1908

William Howard Taft vs William Jennings Bryan

A 20-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%

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1908

Theodore Roosevelt had promised in 1904 that he would not run again in 1908. He kept his promise. But Roosevelt wanted to make sure the next president would continue his Progressive program. He picked William Howard Taft - his Secretary of War and close friend - as the Republican candidate.

Taft was a giant man. He was 6'2" tall and weighed over 350 pounds. He was the heaviest president in U.S. history. He had a big walrus mustache. Taft was a federal judge, a war hero from the Philippines, and Roosevelt's best friend in the Cabinet. But Taft did not really want to be president. He wanted to be a Supreme Court Justice. His wife Helen, his brother Charles, and Theodore Roosevelt all pushed him to run.

Look at the picture. That is William Howard Taft - the only person to serve as both president (1909-13) AND Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (1921-30).

The Democrats picked William Jennings Bryan again - for the THIRD time. Bryan had lost in 1896 to McKinley. He had lost in 1900 to McKinley. He had taken a break in 1904 (when Parker lost). Now he wanted to try one more time. The Democrats hoped

his charisma and oratory could finally win.

Bryan tried a new approach. Instead of free silver (the issue had been settled by the 1900 Gold Standard Act), he focused on Progressive reform: federal bank deposit insurance, an income tax, federal regulation of railroads, and labor protections. Bryan wanted Democrats to OUT-Progressive the Republicans.

But Taft was Roosevelt's handpicked successor. Roosevelt himself campaigned for Taft, even though tradition said presidents should not campaign for their successors. Roosevelt's endorsement was decisive.

On Election Day, Taft won 321 electoral votes to Bryan's 162. Taft won the popular vote by 1,269,356 - a smaller margin than Roosevelt 1904 but still decisive. Bryan was 48 years old in 1908. This was his third presidential loss. He would never run again.

Taft took office March 4, 1909. Roosevelt left for a year-long safari in Africa. He wanted to give Taft room to govern without interference. But Taft's presidency would not go the way Roosevelt expected. Within four years, Taft and Roosevelt would be fierce political enemies.



William Howard Taft, the 27th U.S. president. He weighed over 350 pounds - the heaviest president in U.S. history. He later became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.

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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 27th U.S. president after the 1908 election?

2.

What was unusual about Taft's career path?

3.

How many times did William Jennings Bryan run for president, and how many times did he lose?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1908 the Republicans picked William Howard Taft to follow Theodore Roosevelt. Taft was a giant man - 6'2" tall and over 350 pounds. He had been a judge, a war hero, and the governor of the Philippines. But he did not really want to be president.

Answer key

1.

William Howard Taft. He won 321 electoral votes to William Jennings Bryan's 162. Taft was Theodore Roosevelt's handpicked successor and his Secretary of War.

Taft was the 27th U.S. president (1909-13).

2.

Taft's career path was unusual because he is the only person in U.S. history to serve as both President and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. He was the 27th president (1909-13) under President Theodore Roosevelt's sponsorship. After losing the 1912 re-election bid (when the Roosevelt-Taft Republican split produced Woodrow Wilson's Democratic victory), Taft became a Yale law professor. 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. Taft famously said about the Chief Justice job: "I love judges, and I love courts. They are my ideals, that typify on earth what we shall meet hereafter in heaven under a just God." Taft's major Supreme Court achievement was the Judiciary Act of 1925 (which expanded Supreme Court discretion over its docket).

AP students should know Taft as the only president-and-Chief-Justice.

3.

William Jennings Bryan ran for president THREE times and lost ALL THREE: (1) 1896 - lost to William McKinley (271-176 EV). (2) 1900 - lost to William McKinley again (292-155 EV). (3) 1908 - lost to William Howard Taft (321-162 EV). Bryan never won a presidential election. He was 36 years old at his first run (the youngest major-party nominee ever) and 48 years old at his last run. After 1908, Bryan never ran 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 loss is the most prominent example of a major-party nominee who never won.

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