1908

William Howard Taft vs William Jennings Bryan

A 50-minute lesson on the 1908 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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%

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1908: William Howard Taft vs William Jennings Bryan

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two structural challenges facing a vice presidential successor who wants to win his own term as president. For each, identify the specific 1908-1912 development that demonstrates the challenge.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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 (Roosevelt was perhaps the most popular U.S. president since Lincoln) and his Progressive policy momentum, Roosevelt kept the promise. The political question for 1908 was who would succeed him. The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 16-19, 1908. Roosevelt had spent the previous year actively organizing for 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. 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. (2) Taft had been the most reliable Cabinet member in supporting Roosevelt's Progressive policies. (3) Taft was the only Cab-

inet 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 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. He 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. 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; his judicial temperament made him uncomfortable with the new whistle-stop campaign style that Bryan had pioneered in 1896. 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. (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 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, Nevada, and Oklahoma 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 (1907 statehood) 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'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. 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.

Taft's 1909-13 presidency had significant achievements that Progressive Republicans underestimated. (1) Antitrust enforcement: Taft's Department of Justice initiated 80 antitrust suits in four years, compared to 25 under Roosevelt's seven years. Major Taft antitrust achievements included the 1911 Supreme Court breakup of Standard Oil (initiated under Roosevelt 1906, completed under Taft) and the 1911 Supreme Court breakup of American Tobacco Company. (2) Conservation: Taft signed the 1910 Pickett Act allowing federal protection of public lands. (3) Federal regulation: Taft signed the Mann-Elkins Act (June 1910) extending ICC authority to telephone, telegraph, and cable communications. (4) Constitutional amendments: The 16th

		Amendment (income tax, ratified February 1913) and 17th Amendment (direct election of senators, ratified April 1913) were approved by Congress during Taft's presidency. (5) Postal-savings system (1910). (6) Federal Children's Bureau (April 1912). Despite these substantive Progressive achievements, Taft's political handling of tariff and conservation issues alienated the Roosevelt-Progressive Republican faction sufficiently to produce the 1912 split. 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. Taft's post-presidential career was structurally significant. After losing the 1912 re-election bid, Taft became a Yale law professor (1913-21). In 1921, President Warren G. Harding appointed Taft the 10th Chief Justice of the United States. Taft served as Chief Justice from 1921 to 1930 - a position he had always preferred over the presidency. He died March 8, 1930, one month after resigning from the Court. Taft is the only person in U.S. history to serve as both President and Chief Justice.
10 min	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

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

William Howard Taft

The 27th U.S. president (1909-13) and 10th Chief Justice (1921-30). The only person to hold both offices. 6'2" tall, over 350 pounds - heaviest president in U.S. history. Former federal judge, governor of the Philippines, Secretary of War.

Handpicked successor

A presidential candidate chosen by the outgoing president to continue his policies. Roosevelt picked Taft as his handpicked successor in 1908. Taft would prove more conservative than Roosevelt expected.

Payne-Aldrich Tariff

The August 1909 federal law modifying the Dingley Tariff. Substantially more conservative than Taft had promised. Sponsored by Rep. Sereno Payne and Senator Nelson Aldrich. Alienated Progressive Republicans and Roosevelt.

Ballinger-Pinchot affair

The January 1910 conservation dispute. Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot accused Interior Secretary Richard Ballinger of corruption regarding Alaska coal lands. Taft fired Pinchot. Roosevelt deeply angered.

Eugene V. Debs

American socialist labor leader. Founded the American Socialist Party 1901. 1908 was his third presidential campaign (420,852 votes).

Bull Moose Party (Progressive Party)

The 1912 third party formed by Theodore Roosevelt after the Republican Convention denied him the nomination. Roosevelt declared he felt "as strong as a bull moose." The party's platform endorsed comprehensive Progressive reform.

Acceptance Speech for Republican Nomination

WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT, JULY 28, 1908

Taft delivered this speech in Cincinnati, Ohio on July 28, 1908 - five weeks after his June 1908 Republican nomination. The speech was Taft's formal acceptance of the nomination and articulation of his policy positions. The "Roosevelt policies" passage explicitly committed Taft to continuing Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal agenda - the structural foundation of his 1908 campaign. The "labor and capital" passage articulates Taft's judicial-temperament view of regulation: arbitration and orderly resolution rather than political conflict. The speech demonstrates Taft's structural strengths (judicial professionalism, commitment to Progressive policy) and his structural weaknesses (lack of charismatic political conflict-management) that would shape his 1909-13 presidency.

