3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1908

William Howard Taft vs William Jennings Bryan

A 35-minute lesson on the 1908 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Progressive Era	ELECTORAL VOTES 483 total
WINNER William Howard Taft (Republican) · 321 EV	RUNNER-UP William Jennings Bryan (Democratic) · 162 EV
KEY ISSUE Continuation of Roosevelt's progressive policies; tariff reform	TURNOUT 65.7%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1908: William Howard Taft vs William Jennings Bryan

Timing

5 min	Warm-up	When an outgoing president picks his successor, that person often disappoints him. What political mechanisms make it hard for a successor to maintain his predecessor's policies?
15 min	Reading	The 1908 election was the 31st U.S. presidential election. It produced William Howard Taft's 321-162 electoral-vote victory over William Jennings Bryan - Taft's first and only successful presidential campaign and Bryan's third and final presidential loss. Taft was Theodore Roosevelt's handpicked successor; the 1908 result confirmed both the 1896-1932 Republican alignment and the continuing dominance of Roosevelt's Progressive Republicanism. The election would prove consequential because Taft's 1909-13 presidency would alienate Roosevelt, leading to the 1912 Republican split and Wilson's Democratic victory. The political conditions were defined by Roosevelt's decision not to seek a third term. Roosevelt had promised on Election Night 1904: "Under no circumstances will I be a candidate for or accept another nomination." Despite his enormous personal popularity and his Progressive policy momentum, Roosevelt kept the promise. The political question for 1908 was who would succeed him and whether the successor would continue the Square Deal agenda. The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 16-19, 1908. Roosevelt had spent the previous year actively organizing for his preferred successor: William Howard Taft, his Secretary of War (1904-08). Taft was 51, a 6'2" tall, 350+ pound former federal judge (1892-1900), former Governor of the Philippines (1900-04), and former Secretary of War. Taft's career had been judicial: he had served on the federal circuit court (1892-1900) and had aspired to a Supreme Court appointment throughout his career. He had repeatedly turned down Roosevelt's Supreme Court offers (in 1902, 1903, and 1906) to focus on his Cabinet work. Roosevelt's preference for Taft reflected three considerations: (1) Taft was personally loyal to Roosevelt. (2) Taft had been instrumental in Square Deal implementation as Secretary of War. (3) Taft was the only Cabinet member who could conceivably win the Republican nomination against more conservative alternatives. Roosevelt actively pushed Taft's candidacy through correspondence with Republican delegates; Taft was nominated on the first ballot. James S. Sherman of New York was the vice presidential candidate. The Democratic National Convention met in Denver on July 7-10, 1908 and nominated William Jennings Bryan by acclamation - his third presidential nomination.

Bryan was 48, the most prominent Democratic politician of his generation. Bryan had spent the 1900-1908 period editing the Commoner (a weekly Democratic Party newspaper) and delivering paid public speeches throughout the country. His 1904 decision not to seek the Democratic nomination (in favor of Parker) had been politically costly - Parker's 37.6% loss demonstrated that conservative Democratic strategy could not break the Republican alignment. Bryan's 1908 strategy was to compete for the Progressive label by demanding more aggressive reforms than the Roosevelt-Taft Republicans. John W. Kern of Indiana was the vice presidential candidate.

The Democratic platform endorsed: (1) Federal bank deposit insurance - to prevent the kind of bank failures that had occurred in the 1907 Panic. (2) Direct election of U.S. senators (later operationalized through the 17th Amendment, 1913). (3) Federal income tax (later operationalized through the 16th Amendment, 1913). (4) Federal regulation of telegraph and telephone monopolies. (5) An 8-hour workday for federal employees. (6) Stronger antitrust enforcement than the Roosevelt administration had pursued. The Bryan platform represented a structural shift in Democratic policy: by 1908, Democrats were attempting to out-Progressive the Republicans rather than challenge them from the populist left.

The Socialist Party of America nominated Eugene V. Debs for the third time (after 1900 and 1904). Debs would win 420,852 popular votes in 1908 - approximately the same as 1904. The Socialist vote remained structurally significant as evidence of leftward political pressure.

