1916

Woodrow Wilson vs Charles Evans Hughes

A 50-minute lesson on the 1916 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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

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2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
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1916: Woodrow Wilson vs Charles Evans Hughes

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 conditions in 1916 America that would produce a close presidential election. For each, identify the specific 1913-1916 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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 political conditions had been transformed by World War I. The war had begun in Europe on July 28, 1914. By 1916, the war had killed approximately 5 million people including hundreds of thousands of soldiers in massive battles. The U.S. response had been complicated. Most Americans wanted neutrality. Wilson had declared neutrality in August 1914. 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 campaign against Allied shipping sometimes killed American passengers. The Lusitania sinking (May 7, 1915) produced major U.S. outrage. The Sussex Pledge (May 1916) temporarily defused the submarine crisis. Domestic Progressive reform defined Wilson's 1913-16 first term. Major achievements: October 1913 Underwood Tariff; 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. 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; Charles Evans Hughes; and Senator Elihu Root of New York. 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. 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%.

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 - criticizing Wilson's handling of submarine warfare but unable to clearly call for U.S. entry. Roosevelt's public endorsement of Hughes was muted. Republican fundraising approximately $2.8 million; Democratic approximately $2.2 million.

The campaign's most damaging moment for Hughes was the August 1916 California incident. Hughes was campaigning in California and stayed at the same Long Beach hotel as California Republican Governor Hiram Johnson - but failed to meet with Johnson. The snub angered the Progressive Republican faction in California (Johnson had been Roosevelt's 1912 VP). Wilson's narrow California victory was attributable in part to alienated Progressive Republicans not turning out for Hughes.

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.

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 close 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 U.S. entry: (1) Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1, 1917. (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. (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.

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 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	**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

He kept us out of war

Woodrow Wilson's 1916 campaign slogan promising continued U.S. neutrality. Politically successful but operationally violated within five months - Wilson asked Congress for war April 2, 1917.

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.

Zimmermann Telegram

German diplomatic communication (January 1917) offering Mexico the return of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona if Mexico would attack the U.S. British intelligence intercepted and decoded; February 1917 U.S. publication accelerated U.S. entry into World War I.

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. Later: Secretary of State 1921-25, Chief Justice 1930-41.

Lusitania

British passenger liner sunk by German U-boat on May 7, 1915. 1,198 dead including 128 Americans. Produced major U.S. outrage but did not produce immediate U.S. entry into World War I.

Adamson Act

September 1916 federal law establishing the 8-hour workday for interstate railroad workers. The first federal law mandating an 8-hour workday. Wilson's pre-election Progressive achievement.

Address to Joint Session of Congress (War Message)

WOODROW WILSON, APRIL 2, 1917

Wilson delivered this address to a Joint Session of Congress on the evening of April 2, 1917 - five months after his November 1916 re-election and one month after his March 4, 1917 second inauguration. The address was Wilson's formal request for a declaration of war against Germany. Congress declared war on April 6, 1917. The address was the structural reversal of Wilson's 1916 "He kept us out of war" campaign slogan. The "world must be made safe for democracy" passage articulated the structural framework that would shape U.S. foreign policy through the 20th century - the Wilsonian doctrine of democratic internationalism. The "Fourteen Points" speech of January 8, 1918 would extend this framework into the post-war settlement.

> *"The world must be made safe for democracy. Its peace must be planted upon the tested foundations of political liberty. We have no selfish ends to serve. We desire no conquest, no dominion. We seek no indemnities for ourselves, no material compensation for the sacrifices we shall freely make. We are but one of the champions of the rights of mankind. We shall be satisfied when those rights have been made as secure as the faith and the freedom of nations can make them. Just because we fight without rancor and without selfish object, seeking nothing for ourselves but what we shall wish to share with all free peoples, we shall, I feel confident, conduct our operations as belligerents without passion and ourselves observe with proud punctilio the principles of right and of fair play we profess to be fighting for."*

Wilson, "Address to Joint Session of Congress" (Washington, DC, April 2, 1917). Public domain.

The 1916 Election

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

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?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Wilson says in his War Message that "the world must be made safe for democracy." What political doctrine does this articulate?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1916 election map, identify Wilson's 30 states and Hughes's 18 states. How did the 1916 map compare to the 1912 map?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

277. Wilson 277; Hughes 254. The closest since 1888.

AP students should know the 277-254 split.

QUESTION 2

3,773. Wilson won California by 3,773 votes out of approximately 999,000 cast.

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 reasons: (1) World War I had been raging in Europe since August 1914; most Americans did not want U.S. entry. (2) Wilson had negotiated the Sussex Pledge (May 1916) where Germany promised to stop sinking passenger ships without warning. (3) Hughes was forced to take an ambiguous position - criticizing Wilson but unable to clearly call for U.S. entry. The combined effect was that the slogan captured Wilson's genuine achievement while making Hughes appear indecisive.

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

QUESTION 4

The U.S. entered World War I just five months after the "He kept us out of war" re-election due to four 1917 developments: (1) Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1, 1917. (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. (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. (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.

AP students should be able to articulate the four catalysts.

QUESTION 5

Wilson's "the world must be made safe for democracy" articulates the doctrine of democratic internationalism (often called "Wilsonian" in U.S. foreign policy thought). Core elements: (1) The U.S. has a moral obligation to defend democracy globally - not just to defend its own interests. (2) Democratic governance is the appropriate political form for all nations. (3) U.S. foreign policy should aim at promoting democratic governance abroad. (4) International institutions can constrain autocratic behavior. (5) Just war must aim at structural reform of the international system, not just military victory. The doctrine was operationalized through (a) the Fourteen Points speech (January 1918) - the structural framework for the Versailles Treaty and the League of Nations. (b) The League of Nations - international body to prevent future wars; rejected by the Senate November 1919 and March 1920. (c) Subsequent 20th-century U.S. interventions justified by democratic-promotion rhetoric (Korea 1950, Vietnam 1965, Gulf War 1991, Iraq 2003). The doctrine remains contested in U.S. foreign policy thought: some scholars argue it produced both real democratic advances and disastrous interventionist commitments; others argue it was largely rhetorical justification for power-political objectives.

AP students should be able to articulate the Wilsonian doctrine.

QUESTION 6

Wilson states (30): Solid South (11) + Border States (KY, TN, MO, MD, OK) + most Western states (CA, NV, AZ, NM, ID, UT, MT, WY, CO, KS, NE, ND, OK, AR) + NH. Hughes states (18): all of New England except NH; the Mid-Atlantic; the Old Northwest (Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota); Iowa; South Dakota; Oregon. Compared to 1912: Wilson lost most of the Mid-Atlantic and Old Northwest he had won in 1912 (against the divided Roosevelt-Taft) but gained the West (CA, NV, AZ, NM, ID, MT, WY, ND) by appealing to Western Progressive voters with the "He kept us out of war" slogan and Progressive economic reforms. The 1916 map shows the Republican reunification: Hughes won what had been Roosevelt + Taft states in 1912. Wilson's narrow re-election came from holding the Solid South + adding the Western Progressive states.

AP students should be able to articulate the geographic comparison.