AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1908

William Howard Taft vs William Jennings Bryan

A 105-minute lesson on the 1908 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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

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2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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7. Answer key + discussion

1908: William Howard Taft vs William Jennings Bryan

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

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 Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 16-19, 1908 and nominated William Howard Taft 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. The Socialist Party of America nominated Eugene V. Debs for the third time. Debs won 420,852 popular votes. Taft won 321 electoral votes to Bryan's 162. 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. Taft's presidency proved a structural disappoint-

ment for Roosevelt. The August 1909 Payne-Aldrich Tariff was substantially more conservative than Taft had promised. The Ballinger-Pinchot affair (January 1910) saw Taft fire Roosevelt's conservation appointee Gifford Pinchot. By December 1910, Roosevelt was publicly criticizing Taft.

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 American Tobacco. (2) Conservation: Taft signed the 1910 Pickett Act. (3) Federal regulation: Taft signed the Mann-Elkins Act (June 1910). (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.

The 1912 Republican Convention denied Roosevelt the nomination. Roosevelt bolted to form the Progressive 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 largely retrospective.

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.

Taft's post-presidential career was structurally significant. After losing 1912, Taft became a Yale law professor (1913-21). In 1921, Harding appointed Taft the 10th Chief Justice. Taft served 1921-30. He is the only person in U.S. history to serve as both President and Chief Justice. Major Chief Justice achievement: the Judiciary Act of 1925.

The Bryan policy legacy was substantial. Many demands Bryan had made in 1896, 1900, and 1908 were enacted within 25 years: 16th Amendment (income tax, 1913); 17th Amendment (direct election of senators, 1913); Banking Act of 1933 (Federal Deposit Insurance); Mann-Elkins Act 1910; Adamson Act 1916; Fair Labor Standards Act 1938; Clayton Antitrust Act 1914; FTC Act 1914. The Bryan-era Progressive demands had become structural features of 20th-century U.S. federal governance.

The 1908-1932 era can be analyzed as the implementation phase of the Bryan-era Progressive demands. From 1908 onward, the policy disagreements between Republicans and Democrats were over the pace and scope of Progressive implementation, not over whether to implement Progressive reforms at all. The Progressive consensus had effectively absorbed Republican policy debate as well as Democratic

		- Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal had been the Republican version of Progressive reform; Taft's Square Deal continuation had maintained the Republican Progressive identity; Wilson's 1913-21 "New Freedom" was the Democratic version. The 1932 Roosevelt New Deal would be a structural extension of the Progressive consensus - not a fundamentally new political agenda.
20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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.

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. Substantially more conservative than Taft had promised.

Ballinger-Pinchot affair
The January 1910 conservation dispute. Taft fired Roosevelt's conservation appointee Gifford Pinchot.

Eugene V. Debs
American socialist labor leader. Founded the American Socialist Party 1901. Five-time presidential candidate (1900, 1904, 1908, 1912, 1920).

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

16th Amendment
February 1913 constitutional amendment authorizing federal income tax without apportionment among states. Approved by Congress during Taft's presidency. First federal income tax: Underwood Tariff 1913.

17th Amendment
April 1913 constitutional amendment requiring direct popular election of U.S. senators. Approved by Congress during Taft's presidency. Originally a Populist 1892 Omaha Platform demand.

Mann-Elkins Act
The June 1910 federal law extending ICC authority to telephone, telegraph, and cable communications. Taft's signature regulatory achievement.

Judiciary Act of 1925
The federal law sponsored by Chief Justice Taft that expanded Supreme Court discretion over its docket through the certiorari process. The Act allowed the Supreme Court to selectively choose which appeals to hear.

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 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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Acceptance Speech for Republican Nomination

WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT, JULY 28, 1908

"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.

SOURCE B

Acceptance Speech for Democratic Nomination

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN, AUGUST 12, 1908

"The Democratic platform declares against private monopoly in the most emphatic language possible. It points out that an unlawful trust is a private monopoly engaged in an interstate business and not a corporation engaged in such business; the corporation is permitted by law, the trust is illegal. The Democratic platform pledges itself to such legislation as will make the criminal provisions of the Sherman antitrust law effective; it pledges itself to such an enlargement of the powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission as may be necessary to deal effectively with overcapitalization; it pledges itself to a tariff revision downward, by means of which trusts will be deprived of the special privileges by which they are now enabled to plunder the people; it pledges itself to a graduated income tax, by means of which the burdens of government can be made to rest in some proportion upon the ability of the citizens to bear them; and it pledges itself to a number of other reforms which would diminish the burdens of the people and increase the prosperity of the producers."

Bryan, "Acceptance Speech for Democratic Nomination" (Lincoln, NE, August 12, 1908). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ≈150 words.

The 1908 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Taft's 1908 acceptance) articulating the judicial-procedural antitrust framework. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Bryan's 1908 acceptance) articulating the populist-Progressive Democratic framework. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address corporate regulation but from different positions in the Progressive Era. Identify the specific political function each source performs.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Bryan's Source B demands "a graduated income tax." When was the demand operationalized, and how?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Taft's Source A emphasizes "the machinery of justice" rather than substantive antitrust transformation. How did Taft's 1909-13 antitrust record compare to his rhetoric?

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many antitrust suits did Taft's Department of Justice initiate compared to Roosevelt's?

( ) A. Taft 25 vs Roosevelt 80
( ) B. Taft 80 vs Roosevelt 25
( ) C. Both about equal
( ) D. Both negligible

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

In what year was the 16th Amendment (federal income tax) ratified?