The campaign was a Roosevelt-versus-Bryan campaign in everything but name. Roosevelt actively campaigned for Taft - violating the long-standing tradition that sitting presidents should not personally campaign for their successors. Roosevelt wrote public letters, gave Cabinet speeches, and personally directed the Republican strategy from the White House. Taft's active campaigning was limited; Bryan toured the country on his familiar whistle-stop style. Republican fundraising approximately $1.7 million; Democratic approximately $620,000.

The campaign's primary issues were: (1) Continuation of the Square Deal - Taft endorsed Roosevelt's policies and promised to continue them. (2) Stronger Progressive reforms - Bryan demanded federal deposit insurance, income tax, direct election of senators, and stronger antitrust enforcement. (3) Tariff policy - Republicans defended the Dingley Tariff; Democrats demanded reduction. (4) Federal labor protections.

Taft won 321 electoral votes to Bryan's 162. Taft carried 29 states; Bryan carried 17 states. The popular vote: Taft 7,679,006 (51.6%); Bryan 6,409,106 (43.0%); Debs (Socialist) 420,852 (2.8%); Chafin (Prohibition) 254,087 (1.7%); Hisgen (Independence) 82,537 (0.6%); Watson (Populist) 29,100 (0.2%); Gillhaus (Socialist Labor) 14,021 (0.1%). Taft-Bryan popular-vote margin: 1,269,900.

The geographic pattern was similar to 1904 but slightly less Republican-dominant. Taft lost Kentucky, Tennessee, Maryland, Nevada, and Oklahoma (a new state, admitted 1907) compared to Roosevelt 1904. Bryan held the Solid South (11 former Confederate states), the 4 Border States (Kentucky, Tennessee, Maryland - Maryland flipped back; Missouri stayed in Bryan column), plus Oklahoma and Colorado. Taft's 1908 victory was less decisive than Roosevelt's 1904 but still confirmed Republican alignment dominance.

Taft was inaugurated March 4, 1909. Roosevelt left for a year-long African safari, expecting to give Taft room to govern. But Taft's presidency proved a structural disappointment for Roosevelt. The August 1909 Payne-Aldrich Tariff was substantially more conservative than Taft had promised during the campaign; Taft defended it as "the best tariff bill that the Republican party has ever passed." The Ballinger-Pinchot affair (January 1910) saw Taft fire Roosevelt's conservation appointee Gifford Pinchot over a dispute with Interior Secretary Richard Ballinger. By the end of 1910, Roosevelt was publicly criticizing Taft. By 1912, Roosevelt was attempting to recover the Republican nomination.

The 1912 Republican Convention denied Roosevelt the nomination in favor of Taft. Roosevelt bolted to form the Progressive Party ("Bull Moose Party"). The Roosevelt-Taft split produced Woodrow Wilson's Democratic victory (435-88 EV over Roosevelt 88 and Taft 8). The 1908 election's structural significance was thus largely retrospective: it set up the 1912 Republican split that briefly broke the 1896-1932 alignment.

The 1908 election's significance for Bryan was structural finality. The 48-year-old Bryan would never run for president again. He served as Wilson's Secretary of State (1913-15) and resigned in protest over U.S. drift toward World War I. He died in 1925 - five days after testifying as the prosecutor in the famous Scopes "Monkey Trial" in Dayton, Tennessee against high school teacher John T. Scopes for teaching evolution. Bryan's three-time presidential loss is the most prominent example of a major-party nominee who never won the presidency.

10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1908 Election

The 1908 election was the 31st U.S. presidential election. It produced William Howard Taft's 321-162 electoral-vote victory over William Jennings Bryan - Taft's first and only successful presidential campaign and Bryan's third and final presidential loss. Taft was Theodore Roosevelt's handpicked successor; the 1908 result confirmed both the 1896-1932 Republican alignment and the continuing dominance of Roosevelt's Progressive Republicanism. The election would prove consequential because Taft's 1909-13 presidency would alienate Roosevelt, leading to the 1912 Republican split and Wilson's Democratic victory.

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Key words

William Howard Taft	The 27th U.S. president (1909-13) and 10th Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court (1921-30). The only person to hold both offices. 6'2" tall, over 350 pounds - the heaviest president in U.S. history. Former federal judge, governor of the Philippines (1900-04), Secretary of War (1904-08).
Handpicked successor	A presidential candidate chosen by the outgoing president to continue his policies. Roosevelt picked Taft as his handpicked successor in 1908.

