1908

William Howard Taft vs William Jennings Bryan

A 75-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%

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

1908: William Howard Taft vs William Jennings Bryan

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 1908 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1908 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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. Roosevelt had promised on Election Night 1904 not to seek a third term. He 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. Roosevelt actively pushed Taft's candidacy; Taft was nominated on the first ballot. James S. Sherman of New York was VP. The Democratic National Convention met in Denver on July 7-10, 1908 and nominated William Jennings Bryan by acclamation - his third presidential nomination. John W. Kern of Indiana was VP. The Democratic platform endorsed: federal bank deposit insurance, direct election of U.S. senators, federal income tax, federal regulation of telegraph and telephone monopolies, 8-hour workday for federal employees, and stronger antitrust enforcement. The Bryan platform represented a structural shift in Democratic policy: by 1908, Democrats were attempting to out-Progressive the

Republicans.

The Socialist Party of America nominated Eugene V. Debs for the third time. Debs would win 420,852 popular votes - approximately the same as 1904.

The campaign was a Roosevelt-versus-Bryan campaign in everything but name. Roosevelt actively campaigned for Taft. Republican fundraising approximately $1.7 million; Democratic approximately $620,000.

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%). Taft-Bryan popular-vote margin: 1,269,900.

Taft was inaugurated March 4, 1909. Roosevelt left for a year-long African safari. Taft's presidency proved a structural disappointment for Roosevelt.

The August 1909 Payne-Aldrich Tariff 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. The Ballinger-Pinchot affair (January 1910) saw Taft fire Roosevelt's conservation appointee Gifford Pinchot. By December 1910, Roosevelt was publicly criticizing Taft. By 1912, Roosevelt was attempting to recover the Republican nomination.

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 and the 1911 Supreme Court breakup of American Tobacco. (2) Conservation: Taft signed the 1910 Pickett Act. (3) Federal regulation: Taft signed the Mann-Elkins Act (June 1910) extending ICC authority. (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 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.

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." Bryan's three-time presidential loss is the most prominent example of a major-party nominee who never won.

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. He died March 8, 1930. Taft is the only person in U.S. history to serve as both President and Chief Justice. Taft's major Chief Justice achievement was the Judiciary Act of 1925 (which expanded Supreme Court discretion over its docket through the certiorari process).

The Bryan policy legacy was substantial. Many demands Bryan had made in 1896, 1900, and 1908 were enacted within 25 years: (1) Federal income tax - 16th Amendment ratified February 1913; first federal income tax under the 1913 Underwood Tariff. (2) Direct election of senators - 17th Amendment ratified April 1913. (3) Federal bank deposit insurance - Banking Act of 1933 (Glass-Steagall) established the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation. (4) Federal regulation of telegraph and telephone monopolies - Mann-Elkins Act (June 1910), Communications Act of 1934. (5) 8-hour workday - Adamson Act 1916, Fair Labor Standards Act 1938. (6) Federal antitrust - Clayton Antitrust Act 1914, FTC Act 1914. The Bryan-era Progressive demands had become structural features of 20th-century U.S. federal governance. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.

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

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1908 election tells you about the Progressive 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

William Howard Taft
The 27th U.S. president (1909-13) and 10th Chief Justice (1921-30). The only person to hold both offices. Heaviest president in U.S. history.

Payne-Aldrich Tariff
The August 1909 federal law modifying the Dingley Tariff. Substantially more conservative than Taft had promised.

Eugene V. Debs
American socialist labor leader. Founded the American Socialist Party 1901. Five-time presidential candidate.

Scopes Monkey Trial
The July 1925 trial of high school teacher John T. Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee for teaching evolution in violation of the state's Butler Act. Bryan was the prosecutor; Clarence Darrow was the defense. Bryan died five days after the trial.

Handpicked successor
A presidential candidate chosen by the outgoing president to continue his policies. Roosevelt picked Taft as his handpicked successor in 1908.

