1916

Woodrow Wilson vs Charles Evans Hughes

A 35-minute lesson on the 1916 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Progressive Era	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Woodrow Wilson (Democratic) · 277 EV	RUNNER-UP Charles Evans Hughes (Republican) · 254 EV
KEY ISSUE World War I neutrality; progressive domestic reforms (Federal Reserve, labor laws)	TURNOUT 61.8%

CONTENTS

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

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Timing

5 min	Warm-up	When a president runs for re-election with a campaign slogan that is operationally violated within months of victory, was the slogan a lie, a wartime necessity, or a contingent failure?
15 min	Reading	The 1916 election was the 33rd U.S. presidential election. It produced Woodrow Wilson's 277-254 electoral-vote victory over Republican Charles Evans Hughes - the closest U.S. presidential election since 1888. The election was decided by California, which Wilson won by just 3,773 votes out of approximately 999,000 cast. The 1916 result was the first Democratic presidential re-election since Andrew Jackson in 1832 (84 years earlier). The election's structural significance was its demonstration that Wilson's 1912 victory had been entirely a product of the Republican split - and that the Republican Party had reunited sufficiently to nearly recapture the presidency. The political conditions had been transformed by World War I. The war had begun in Europe on July 28, 1914 with Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia following the June 28, 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Germany declared war on Russia (August 1) and France (August 3); Britain entered the war on August 4 after Germany invaded Belgium. By 1916, the war had killed approximately 5 million people including hundreds of thousands of soldiers in massive battles (Verdun February-December 1916: 1+ million casualties; Somme July-November 1916: 1+ million casualties). The U.S. response had been complicated. Most Americans wanted neutrality. Wilson had declared neutrality in August 1914 and had urged Americans to be "neutral in fact as well as in name." But neutrality was structurally difficult. American banks lent money to the Allies; American factories sold munitions to the Allies; American ships carried Allied cargo. The British naval blockade of Germany interrupted American trade with the Central Powers. German submarine warfare created the most acute crisis. The German submarine (U-boat) campaign against Allied shipping sometimes killed American passengers. The Lusitania sinking (May 7, 1915) - a British passenger liner sunk by a German U-boat with 128 Americans among 1,198 dead - produced major U.S. outrage. Wilson protested through three diplomatic notes; his Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan resigned in protest (June 1915) believing Wilson's protests were drifting toward war. The Sussex Pledge (May 1916) saw Germany promise to stop sinking passenger ships without warning - temporarily defusing the submarine crisis.

Domestic Progressive reform also defined Wilson's 1913-16 first term. Major achievements: October 1913 Underwood Tariff (substantial reduction); December 1913 Federal Reserve Act; October 1914 Clayton Antitrust Act; September 1914 Federal Trade Commission Act; July 1916 Federal Farm Loan Act; September 1916 Adamson Act (8-hour day for railroad workers); September 1916 Workmen's Compensation Act; September 1916 Keating-Owen Child Labor Act (banned products of child labor from interstate commerce - later struck down by Supreme Court in 1918). The Wilson Progressive record was substantively as comprehensive as Roosevelt's Square Deal had been.

The Democratic National Convention met in St. Louis on June 14-16, 1916 and renominated Wilson by acclamation. Thomas R. Marshall of Indiana was renominated as VP. The Democratic platform endorsed continued U.S. neutrality, continued Progressive reform, and the protection of American rights to travel on the high seas.

The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 7-10, 1916. The convention faced a structural choice between three candidates: Theodore Roosevelt (the 1912 Bull Moose nominee, now seeking Republican reconciliation); Charles Evans Hughes (the Supreme Court Justice and former NY governor); and Senator Elihu Root of New York (the Republican establishment's candidate). The convention nominated Hughes on the third ballot. Hughes was 54, a U.S. Supreme Court Justice (1910-16) who had served as governor of New York (1907-10). He resigned from the Court on June 10, 1916 - the same day he was nominated. Charles W. Fairbanks of Indiana (Roosevelt's 1904 VP) was the running mate.

The Progressive Party held a parallel convention in Chicago on June 7-10, 1916. The convention nominated Roosevelt by acclamation. Roosevelt declined the nomination in a letter on June 26, 1916 - effectively dissolving the Progressive Party. He endorsed Hughes. The Progressive Party held a brief rump convention nominating John M. Parker of Louisiana for president (Parker would receive 0.2%). The Progressive Party effectively dissolved.

The Socialist Party of America nominated Allan L. Benson of New York. Debs declined to run due to health and political concerns. Benson would win 590,524 votes (3.2%) - a structural decline from Debs's 1912 6.0%, reflecting both the Wilson administration's adoption of many Socialist demands and the wartime restriction of dissent.

