

American History: The Disputed Election of 2000

AP
Democratic candidate Al Gore, left, and Republican candidate George W. Bush shake hands before the first presidential debate in 2000



STEVE EMBER:
Welcome to THE
MAKING OF A NATION
– American history in
VOA Special English.
I'm Steve Ember.

This week in our series, we look at the presidential election of two thousand. It was an election that few Americans would soon forget.

DAN RATHER (CBS NEWS): "The presidential race looks jar-lid-tight. We could be in for a long night, as voters decide whether Vice President Al Gore or Texas Governor George Bush will be the next president of the United States. It is that close."

(MUSIC)

In two thousand, Americans were preparing to elect a new president in November. The United States Constitution limits presidents to two terms. Bill Clinton would be leaving office. So his Democratic Party needed to choose a new candidate.

The Democrats nominated Clinton's vice president, Al Gore. Gore chose Senator Joseph Lieberman of Connecticut as his running mate. Lieberman became the first Jewish candidate ever nominated by a major party to such a high office. He was first elected to the Senate in nineteen eighty-eight.

(MUSIC)

Al Gore was born in Washington in nineteen forty-eight. He was named after his father, a United States senator from Tennessee. The future vice president grew up in Washington and in Carthage, Tennessee, where his family had a farm.

He studied government at Harvard in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and graduated in nineteen sixty-nine. That was during the Vietnam War. His father opposed American involvement in that war. But the young Al Gore joined the Army and spent about six months of his service as a military journalist in Vietnam.

Back in civilian life, Gore again worked as a reporter. Later he studied religion and then law at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. But he dropped out of law school to enter politics.

He was elected to the United States House of Representatives in nineteen seventy-six. He became known for supporting nuclear arms control and protecting the environment.

Al Gore was elected to the Senate in nineteen eighty-four. He was re-elected six years later. That was after he had tried to become the Democratic candidate for president in nineteen eighty-eight.

Then, in nineteen ninety-two, Bill Clinton won the party's nomination and asked Al Gore to be his vice president. As vice president, Gore became known for his work on issues involving the environment, technology and foreign relations.

(MUSIC)

In March nineteen ninety-nine he gave an interview on CNN. During that interview he talked about his plans to enter the race for the presidential nomination the following year.

He made the statement that during his service in Congress ...

AL GORE: "I took the initiative in creating the Internet."

He went on to say that he "took the initiative in moving forward" other efforts important to the economy, environmental protection and educational improvements. But his comment about the Internet led to jokes and criticism that he was claiming to have actually invented it.

(MUSIC)

The Republicans nominated Texas Governor George W. Bush as their presidential candidate. For his running mate, he chose Dick Cheney, a former secretary of defense.

George Walker Bush was born in Texas in nineteen forty-six, the oldest child of former President George Herbert Walker Bush. He grew up in the Texas cities of Midland and Houston.

He graduated from Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, and earned a master's in business administration at Harvard University.

During the Vietnam War years, he was a pilot in the Texas Air National Guard. Later he worked in the state's oil and gas industry.

In nineteen eighty-eight, Bush worked on his father's winning campaign for president. Later, he became one of the owners of the Texas Rangers, a Major League baseball team.

In nineteen ninety-four George W. Bush was elected governor of Texas. He was re-elected four years later.

Several other candidates also ran for president in the November two thousand election. These minor or so-called third party candidates included activist Ralph Nader. He represented the Green Party. He criticized large corporations for having too much influence in America. Pat Buchanan, a conservative, ran as the Reform Party candidate.

(MUSIC)

Public opinion surveys showed that the race between George Bush and Al Gore would be extremely close. The election took place on November seventh. More than one hundred million people voted for them. Al Gore received about five hundred forty thousand more of those votes than George Bush did.

(MUSIC)

But winning the popular vote does not make someone president.

Americans do not directly elect their president. When they vote for a candidate, what they are really doing is voting for electors. The number of electors for each state is based on the size of its congressional delegation, which is based on population. These electors then vote in December in a system known as the Electoral College. The Electoral College officially elects the president.

In the two thousand election, there were five hundred thirty-eight electors in the Electoral College. To become president, the winner needed a simple majority of two hundred seventy.