Ballinger-Pinchot affair
The January 1910 conservation dispute. Taft fired Roosevelt's conservation appointee Gifford Pinchot over a dispute with Interior Secretary Richard Ballinger.

Bull Moose Party (Progressive Party)
The 1912 third party formed by Theodore Roosevelt after the Republican Convention denied him the nomination.

Acceptance Speech for Republican Nomination

WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT, JULY 28, 1908

Taft delivered this speech in Cincinnati, Ohio on July 28, 1908. The speech committed Taft to continuing Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal agenda while emphasizing judicial-procedural approaches to antitrust enforcement. The "Roosevelt policies" passage and "machinery of justice" passage articulate Taft's structural approach: continuity of Progressive policy + judicial-procedural method.

> *"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 (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 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 to Roosevelt's?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Taft is the only person to serve as both President and Chief Justice. Explain his post-presidential career trajectory.

QUESTION 7 · 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.

QUESTION 2

3. Bryan ran for president three times: 1896, 1900, 1908. Lost all three.

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 1898. (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. 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 rather than political confrontation. (2) Antitrust should "interfere with legitimate business as little as possible." (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 and the 1911 Supreme Court breakup of American Tobacco. Numerically, Taft was MORE active on antitrust than Roosevelt. But Taft's judicial-procedural approach 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 the approach and 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 was substantially more conservative than promised. Taft's defense of the bill as "the best tariff bill that the Republican party has ever passed" alienated Progressive Republicans. Ballinger-Pinchot affair: Chief Forester Pinchot accused Interior Secretary Ballinger of corruption regarding Alaska coal lands. Taft fired Pinchot for insubordination. Roosevelt was deeply angered. Together, the events demonstrated Taft was aligning with the conservative Republican establishment.

AP students should be able to articulate both inflection points.

QUESTION 6

Taft's post-presidential career trajectory: (1) Lost 1912 re-election bid (the Roosevelt-Taft Republican split produced Wilson's 435-88 EV Democratic victory; Taft finished third with 8 EV - the worst incumbent president result in U.S. history). (2) Yale law professor (1913-21) - Taft's natural element after the presidency. (3) Provost of Yale (1913-21). (4) Chief Justice of the United States (1921-30) - appointed by President Warren G. Harding in 1921. Taft is the only person in U.S. history to serve as both President and Chief Justice. (5) Major Chief Justice achievement: the Judiciary Act of 1925 - which expanded Supreme Court discretion over its docket through the certiorari process. The Act allowed the Supreme Court to selectively choose which appeals to hear rather than being required to hear all federal appeals; structurally, the Act made the Supreme Court a court of last resort focused on constitutional and federal-question issues rather than error-correction. Taft died March 8, 1930 - one month after resigning from the Court due to declining health. Taft's post-presidential trajectory is a model of how a politician can use post-presidential years to pursue an alternative career better suited to his temperament than the presidency had been.

AP students should be able to articulate Taft's career trajectory.

QUESTION 7

Taft states: 29 states - the Northeast, the Midwest, the Mountain West, the West Coast. Bryan states: 17 states - the Solid South, 4 Border States, plus Oklahoma (1907 statehood) and Colorado. Compared to 1904: Taft lost Kentucky, Tennessee, Nevada, and Oklahoma. The 1908 map showed slightly less Republican dominance than 1904 but still confirmed the structural Republican alignment.

AP students should be able to articulate the geographic pattern.

Discussion prompts

1 Roosevelt's decision to handpick Taft as his successor and Roosevelt's active campaigning for Taft would prove structurally consequential. Identify three specific 1909-1912 developments that demonstrated the structural difficulty of presidential succession by handpicked candidate.

2 Bryan's 1908 platform demanded federal deposit insurance, income tax, direct election of senators, and stronger antitrust enforcement. Identify four of these demands that were enacted within 25 years and the specific federal legislation that operationalized each.