1928

Herbert Hoover vs Al Smith

A 50-minute lesson on the 1928 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Roaring Twenties	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Herbert Hoover (Republican) · 444 EV	RUNNER-UP Al Smith (Democratic) · 87 EV
KEY ISSUE Prosperity; Prohibition; religious prejudice against the first Catholic major-party nominee	TURNOUT 56.9%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1928: Herbert Hoover vs Al Smith

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 1928 America that would produce Republican landslide. For each identify specific 1920s development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	1928 election was 36th U.S. presidential election. Produced Hoover's 444-87 EV victory over Democrat Al Smith - largest electoral landslide since Harding's 1920 (404-127). Hoover's 58.2% popular vote second-highest since 1900. Election structurally significant: (1) Al Smith first Catholic ever nominated by major political party - religion major factor in loss; (2) Last election under 1920s prosperity conditions - within 7 months October 1929 stock market crash began Great Depression. Coolidge August 1927 "I do not choose to run" opened Republican nomination. 1923-28 "Coolidge Prosperity" remarkable: GDP grew ~5%/year; unemployment <4%; federal budget surpluses every year; consumer credit and automobile ownership boomed; stock market unprecedented heights. Republican National Convention Kansas City June 12-15, 1928 nominated Hoover first ballot. Hoover 53, born 1874 West Branch Iowa - first U.S. president born west of Mississippi. Orphaned age 9. Stanford geology grad 1895. Mining career made him millionaire by 40 - Australia, China (survived 1900 Boxer Rebellion siege of Tientsin), Russia, Burma. WWI organized Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) - delivered ~5M tons food saving 9M people. Post-WWI American Relief Administration (ARA) - food aid to 22 European countries + Russia. Secretary of Commerce 1921-28. Senator Charles Curtis of Kansas (Kaw Native American heritage, first Native American on major-party ticket) VP. Democratic National Convention Houston June 26-28, 1928 nominated NY Gov Al Smith first ballot. Smith 54, born September 30, 1873 Lower East Side Manhattan. Irish Catholic - first Catholic ever nominated by major party. No formal education beyond elementary school. Rose through Tammany Hall. Four-term Governor NY. Joseph T. Robinson of Arkansas (Protestant Southern Democrat) VP. Smith candidacy faced three structural disadvantages: (1) Catholic religion. Anti-Catholic prejudice widespread 1920s. KKK (3-5M 1920s members) actively campaigned against Smith. (2) Support for ending Prohibition. Smith openly "wet."

(3) Urban Tammany Hall background. Smith first U.S. presidential candidate from urban immigrant Catholic working-class.

Campaign structurally bitter. Anti-Catholic prejudice overt. Republican-affiliated literature suggested Smith would build "Pope tunnel" between Vatican and Washington. Methodist Episcopal Church Bishop James Cannon Jr. of Virginia led anti-Catholic religious mobilization. Hoover personally repudiated anti-Catholic attacks but broader Republican coalition exploited them.

1920s prosperity message dominated substantive campaign. Hoover emphasized continued prosperity, federal-government competence, personal record as "Great Humanitarian." Republican slogan "A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage." Republican fundraising ~$6.3M; Democratic ~$5.3M.

Hoover won 444 EV; Smith 87. Hoover carried 40 states; Smith 8. Popular vote: Hoover 21,427,123 (58.2%); Smith 15,015,464 (40.8%); Thomas (Socialist) 267,478 (0.7%); Foster (Workers/Communist) 48,170 (0.1%). Hoover-Smith popular margin: 6,411,659.

Geographic pattern structurally significant. Hoover broke Solid South first time since Reconstruction. Carried Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, Florida, Texas. Southern vote structural rejection of Catholic Smith rather than support for Republican economic policies. Smith's 8 states: Massachusetts, Rhode Island (Catholic-heavy Northeastern), plus Deep South (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina). Smith lost home state NY.

1928 map structurally anomalous - only U.S. presidential election in which Catholic religion was decisively significant. 1932 map (FDR 472-59 EV over Hoover) dramatically reversed 1928 pattern.

Hoover inaugurated March 4, 1929. Initially governed as conservative Republican: tax reduction; federal budget surpluses; pro-business policies; immigration restriction continuation; tariff increases (June 1930 Smoot-Hawley Tariff raising rates to 60%).

October 24-29, 1929 stock market crash transformed political conditions. Crash wiped out ~$30B in stock value. Dow Jones peaked at 381 September 3, 1929; fell to 41 July 8, 1932 - 89% decline. By 1933: unemployment 25% (vs 4% in 1929); industrial production -46%; ~9,000 banks failed; agricultural prices collapsed (cotton from 18 cents/lb to 6 cents; wheat from $1.04/bushel to 40 cents).

