

Red States, Blue States: Mapping the Presidential Election

Overview

Topic: Voting Patterns, Electoral Process

Grade Level: Grades 6-8

Subject Area: History and Civics

Time Required: 2 class periods

Goals/Rationale

- Observe and analyze voting patterns in US presidential elections
- Engage students in current election
- Read and interpret data

Essential Question

What makes voting patterns change over time?

Objectives

Students will:

- analyze 1960 election results to identify voting patterns, for example, by region.
- predict and record current election results.
- compare the results and identify changes in voting patterns.

Connections to Curriculum (Standards)

National Council for the History Education

History's Habits of Mind 12. Understand the relationship between geography and history as a matrix of time and place, and as a context for events.

National History Standards

Historical Comprehension

Historical Analysis and Interpretation

National Standards for Civics and Government

III. How does the government established by the Constitution Embody the Purposes, Values, and Principles of American Democracy?

V. What are the Roles of the Citizen in American Democracy?

Preparation

Prior Knowledge and Skills

Knowledge of Electoral College

Historical Background and Context

"He's too young to be president." "He doesn't have enough experience." Voters expressed these concerns in 1960 when a 42 year-old senator from Massachusetts threw his hat into the ring as a Democratic candidate for president.

Age was but one of John F. Kennedy's challenges. He had to convince tens of millions of Americans that religion should not be a factor in judging a candidate's ability to lead. At the time, anti-Catholic sentiment was extremely high and many voters feared that because Kennedy was Catholic, he would be obligated to follow the Pope's orders and decisions. With an energetic, highly organized campaign headed by his 32 year-old brother Robert (Bobby) and well-financed by his father, Kennedy overcame these two great obstacles, his youth and his religion, to receive the nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, California in July 1960.

The campaign race was neck and neck through the fall and included significant historic events. On September 26, 1960, over 70 million Americans tuned in to see Democrat John F. Kennedy and Republican Richard M. Nixon, side by side, in the first televised presidential debate. Kennedy, well-prepared, tanned, and smartly dressed in a dark suit, exuded calm and confidence. Nixon, who was recovering from a knee injury, and exhausted from extensive campaigning, sweated profusely under the studio lights. Although three more debates would follow, many voters judged the candidates based on their television appearance that evening. A poll following the debate reported Kennedy edging out Nixon, 49% to 46%. In late October, Kennedy's advisers convinced him to make a telephone call to a pregnant Coretta Scott King to offer support. Her husband, Martin Luther King Jr., had been unjustly jailed. News of the call was well-received by thousands of African-American voters. Some historians believe the call galvanized the black vote and led to a Kennedy victory.

On Election Day, November 8, 1960, the race was still close. Not until 3:30am on November 9th, did John F. Kennedy pulled himself away from the incoming results on television to make his way to bed in Hyannisport, Massachusetts. Even with a disappointing loss in Ohio, he had garnered 261 electoral votes, 8 votes shy of the target number - 269. About two hours later, a

secret service security detail was sent to the Kennedy compound to protect the new president: his victory was almost assured when results came in from Michigan that would make it impossible for Nixon to win.

Kennedy won by approximately 118, 550 votes, the slimmest popular vote margin since 1888. Although Kennedy barely won the popular vote, he clearly secured sufficient electoral votes, 303 to Nixon's 219. (Although he received 540,520 more popular votes than George W. Bush, Al Gore lost the electoral vote in the election of 2000.)

How did Kennedy win the 1960 election? Nixon actually won 26 states, but the 23 states Kennedy won held more electoral votes (see 1960 Election Results handout). The number of electors for each state is based on its population (the number of senators plus representatives). Kennedy increased his total by winning several states with big urban centers in the Northeast and in industrial states. With the help of his Texan vice presidential candidate Lyndon B. Johnson, he was able to deliver much of the South. Nixon won big victories in the farm belt and in the West, where states (with the exception of California) have fewer electoral votes. In three states, some or all of the electors voted for segregationist Harry F. Byrd Sr.

Materials (included in downloadable pdf)

- 1960 Election Results
- Current Election Results

Procedure

Challenge your students to analyze the results of the 1960 election. You may reproduce the map, *1960 Election Results*, to use with these discussion questions.

1. What do you notice about the 1960 election results? What patterns do you notice?
2. How many states did Nixon win? How many states did Kennedy win? How did Kennedy win the electoral vote?
3. How do you think the upcoming final results for the major parties will differ from the 1960 results? What accounts for this change? Why do you predict these results?

For further research:

1. Reflect on the patterns you identified on the 1960 electoral map. Why do you think these patterns emerged?
2. There is a third color, dark blue, on the map. What candidate is represented by the dark blue color? Why did some electors vote for this person? How did this affect the election?

Election Results: Upcoming Presidential Election

Use the *Current Election Results* handout to predict and record the results of this year's presidential election. You may reproduce the blank map and use it in several ways.