The campaign focused on World War I neutrality and Progressive reform. The Wilson campaign slogan "He kept us out of war" was structurally devastating against Hughes. Hughes was forced to take an ambiguous position on the war - he criticized Wilson's handling of submarine warfare but did not call for U.S. entry. Roosevelt's public endorsement of Hughes was muted (Roosevelt favored U.S. entry into the war but was constrained by the Republican neutrality position). The combined effect

was that Hughes appeared indecisive and politically isolated. Republican fundraising approximately $2.8 million; Democratic approximately $2.2 million.

Wilson won 277 electoral votes to Hughes's 254. Wilson carried 30 states; Hughes carried 18 states. The popular vote: Wilson 9,126,868 (49.2%); Hughes 8,548,728 (46.1%); Benson (Socialist) 590,524 (3.2%); Hanly (Prohibition) 221,302 (1.2%); Parker (Progressive) 36,378 (0.2%). Wilson-Hughes popular-vote margin: 578,140. Wilson's 49.2% was much higher than his 1912 41.8% - reflecting the elimination of the Roosevelt-Taft Republican split.

The 1916 result was decided by California. Wilson won California by 3,773 votes out of approximately 999,000 cast. California had been a Roosevelt state in 1912 (Roosevelt 41.8%, Wilson 41.8% nearly tied). Wilson's 1916 California margin was thinner than 1912 - reflecting the Republican reunification - but enough for the state. California's 13 EV gave Wilson 277 total (the 266-EV threshold was 266 of the 531 total Electoral College votes).

Election Night drama was structurally significant. The early Eastern states broke heavily for Hughes. The New York Times printed "Hughes Wins" on its front page; the Republican headquarters in New York hosted a victory celebration; Hughes prepared a victory speech. But Western state results came in late. As state-by-state returns from California arrived through November 9-10, 1916, Wilson's lead emerged. Hughes did not concede until November 22, 1916 - two weeks after Election Day - when the California count was final.

Other 1916 deciding states: Ohio (Wilson +89,408), New Hampshire (Wilson +56), North Dakota (Wilson +1,735), Minnesota (Hughes +393). The close margins demonstrated the structural Republican reunification.

Wilson was inaugurated to a second term on March 4, 1917. One month later, on April 2, 1917, Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany. The structural causes of the U.S. entry: (1) Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1, 1917 - threatening U.S. ships. (2) The Zimmermann Telegram (February 1917) - a German diplomatic communication offering Mexico the return of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona if Mexico would attack the U.S. in alliance with Germany. The U.S. intercepted and decoded the telegram; its publication produced massive public outrage. (3) German U-boat sinkings of U.S. merchant ships continued through February-March 1917. Congress declared war on April 6, 1917. The U.S. would mobilize 4.7 million soldiers and lose 116,516 American military deaths in World War I (approximately equal to U.S. losses in Vietnam over 20 years).

Wilson's 1917-21 second term would be defined by World War I and its aftermath: the November 11, 1918 armistice; the January-June 1919 Versailles Treaty negotiations (Wilson's "Fourteen Points" speech January 8, 1918 set the structural framework; the actual treaty was much harsher than Wilson had advocated); the League of Nations

		rejection by the Senate (November 1919, March 1920); Wilson's September 1919 stroke; the 1920 Republican landslide (Harding 404-127 EV) returning Republicans to power. The 1916 election's structural significance was twofold. First, it demonstrated that the 1912 Wilson victory had been entirely a product of the Republican split. With the Republican Party reunited, Wilson's 1916 margin was just 23 EV - the closest U.S. election since 1888. Second, it produced Wilson's 1917-21 second term that would deeply transform U.S. governance and global influence through World War I and the post-war settlement.
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 1916 Election

The 1916 election was the 33rd U.S. presidential election. It produced Woodrow Wilson's 277-254 electoral-vote victory over Republican Charles Evans Hughes - the closest U.S. presidential election since 1888. The election was decided by California, which Wilson won by just 3,773 votes out of approximately 999,000 cast. The 1916 result was the first Democratic presidential re-election since Andrew Jackson in 1832 (84 years earlier). The election's structural significance was its demonstration that Wilson's 1912 victory had been entirely a product of the Republican split - and that the Republican Party had reunited sufficiently to nearly recapture the presidency.

The political conditions had been transformed by World War I. The war had begun in Europe on July 28, 1914 with Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia following the June 28, 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. Germany declared war on Russia (August 1) and France (August 3); Britain entered the war on August 4 after Germany invaded Belgium. By 1916, the war had killed approximately 5 million people including hundreds of thousands of soldiers in massive battles (Verdun February-December 1916: 1+ million casualties; Somme July-November 1916: 1+ million casualties).