Payne-Aldrich Tariff The August 1909 federal law modifying the Dingley Tariff. The bill was substantially more conservative than Taft had promised during the 1908 campaign. Sponsored by Rep. Sereno Payne and Senator Nelson Aldrich. Taft's defense of the bill as "the best tariff bill that the Republican party has ever passed" alienated Progressive Republicans and Roosevelt.

Ballinger-Pinchot affair The January 1910 conservation dispute. Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot (a Roosevelt appointee) accused Interior Secretary Richard Ballinger of corruption regarding Alaska coal lands. Taft fired Pinchot in January 1910. Roosevelt was deeply angered by the firing; the affair was a structural inflection point in the Roosevelt-Taft split.

Eugene V. Debs American socialist labor leader. Founded the American Socialist Party 1901. 1908 was his third presidential campaign; he won 420,852 popular votes. His peak was 1912 (6%) and 1920 (913,693 votes from federal prison).

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did William Howard Taft win in 1908?

( ) A. 292
( ) B. 321
( ) C. 336
( ) D. 349

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many times had Bryan run for president before 1908?

( ) A. 1
( ) B. 2
( ) C. 3
( ) D. 4

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Theodore Roosevelt pick William Howard Taft as his successor in 1908?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Payne-Aldrich Tariff and Ballinger-Pinchot affair contribute to the Roosevelt-Taft split?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

321. Taft 321; Bryan 162.

Taft's 159-EV margin was less than Roosevelt's 196-EV margin in 1904 but still decisive.

QUESTION 2

2. Bryan had run in 1896 (lost to McKinley) and 1900 (lost to McKinley). 1908 was his third nomination.

AP students should know Bryan ran three times total.

QUESTION 3

Roosevelt picked Taft for three structural reasons: (1) Taft was personally loyal to Roosevelt. They had been close personal and political friends since Roosevelt's 1898 New York governorship; Taft had been instrumental in Square Deal implementation as Secretary of War (1904-08). (2) Taft had been the most reliable Cabinet member in supporting Roosevelt's Progressive policies. Roosevelt believed Taft would continue trust-busting, conservation, and federal regulation. (3) Taft was the only Cabinet member who could conceivably win the Republican nomination against more conservative alternatives. Roosevelt's preferred Progressive Republican (Senator Robert M. La Follette of Wisconsin) would have alienated conservative Republicans; Taft's judicial background and Cabinet record made him acceptable to multiple Republican factions. Roosevelt's 1907-08 active campaigning for Taft's nomination (writing letters to delegates, giving speeches, directing strategy) made Taft the inevitable nominee. The choice would prove structurally disappointing for Roosevelt - Taft's judicial-temperament conservatism on tariff and conservation issues led to the 1912 Republican split.

AP students should be able to articulate Roosevelt's rationale.

QUESTION 4

The Payne-Aldrich Tariff (August 1909) and Ballinger-Pinchot affair (January 1910) were the two structural inflection points in the Roosevelt-Taft split. Payne-Aldrich Tariff: Taft had promised during the 1908 campaign to support significant tariff reduction. The bill that emerged from Senate Republican Boss Nelson Aldrich's deals was substantially more conservative than Taft had promised - maintaining most Dingley Tariff rates with modest adjustments. Taft's September 17, 1909 defense of the bill as "the best tariff bill that the Republican party has ever passed" alienated Progressive Republicans and Roosevelt. Progressive Republicans like Senator Robert M. La Follette had expected Taft to challenge Aldrich; Taft's acquiescence demonstrated his judicial-temperament unwillingness to engage in political fights. Ballinger-Pinchot affair: Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot (a Roosevelt appointee and personal friend) accused Interior Secretary Richard Ballinger of corruption regarding Alaska coal lands. Taft fired Pinchot in January 1910 for insubordination after Pinchot publicly attacked Ballinger. Roosevelt was deeply angered. Together, the two events demonstrated to Roosevelt that Taft was structurally aligning with the conservative Republican establishment rather than maintaining the Progressive Republican coalition Roosevelt had built. By December 1910, Roosevelt was publicly criticizing Taft; by 1912, Roosevelt was challenging Taft for the Republican nomination.

AP students should be able to articulate both inflection points.