> *"The chief function of the next administration in my judgment is distinct from, and a progressive development of, that which has been performed by President Roosevelt. The chief function of the next administration is to complete and perfect the machinery by which these standards may be maintained, by which the lawbreakers may be promptly restrained and punished, but which shall operate with sufficient accuracy and dispatch to interfere with legitimate business as little as possible. Such machinery is not now adequate. Persons who have committed the unlawful acts which the antitrust law forbids should be subjected to civil suits and to criminal prosecution; but the machinery of justice is so cumbersome and slow that the public has lost faith in its capacity to administer justice promptly. The principal task of the new administration in this regard, therefore, will be to overhaul the agencies of justice so as to facilitate proceedings under the antitrust law."*

Taft, "Acceptance Speech for Republican Nomination" (Cincinnati, OH, July 28, 1908). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ≈150 words.

The 1908 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

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 did Bryan run for president in his lifetime?

( ) A. 2
( ) B. 3
( ) C. 4
( ) D. 5

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Taft says he will "overhaul the agencies of justice so as to facilitate proceedings under the antitrust law." What approach to antitrust does this reflect, and how did Taft's actual record compare?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Payne-Aldrich Tariff (1909) and Ballinger-Pinchot affair (1910) contribute to the Roosevelt-Taft split?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1908 election map, identify Taft's 29 states and Bryan's 17 states. How did the 1908 map compare to the 1904 map?

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

3. Bryan ran for president three times: 1896 (lost to McKinley), 1900 (lost to McKinley), and 1908 (lost to Taft).

AP students should know Bryan's three-loss record.

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. (2) Taft had been the most reliable Cabinet member in supporting Roosevelt's Progressive policies as Secretary of War. (3) Taft was the only Cabinet member who could conceivably win the Republican nomination against more conservative alternatives. Roosevelt's preferred Progressive Republican (La Follette) would have alienated conservatives; Taft's judicial background and Cabinet record made him acceptable to multiple Republican factions. Roosevelt actively pushed Taft's candidacy through correspondence with Republican delegates. 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

Taft's "overhaul the agencies of justice" approach reflects his judicial-temperament view of antitrust regulation. Core elements: (1) Antitrust enforcement should be through legal-procedural improvements (faster courts, clearer rules) rather than political confrontation. (2) Antitrust should "interfere with legitimate business as little as possible" - emphasizing procedural fairness over substantive transformation. (3) Lawbreakers should be "subjected to civil suits and to criminal prosecution" with predictable judicial outcomes. The approach contrasted with Roosevelt's more politically aggressive Square Deal antitrust posture. Taft's actual record: Taft's Department of Justice initiated 80 antitrust suits in four years - compared to 25 under Roosevelt's seven years. Major Taft achievements included the 1911 Supreme Court breakup of Standard Oil (initiated under Roosevelt 1906, completed under Taft) and the 1911 Supreme Court breakup of American Tobacco. Numerically, Taft was MORE active on antitrust than Roosevelt. But Taft's judicial-procedural approach (slow courts, predictable rulings) was politically less satisfying than Roosevelt's aggressive public confrontation. The lesson: Progressive Republicans valued political theater of trust-busting more than the actual legal outcomes; Taft's technically superior record was politically less successful than Roosevelt's.

AP students should be able to articulate both the approach and the record.

QUESTION 5

The Payne-Aldrich Tariff (August 1909) and Ballinger-Pinchot affair (January 1910) were the 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. 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. Ballinger-Pinchot affair: Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot (a Roosevelt appointee) accused Interior Secretary Richard Ballinger of corruption regarding Alaska coal lands. Taft fired Pinchot in January 1910 for insubordination. 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. 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.

QUESTION 6

Taft states: 29 states - the Northeast (Maine through Maryland), the Midwest (Ohio through North Dakota), the Mountain West (Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Utah), the West Coast (California, Oregon, Washington). Bryan states: 17 states - the Solid South (11 former Confederate states), 4 Border States (Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Maryland flipped back), plus Oklahoma (1907 statehood) and Colorado. Compared to 1904: Taft lost Kentucky, Tennessee, Nevada, and Oklahoma compared to Roosevelt 1904. The 1908 map showed slightly less Republican dominance than 1904 but still confirmed the structural Republican alignment. The 1908-1912 sequence would dramatically change: Wilson 1912 (after the Republican split) would carry 40 states; Wilson 1916 (without the Republican split) would still carry the Solid South + 12 Western/Mountain states.

AP students should be able to articulate the geographic pattern.