( ) A. 1910
( ) B. 1911
( ) C. 1912
( ) D. 1913

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1908 election about consensus, 1912-split foundation, or Bryan-finality? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Taft's 1908 acceptance speech (Source A) committed to continuing Roosevelt's Square Deal through judicial-procedural antitrust reform. Bryan's 1908 acceptance speech (Source B) called for more aggressive structural transformation of the trust problem through tariff reduction and graduated income tax. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1908-1933 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1908 election represented (a) the consolidation of the Progressive consensus across both major parties that would shape 20th-century U.S. federal governance, (b) the foundation for the 1912 Roosevelt-Taft Republican split that briefly broke the alignment by electing Wilson, or (c) the final demonstration that Bryan's populist-Progressive Democratic strategy could not break the 1896-1932 Republican alignment. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the consensus-vs-1912-split-vs-Bryan-finality axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Roosevelt Square Deal, the Payne-Aldrich Tariff, the Ballinger-Pinchot affair, the 1912 Republican split, the 16th-17th Amendments, the Wilson New Freedom, the 1932 New Deal. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "overhaul the agencies of justice so as to facilitate proceedings under the antitrust law", "the machinery of justice is so cumbersome and slow that the public has lost faith in its capacity to administer justice promptly", "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". The "machinery of justice" phrase is the cleanest articulation.

Taft's framing emphasized procedural reform over substantive transformation.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "a tariff revision downward, by means of which trusts will be deprived of the special privileges by which they are now enabled to plunder the people", "a graduated income tax, by means of which the burdens of government can be made to rest in some proportion upon the ability of the citizens to bear them", "such an enlargement of the powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission as may be necessary to deal effectively with overcapitalization". The "graduated income tax" phrase is the cleanest articulation of the Populist demand.

Bryan's framing emphasized substantive structural transformation.

QUESTION 3

Source A is Taft's acceptance speech - articulated as the Republican nominee to commit his administration to continuing Roosevelt's Square Deal through judicial-procedural reform. The function is to commit the Republican Party to maintaining Progressive policy while emphasizing the judicial-temperament approach that Taft preferred. Source B is Bryan's acceptance speech - articulated as the Democratic nominee to differentiate Democratic policy from Republican policy by demanding more aggressive structural reform. The function is to compete for the Progressive label by demanding more reform than the Republicans had delivered. Together, the sources reveal the structural Progressive consensus across both major parties - both candidates accepted that corporate regulation was a legitimate federal responsibility; both committed to specific reform agendas; both promised to operationalize Progressive policy.

AP students should be able to articulate the consensus.

QUESTION 4

Bryan's "graduated income tax" demand was operationalized through the 16th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified February 3, 1913. The amendment authorized federal income tax without apportionment among the states (overruling the 1895 Pollock v. Farmers' Loan and Trust Co. Supreme Court decision that had struck down the 1894 Wilson-Gorman Tariff's income tax provision). The first federal income tax under the new amendment was the Underwood Tariff of October 1913 - signed by Wilson during his first year in office. The 1913 tax was 1% on incomes over $3,000 ($85,000 in 2024 dollars) with additional rates up to 7% on incomes over $500,000. The tax structure was thus heavily progressive: most Americans were below the $3,000 threshold and paid no income tax. Federal income tax revenues would grow substantially during World War I (rates increased to 77% on top incomes by 1918) and would become the federal government's largest revenue source by the 1940s. The 16th Amendment's structural significance: it shifted federal revenue from tariffs (which fell on consumers) to income (which fell on wealth) - operationalizing the Populist-Progressive redistributive vision.

AP students should know the 16th Amendment.

QUESTION 5

Taft's 1909-13 antitrust record was numerically superior to Roosevelt's 1901-09 record. Taft's Department of Justice initiated 80 antitrust suits in four years - compared to 25 under Roosevelt's seven years (more than 5x the per-year rate). Major Taft antitrust achievements: (1) The 1911 Supreme Court breakup of Standard Oil (initiated under Roosevelt 1906, completed under Taft) - the largest single antitrust action in U.S. history at that time. (2) The 1911 Supreme Court breakup of American Tobacco Company. (3) The 1911 Supreme Court "rule of reason" doctrine - the Court ruled that only "unreasonable" restraints of trade were illegal under the Sherman Act, creating judicial discretion to interpret reasonable corporate combinations. The structural lesson: Taft's judicial-procedural approach was numerically more successful than Roosevelt's aggressive public confrontation. But the political effect was opposite: Roosevelt's public confrontations produced political loyalty from Progressive voters; Taft's procedural successes did not. The 1912 Republican split reflected the political mismatch between Taft's superior antitrust record and his judicial temperament that could not produce the political theater of trust-busting.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetoric-versus-record distinction.

QUESTION 6

Taft 80 vs Roosevelt 25. Taft initiated 80 antitrust suits in four years; Roosevelt initiated 25 in seven years. Taft's rate was more than 5x Roosevelt's per-year.

AP students should know the Taft 80/Roosevelt 25 figures.

QUESTION 7

1913. The 16th Amendment was ratified February 3, 1913 - approved by Congress during Taft's presidency and ratified during the transition to Wilson. The first federal income tax under the new amendment was the October 1913 Underwood Tariff.

AP students should know the 1913 ratification.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the consensus-vs-1912-split-vs-Bryan-finality axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric evaluates the full essay.