1. Have students predict the results of an upcoming election. They should color states they believe will vote Republican in red and states that will vote Democratic in blue, or otherwise indicate the results. To bolster their prediction, encourage them to study recent electoral maps, polls, and news articles, and web sites.
2. Have students identify swing states. They may leave these states blank, or outline them in the color they predict the state will vote.
3. On the night of the election, send a blank map home with students to record the results as they are announced (or to be filled in the next day.)
4. As a class, or individually in writing, have students compare the 1960 results to the current election. How accurate were their predictions? What accounts for the change in these patterns?

Assessment

Have students create a news show in which they report and interpret election results. The show may focus on the 1960 election, a current election, or a comparison of the two. The script should include “commentators” and visual aids for the viewers.

Accommodation

Designate regions on the map, i.e., northeast, south, west, midwest. Have students identify which candidate won in each region.

Additional Resources

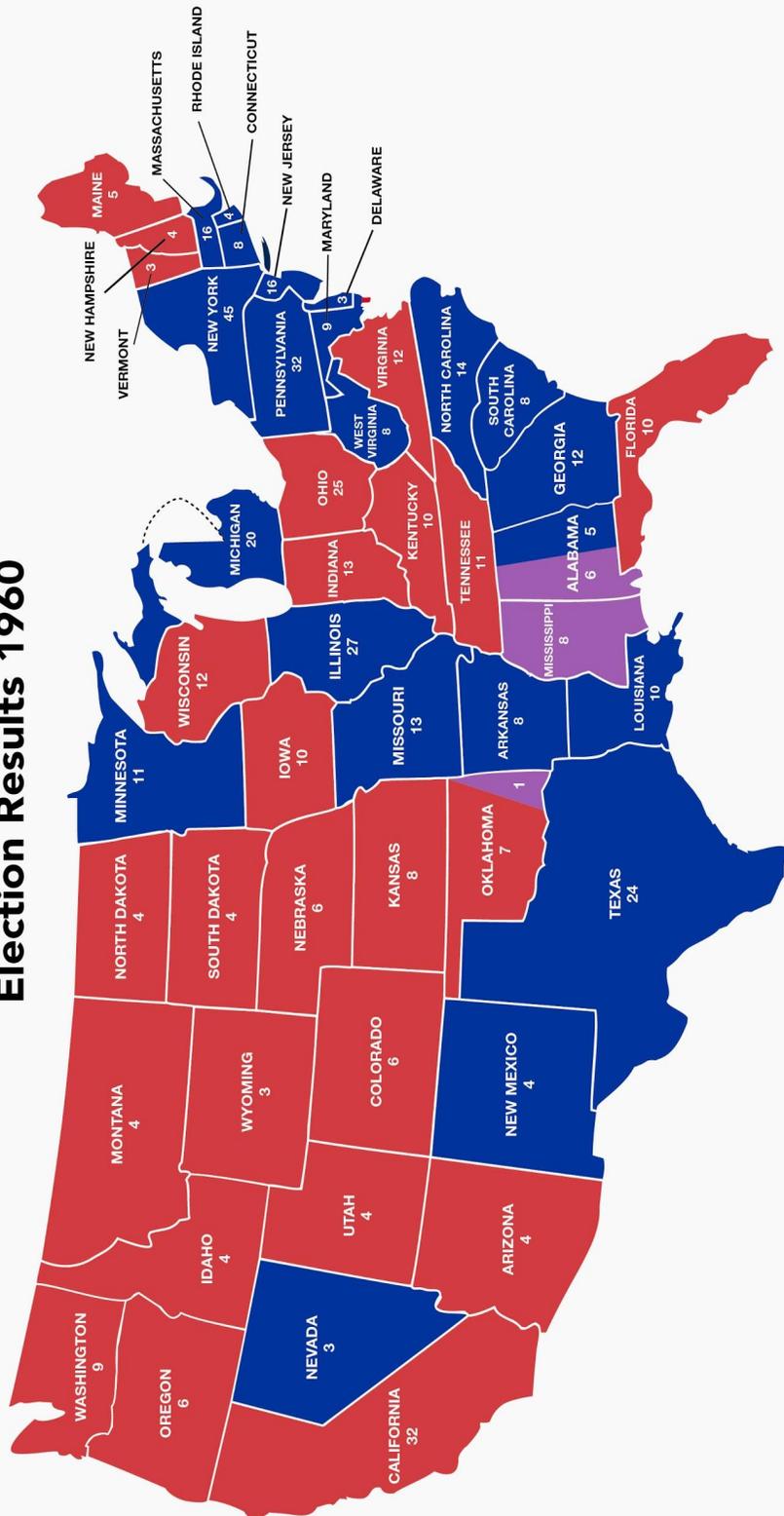
[JFK in History: The Campaign of 1960](#): A topic guide on the 1960 election. Includes links to JFK's announcement of his candidacy, audio recordings and transcripts from the Kennedy/Nixon televised debates, and his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention.

"[The Most Powerful and Precious Right](#)": A Voting Rights Photo Book: Drawing on the JFK Library archives and other collections, this resource presents the story of voting rights in the United States and, in particular, the challenges and risks citizens and leaders have taken to address racial discrimination in voting. Includes photographs, documents, and guiding questions.

