1916

Woodrow Wilson vs Charles Evans Hughes

A 20-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%

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1916

World War I had started in Europe in August 1914. Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey (the Central Powers) fought against Britain, France, and Russia (the Allies). Millions of soldiers were being killed in massive battles. By 1916, the war had been going on for over two years.

Most Americans did NOT want to join the war. The war was far away in Europe. American soldiers had not fought in a major European war ever before. Wilson promised to keep America out of the war.

The Republicans needed to find a new candidate after losing badly in 1912. They picked Charles Evans Hughes - a former governor of New York and a Supreme Court Justice. Hughes had been on the Supreme Court since 1910. He resigned from the Court to run for president. He was 54 years old, smart, and dignified - but did not have Theodore Roosevelt's personality.

Theodore Roosevelt was disappointed Hughes was the nominee instead of him. But Roosevelt eventually supported Hughes. The Republican Party reunited after the 1912 Bull Moose split.

Look at the picture. That is Charles Evans Hughes - the man who almost beat Wilson.

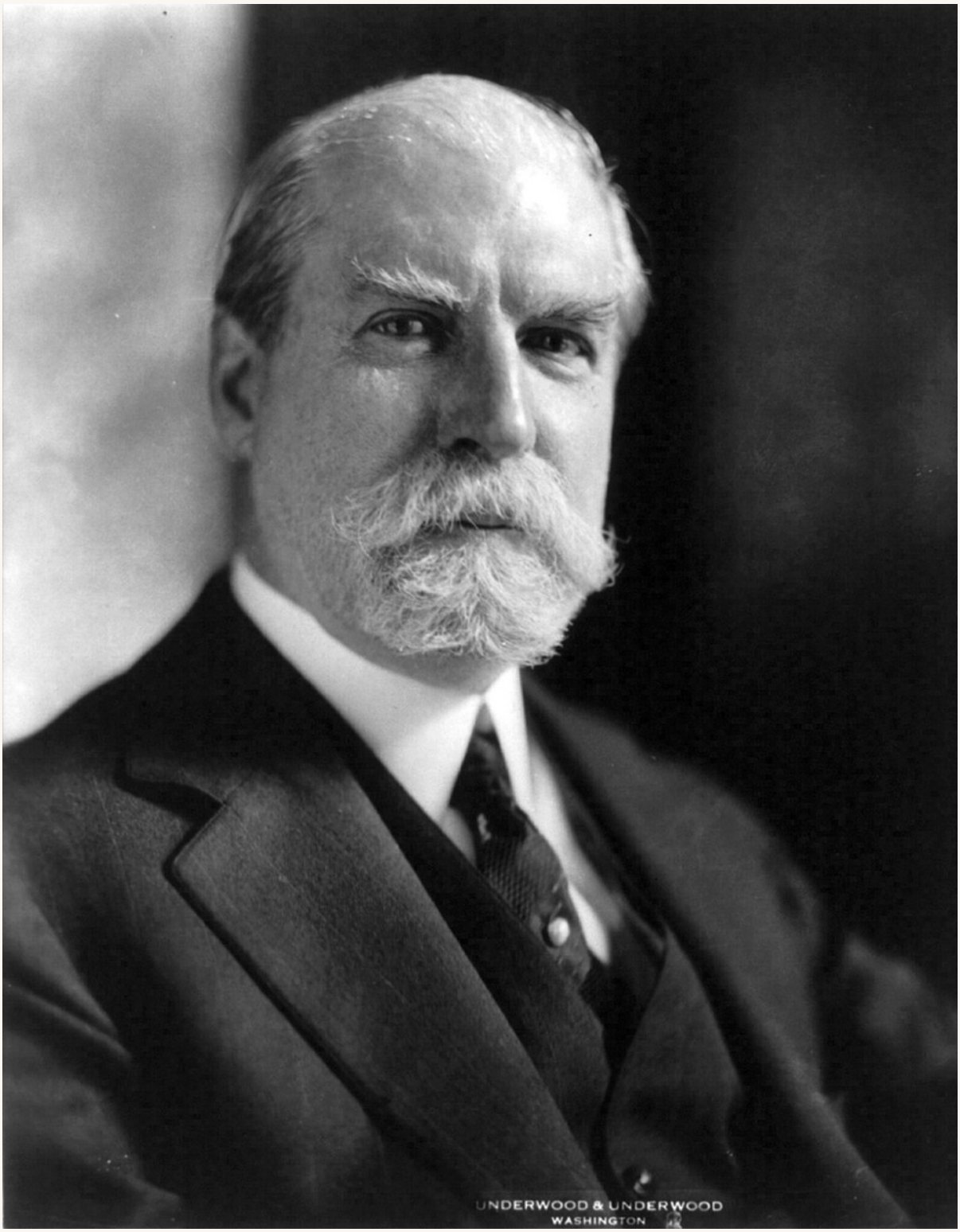
Wilson's campaign slogan was "He kept us out of war." It was a powerful message. Many Americans wanted to stay neutral. Wilson had also passed important laws to help workers, farmers, and women.

On Election Night, things looked bad for Wilson. The early states - on the East Coast - were going for Hughes. The New York Times newspaper printed "Hughes Wins" on its front page. People went to bed thinking Hughes had won.

But Wilson held on. The West Coast states were the LAST states to report results in 1916. As Western state results came in, Wilson kept winning. The deciding state was California. It took TWO DAYS to count California's votes. When the count finished, Wilson had won California by just 3,773 votes! That gave Wilson 13 more electoral votes - enough to win.

Final result: Wilson 277 electoral votes, Hughes 254. Wilson became the first Democrat re-elected since Andrew Jackson in 1832 - 84 years earlier!

But Wilson's "He kept us out of war" promise lasted only a few



Charles Evans Hughes, the 1916 Republican presidential nominee. He lost to Wilson by just 23 electoral votes - the closest U.S. presidential election since 1888.

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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who won the 1916 U.S. presidential election?

2.

What was Wilson's 1916 campaign slogan?

3.

What happened five months after the 1916 election?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1916 World War I was raging in Europe. Millions of soldiers were dying. President Woodrow Wilson kept America OUT of the war. His campaign slogan was "He kept us out of war." It almost won him the election.

Answer key

1.

Woodrow Wilson. He won 277 electoral votes to Charles Evans Hughes's 254. Wilson was the first Democrat re-elected since Andrew Jackson in 1832 - 84 years earlier. The 1916 election was decided by California, which Wilson won by just 3,773 votes.

AP students should know Wilson's 1916 re-election and the 84-year Democratic gap.

2.

Wilson's 1916 campaign slogan was "He kept us out of war." The slogan promised continued U.S. neutrality in World War I, which had been raging in Europe since August 1914. Most Americans did not want the U.S. to join the war. Wilson had successfully negotiated with Germany over submarine warfare (after Germany sank the British liner Lusitania in May 1915 with 128 Americans aboard). The slogan was politically successful but would prove short-lived: Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany just five months after his March 1917 inauguration.

AP students should know the slogan and its political context.

3.

Five months after the 1916 election (November 7, 1916), Wilson was inaugurated for his second term on March 4, 1917. One month after his inauguration - on April 2, 1917 - Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany. Congress declared war on April 6, 1917. The U.S. entered World War I, despite Wilson's campaign slogan "He kept us out of war." The reasons for the change: (1) Germany resumed unrestricted submarine warfare on February 1, 1917 - threatening U.S. ships. (2) The Zimmermann Telegram (February 1917) was 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. The U.S. would mobilize 4.7 million soldiers and lose 116,516 American military deaths in World War I.

AP students should know the structural reasons for U.S. entry into WWI.