The U.S. response had been complicated. Most Americans wanted neutrality. Wilson had declared neutrality in August 1914 and had urged Americans to be "neutral in fact as well as in name." But neutrality was structurally difficult. American banks lent money to the Allies; American factories sold munitions to the Allies; American ships carried Allied cargo. The British naval blockade of Germany interrupted American trade with the Central Powers.

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The 1916 election's structural significance was twofold. First, it demonstrated that the 1912 Wilson victory had been entirely a product of the Republican split. With the Republican Party reunited, Wilson's 1916 margin was just 23 EV - the closest U.S. election since 1888. Second, it produced Wilson's 1917-21 second term that would deeply transform U.S. governance and global influence through World War I and the post-war settlement.

Key words

He kept us out of war	Woodrow Wilson's 1916 campaign slogan promising continued U.S. neutrality in World War I. Politically successful but operationally violated within five months of Wilson's March 1917 inauguration - Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany April 2, 1917; Congress did so April 6, 1917.
Charles Evans Hughes	The 1916 Republican presidential nominee. Former NY governor (1907-10) and Supreme Court Justice (1910-16). Lost to Wilson 277-254 EV - the closest U.S. presidential election since 1888. Later: Secretary of State 1921-25, Chief Justice 1930-41.
California 1916	The state that decided the 1916 presidential election. Wilson won California by 3,773 votes out of ~999K cast. California's 13 EV gave Wilson 277 total. The closest deciding state in U.S. presidential history since Maryland 1888.
Lusitania	British passenger liner sunk by German U-boat on May 7, 1915 off the coast of Ireland. 1,198 dead including 128 Americans. Produced major U.S. outrage but did not produce immediate U.S. entry into World War I. Wilson protested through three diplomatic notes; Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan resigned June 1915.

Zimmermann Telegram German diplomatic communication (January 1917) from German Foreign Minister Arthur Zimmermann to the German Minister to Mexico Heinrich von Eckardt. Offered Mexico the return of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona if Mexico would attack the U.S. in alliance with Germany. British intelligence intercepted and decoded the telegram; its February 1917 U.S. publication produced massive public outrage and accelerated U.S. entry into World War I.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Wilson win in 1916?

( ) A. 247
( ) B. 266
( ) C. 277
( ) D. 305

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

By how many votes did Wilson win California in 1916?

( ) A. 1,047
( ) B. 3,773
( ) C. 8,295
( ) D. 12,855

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was Wilson's 1916 campaign slogan and why was it politically powerful?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the U.S. end up entering World War I just five months after Wilson's "He kept us out of war" re-election?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

277. Wilson 277; Hughes 254. Wilson's 23-EV margin was the closest since the 1888 Cleveland-Harrison race.

AP students should know the 277-254 split and 23-EV margin.

QUESTION 2

3,773. Wilson won California by just 3,773 votes out of approximately 999,000 cast. California's 13 EV gave Wilson 277 total - one more than needed for victory.

AP students should know the California margin.

QUESTION 3

Wilson's 1916 campaign slogan was "He kept us out of war." The slogan was politically powerful for three structural reasons: (1) World War I had been raging in Europe since August 1914; most Americans did not want the U.S. to join. (2) Wilson had successfully negotiated with Germany over submarine warfare - particularly the Sussex Pledge (May 1916) where Germany promised to stop sinking passenger ships without warning. (3) Wilson's opponent Hughes was forced to take an ambiguous position - criticizing Wilson's handling of the war but unable to clearly call for U.S. entry. The combined effect was that the slogan captured Wilson's genuine achievement (keeping the U.S. out for 2.5 years) while making Hughes appear indecisive. But the slogan would be operationally violated within five months of Wilson's 1917 inauguration.

AP students should be able to articulate the slogan's political power.

QUESTION 4

The U.S. entered World War I just five months after Wilson's "He kept us out of war" re-election due to four specific 1917 developments: (1) Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1, 1917 - announcing that U-boats would sink all ships (including U.S. ships) in Allied waters without warning. (2) The Zimmermann Telegram (February 1917) - a German diplomatic communication offering Mexico the return of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona if Mexico would attack the U.S. in alliance with Germany. British intelligence intercepted and decoded the telegram. Its publication produced massive public outrage. (3) German U-boat sinkings of U.S. merchant ships through February-March 1917. The U.S. ships City of Memphis, Vigilancia, and Illinois were sunk - producing direct casualties. (4) Wilson's structural commitment to "freedom of the seas" - he believed U.S. trade rights had to be protected even at the cost of war. On April 2, 1917, Wilson asked Congress for a war declaration; Congress declared war April 6, 1917. The structural lesson: a "he kept us out of war" slogan can be politically successful while structural events drive a country into war anyway.

AP students should be able to articulate the four 1917 catalysts.