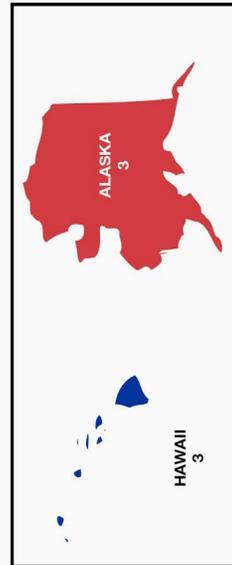
[US Electoral College](#): Comprehensive resource on the Electoral College from the National Archives. Includes FAQs, results from past elections, Electoral College calculator, popular vote, and links to lesson plans and web sites.

[National Student Mock Election](#): Information on how to participate in this national program. The JFK Presidential Library and Museum is the state coordinator for Massachusetts.

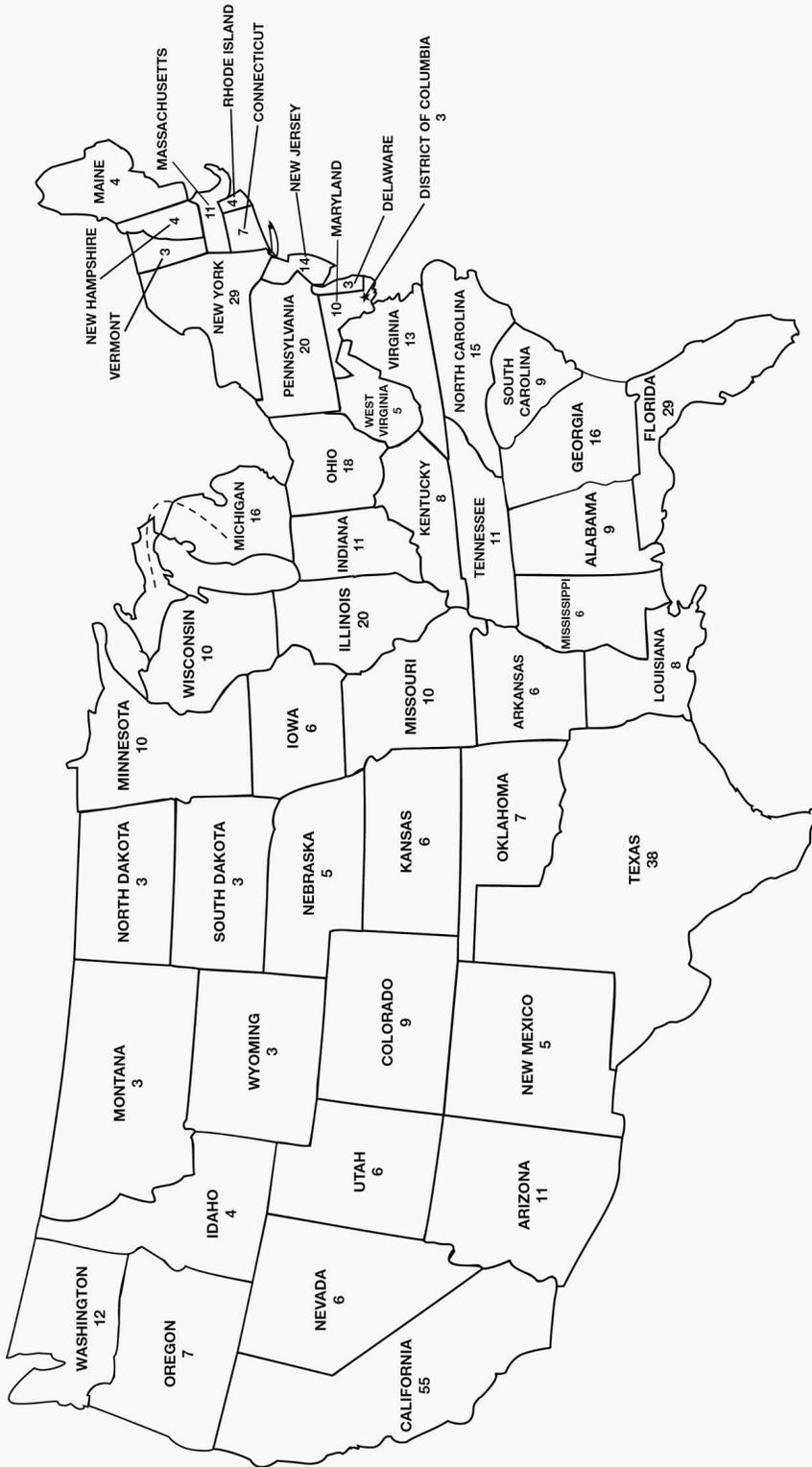
Election Results 1960



Candidate	Color	Political Party	Popular Votes	Electoral Votes
John F. Kennedy		Democratic	34,226,731	303
Richard M. Nixon		Republican	34,108,157	219
Harry Byrd, Sr.		Democratic	-----	15



Election Results 2020



Candidate	Color	Political Party	Popular Votes	Electoral Votes
				
				
				

