1916

Woodrow Wilson vs Charles Evans Hughes

A 75-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

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

1916: Woodrow Wilson vs Charles Evans Hughes

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 1916 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1916 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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 with Austria-Hungary's declaration of war on Serbia following the June 28, 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. 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. But neutrality was structurally difficult. 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; Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan resigned in protest (June 1915). 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; 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 was renominated as VP. The Democratic platform endorsed continued U.S. neutrality, continued Progressive reform, and protection of American rights on the high seas.

The Republican National Convention met in Chicago on June 7-10, 1916 and nominated Hughes on the third ballot. Hughes was 54, a U.S. Supreme Court Justice (1910-16) and former NY governor (1907-10). He resigned from the Court on June 10, 1916 - the same day he was nominated. Charles W. Fairbanks of Indiana was VP.

The Progressive Party held a parallel convention and nominated Roosevelt by acclamation. Roosevelt declined in a letter on June 26, 1916 - effectively dissolving the Progressive Party. He endorsed Hughes. The Progressive Party effectively dissolved.

The Socialist Party of America nominated Allan L. Benson of New York. Debs declined to run. Benson won 590,524 votes (3.2%).

The campaign focused on World War I neutrality and Progressive reform. The Wilson slogan "He kept us out of war" was structurally devastating against Hughes, who was forced to take an ambiguous position.

The campaign's most damaging moment for Hughes was the August 1916 California incident. Hughes 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. 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.

The 1916 result was decided by California. Wilson won California by 3,773 votes out of approximately 999,000 cast. 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 for Hughes. The New York Times printed "Hughes Wins" on its front page; Hughes prepared a victory speech. Western state results came in late. Hughes did not concede until November 22, 1916.

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. Causes: (1) Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare February 1, 1917. (2) The Zimmermann Telegram (February 1917). (3) German U-boat sinkings of U.S. merchant ships. Congress declared war April 6, 1917. The U.S. mobilized 4.7 million soldiers and lost 116,516 American military deaths. Wilson's 1917-21 second term would be defined by World War I and aftermath: the November 11, 1918 armistice; the January-June 1919 Versailles Treaty (Wilson's Fourteen Points speech January 8, 1918 set the framework; actual treaty harsher than Wilson 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). 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. Second, it produced Wilson's 1917-21 second term that would deeply transform U.S. governance and global influence. 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 1916 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

He kept us out of war
Wilson's 1916 campaign slogan promising continued U.S. neutrality. Politically successful but operationally violated within five months.

California 1916
The state that decided the 1916 presidential election. Wilson won California by 3,773 votes out of ~999K cast.

Zimmermann Telegram
German diplomatic communication (January 1917) offering Mexico the return of Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona if Mexico would attack the U.S.

Sussex Pledge
May 4, 1916 German commitment to stop sinking passenger ships without warning. Temporarily defused the U.S.-Germany submarine crisis. Repudiated by Germany on January 31, 1917 with the resumption of unrestricted submarine warfare.

Charles Evans Hughes
The 1916 Republican presidential nominee. Former NY governor and Supreme Court Justice. Lost to Wilson 277-254 EV.

Lusitania
British passenger liner sunk by German U-boat on May 7, 1915. 1,198 dead including 128 Americans.

Adamson Act
September 1916 federal law establishing the 8-hour workday for interstate railroad workers.

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. The address was Wilson's formal request for a declaration of war against Germany. Congress declared war on April 6, 1917. 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 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 (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 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?

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain why the 1916 result is structural evidence that the 1912 Wilson victory had been entirely a product of the Republican split.

QUESTION 7 · 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.

AP students should know the close split.

QUESTION 2

3,773. Wilson won California by 3,773 votes.

AP students should know the California margin.

QUESTION 3

Wilson's 1916 slogan "He kept us out of war" was politically powerful for three reasons: (1) WWI had raged since August 1914; most Americans did not want U.S. entry. (2) Wilson had negotiated the Sussex Pledge (May 1916). (3) Hughes was forced to take an ambiguous position - criticizing Wilson but unable to clearly call for U.S. entry. 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 - abrogating the Sussex Pledge. (2) The Zimmermann Telegram (February 1917) - offering Mexico the return of Texas/NM/AZ if it would attack the U.S. (3) German U-boat sinkings of U.S. merchant ships (City of Memphis, Vigilancia, Illinois). (4) Wilson's structural commitment to "freedom of the seas." On April 2, 1917 Wilson asked Congress for war; Congress declared war April 6, 1917.

AP students should be able to articulate the four catalysts.

QUESTION 5

Wilson's "world must be made safe for democracy" articulates the doctrine of democratic internationalism (Wilsonianism). Core elements: (1) The U.S. has a moral obligation to defend democracy globally. (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. Operationalized through Fourteen Points (January 1918), League of Nations, subsequent 20th-century interventions justified by democratic-promotion rhetoric (Korea, Vietnam, Iraq).

AP students should be able to articulate Wilsonianism.

QUESTION 6

The 1916 result is structural evidence that the 1912 Wilson victory had been entirely a product of the Republican split. Specific evidence: (1) Wilson's 1916 popular vote (49.2%) was 7.4 percentage points HIGHER than his 1912 popular vote (41.8%). Wilson was MORE popular in 1916 than 1912. (2) Yet Wilson's 1916 EV total DROPPED from 435 to 277 - a 158-EV decline. (3) The 1916 Republican vote (Hughes 46.1%, 8.5M votes) was higher than the combined 1912 Roosevelt + Taft vote (50.6% but only 7.6M votes due to lower 1912 turnout). (4) California decided 1916 by 3,773 votes; California had been a Roosevelt state in 1912. With the Republican Party reunified by 1916, the structural Republican advantage reasserted itself. Wilson barely won; without the August 1916 Hughes-Johnson California snub or the "He kept us out of war" slogan's appeal, Wilson would have lost.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural argument.

QUESTION 7

Wilson states (30): Solid South + Border States + most Western states + NH. Hughes states (18): all of New England except NH; the Mid-Atlantic; the Old Northwest; 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. The 1916 map shows the Republican reunification: Hughes won what had been Roosevelt + Taft states in 1912.

AP students should be able to articulate the geographic comparison.

Discussion prompts

1. Wilson's 1916 "He kept us out of war" slogan was politically successful but operationally violated within five months. Identify three structural reasons U.S. entry into World War I in April 1917 was inevitable despite Wilson's 1916 neutrality commitment.

2. The 1916 election was decided by California by 3,773 votes. Identify two specific 1916 events that affected the California outcome and assess whether either was structurally decisive.