bush 2004 re-election was the structural high point of post-9/11 Republican-conservative dominance for five reasons: (1) Coalition assembly. Bush 43 2000 + 2004 victories operationalized post-Reagan Republican coalition: Southern realignment + Mountain West + religious conservatives + suburban whites + working-class whites with cultural-conservative concerns. (2) Ideological dominance. Bush 43 era operationalized Reagan-era conservative framework: tax cuts (2001 + 2003); foreign-policy assertiveness (Afghanistan + Iraq + War on Terror); cultural-conservative judicial appointments (Roberts 2005 + Alito 2006); federalism + regulatory rollback. (3) Republican Congressional majorities. Republicans controlled House 1995-2007 + Senate 1995-2001 + 2003-07 + presidency 2001-09. Structural Republican governmental dominance. (4) Cultural mobilization. 2004 anti-same-sex-marriage ballot initiatives in 11 states + cultural-conservative voter mobilization. Karl Rove "values voters" strategy. (5) End in 2008. Iraq War + 2008 financial crisis structurally damaged Republican Party position. Obama 2008 365-173 EV victory ended Republican-conservative ascendance. The 2004 high point was 4 years before structural collapse. Subsequent Republican presidential victories (Trump 2016 + 2024) operated within different framework: anti-establishment + populist + culture-war Republican rather than Reagan-Bush establishment Republican. The 2004 election was last election of post-Reagan Republican ascendance + last classic Republican-establishment victory.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural peak.

**QUESTION 7**

Bush states (31): most South + Plains + Mountain West + parts Midwest. Kerry states (19 + DC): Northeast + West Coast + selected Midwest + HI + DC. Pattern: Solid South consolidated; Plains + Mountain West Republican; Industrial Midwest contested; Northeast + West Coast Democratic. The 2004 map confirmed post-1992 Democratic coastal-Midwest coalition vs Republican Southern-Mountain-Plains coalition. Industrial Midwest swing states would be structurally decisive in subsequent elections.

AP students should be able to articulate.

## Discussion prompts

- 1** Bush 2004 was first Republican popular vote victory since Bush 41 1988 (16-year gap). Identify three structural reasons Republicans had difficulty winning popular vote 1988-2004.
- 2** Swift Boat Veterans for Truth attacked Kerry's structural strength (Vietnam service). Identify three structural reasons attacks on candidate's strengths can be more politically effective than attacks on weaknesses.