(MUSIC)

Al Gore won the popular vote, but neither he nor George Bush won a majority of the electoral votes. Not that any of this was clear on Election Night.

DAN RATHER: "Bulletin: Florida pulled back into the undecided column. This thing is so wild, wacky, and woolly, nobody knows how it's going to come out."

BERNARD SHAW (CNN): "... as CNN right now is moving Florida to the too-close-to-call column ... "

TOM BROKAW (NBC NEWS): "... too close to call ..."

DAN RATHER: "Florida is now too close to call. [I] want to say that again, it's a confusing situation. Now, if you're disgusted with us, frankly I don't blame you."

(MUSIC)

Florida is a big southern state. It had enough electoral votes to make either candidate the winner. Election officials counted almost six million votes on Election Night. George Bush had slightly more votes than Al Gore but not enough to avoid a recount. Florida state law calls for a recount when the difference between two candidates is less than one-half of one percent of the votes.

State recounts normally involve the governor. But the governor of Florida said he would not get involved. That was because the governor was Jeb Bush, George Bush's brother.

And there were other issues with the election. Some black voters said election workers had unjustly prevented them from voting. There were also problems with voting machines and ballots. In one area, some Gore supporters believed they had voted for Pat Buchanan by mistake. The names were next to one another on the ballot. Democrats said the ballot design was illegal. Republicans said Democratic Party officials had never objected to it.

(MUSIC)

The disputed election results in Florida introduced a new term into popular speech. Americans began talking about "chads." Whether it was "hanging chads," "pregnant chads" or "dimpled chads," it amounted to the same problem. It meant

that a voting machine had not cleanly punched out a bit of paper, called a chad, when the voter made a choice. As a result, the ballot would confuse a vote-counting machine and make the choice unreadable.

That, in turn, meant election workers had to look at each questionable ballot and try to decide the voter's choice. All this took place with the nation -- and the world -- watching and wondering who would become America's next president.

(MUSIC)

Something else only added to anger and debate over the situation in Florida. Florida's secretary of state, its chief election officer, Katherine Harris, also happened to be a leader of the Bush campaign there.

KATHERINE HARRIS: "Governor George W. Bush – two million, nine hundred twelve thousand seven hundred ninety."

Almost three weeks after the election, Florida officials declared George Bush the winner of the state's twenty-five electoral votes. That gave him a total of two hundred seventy-one.

Out of six million ballots, state officials said he had defeated Al Gore by five hundred thirty-seven votes.

But the election was still not over. Gore and his supporters in Florida asked the courts to reject the results because of what they said were the many voting problems. The Florida Supreme Court ordered another count of the disputed ballots.

Bush campaign officials quickly appealed to the United States Supreme Court. The court said Florida law did not explain how officials should judge the ballots. The court found the situation in Florida unconstitutional because there were different standards around the state. The justices also said not enough time remained to settle the issue before the Electoral College had to meet. On December twelfth, the court voted seven to two to end the recount, and five to four against ordering a new one.

Six days later, on December eighteenth, members of the Electoral College met in each state capital and the District of Columbia. They made the election official. George W. Bush would become the forty-third president of the United States.

GEORGE BUSH: "I, George Walker Bush, do solemnly swear ..."

WILLIAM REHNQUIST (CHIEF JUSTICE): "That I will faithfully execute the office of president of the United States..."

GEORGE BUSH: "That I will faithfully execute the office of president of the United States..."

He took office on January twentieth, two thousand one.

(MUSIC)

The election dispute had divided Americans. But less than a year later, the nation was brought together by events that would set the direction for George W. Bush's presidency.

KATIE COURIC (NBC): "A plane has just crashed into the World Trade Center here in New York City. It happened just a few moments ago..."

The United States suffered the worst terrorist attacks in its history on September eleventh, two thousand one -- a day that would be remembered as 9-11. That will be our story next week.

You can find our series online with transcripts, MP3s, podcasts and pictures at voaspecialenglish.com. You can also follow us on Facebook and Twitter at VOA Learning English. I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next week for THE MAKING OF A NATION -- American history in VOA Special English.

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