Hoover response structurally inadequate. Believed in "rugged individualism" and voluntary cooperation rather than federal intervention. Specific responses: (1) 1930 Smoot-Hawley Tariff raised tariff rates and prompted retaliatory tariffs - reducing world trade ~60%. (2) 1932 Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) provided $2B in loans to banks, railroads, businesses but not direct aid to unemployed. (3)

		1932 Revenue Act raised income tax rates to combat federal deficit - structurally contractionary. (4) 1932 Federal Home Loan Bank Act provided some mortgage relief. (5) July 1932 Bonus Army veterans' protest in DC forcibly dispersed by U.S. Army troops led by MacArthur on Hoover's orders; Army burned veterans' encampment, killing two veterans. Bonus Army incident produced massive public revulsion. By 1932 Hoover politically destroyed. 1932 election (FDR 472-59 EV over Hoover, 57.4% to 39.7% popular vote) was structural realignment ending 1896-1932 Republican alignment and inaugurating 1932-68 New Deal coalition. 1928 election can be analyzed retrospectively as final triumph of 1920s Republican alignment before structural collapse. Election's long-term significance paradoxical: Smith's loss demonstrated depth of 1920s anti-Catholic prejudice; but Smith's coalition (urban Catholic immigrants, Northeastern industrial workers) became foundation of FDR's 1932 New Deal coalition. Structural prerequisites for New Deal Democratic majority built through Smith's 1928 organizational work in urban Democratic politics. Al Smith political career effectively ended with 1928. Became increasingly conservative through 1930s - opposing New Deal. Helped found American Liberty League 1934. Endorsed Republican Alf Landon 1936 and Republican Wendell Willkie 1940. Died October 4, 1944. 1960 election of Catholic JFK (first Catholic actually elected, 32 years after Smith's nomination) marked structural defeat of organized anti-Catholic political prejudice.
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

Herbert Hoover

31st U.S. president (1929-33). Coolidge's Secretary of Commerce. Stanford-educated mining engineer who organized WWI food relief - "Great Humanitarian." Won 1928 444-87 EV.

Anti-Catholic prejudice

Significant 1920s political force. Protestants believed Catholic president would take orders from Pope. KKK (3-5M members) actively campaigned against Smith.

Breaking the Solid South

1928 election was first since Reconstruction in which Republicans carried significant former Confederate states.

Bonus Army

Summer 1932 protest by ~17,000 WWI veterans in DC demanding immediate payment of wartime service bonus (legally not due until 1945). July 28, 1932 Hoover ordered U.S. Army troops led by MacArthur to disperse encampment. Army burned camp, killed two veterans.

Al Smith

NY Governor and 1928 Democratic nominee. First Catholic ever nominated by major party. Lost 444-87 EV to Hoover.

"A chicken in every pot"

Hoover's 1928 slogan: "A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage." Tragically ironic.

Smoot-Hawley Tariff

June 1930 federal law raising average tariff rates to 60% - highest in U.S. history. Prompted retaliatory tariffs from ~25 trading partners. Reduced world trade ~60%. Worsened Depression.

Acceptance Address for Republican Presidential Nomination

HERBERT HOOVER, AUGUST 11, 1928

Hoover delivered this speech in Stanford Stadium on August 11, 1928 - two months after June 1928 Republican nomination. Speech was Hoover's formal acceptance and articulation of "American System" framework. "American System" passage articulated structural Republican economic philosophy of 1920s: competitive capitalism, federal-government enabling rather than regulating, individual responsibility, economic prosperity. "We shall soon" passage articulated Hoover's optimism about elimination of poverty through 1920s prosperity - optimism that would be tragically refuted by October 1929 stock market crash and Great Depression.

> *"We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land. The poorhouse is vanishing from among us. We have not yet reached the goal, but given a chance to go forward with the policies of the last eight years, we shall soon, with the help of God, be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation. There is no guarantee against poverty equal to a job for every man. That is the primary purpose of the economic policies we advocate. Our American experiment in human welfare has yielded a degree of well-being unparalleled in all the world. It has come nearer to the abolition of poverty, to the abolition of fear of want, than humanity has ever reached before. Progress of the past seven years is the proof of it."*

Hoover, "Acceptance Address for Republican Presidential Nomination" (Stanford, CA, August 11, 1928). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ≈150 words.

The 1928 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Hoover win in 1928?

( ) A. 292
( ) B. 356
( ) C. 404
( ) D. 444

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many former Confederate states did Hoover carry in 1928?

( ) A. 0
( ) B. 3
( ) C. 5
( ) D. 8

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Al Smith's 1928 candidacy historically significant?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Hoover says in 1928 acceptance speech "we shall soon, with the help of God, be in sight of the day when poverty will be banished from this nation." Why is this passage tragically ironic in retrospect?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Smoot-Hawley Tariff and Bonus Army incident damage Hoover's political position?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On 1928 election map identify Hoover's 40 states and Smith's 8 states. What does geographic pattern reveal about 1928 anti-Catholic dynamic?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

444. Hoover 444; Smith 87.

AP students should know 444-87 split.

QUESTION 2

5. Hoover carried Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, Florida, Texas - all former Confederate states.

AP students should know 5 Confederate states broken.

QUESTION 3

Al Smith first Catholic ever nominated for president by major political party. Irish Catholic from Lower East Side Manhattan. Three structural reasons for anti-Catholic prejudice: (1) Protestants believed Catholic president would take orders from Pope. (2) KKK (3-5M members) actively campaigned against Smith. (3) Anti-Catholic literature flooded country; Protestant ministers openly campaigned from pulpits. Beyond religion, Smith's loss reflected structural Republican prosperity and Smith's "wet" position on Prohibition. 1928 anti-Catholic prejudice not overcome until JFK's 1960 victory.

AP students should articulate Smith's significance.

QUESTION 4

Hoover's "poverty will be banished" statement tragically ironic because: (1) October 24-29, 1929 stock market crash began Great Depression just 14 months after August 1928 speech and 7 months after March 1929 inauguration. (2) By 1933 (end of Hoover's single term) U.S. poverty massively expanded: unemployment 25% (from 4% in 1929); industrial production -46%; ~9,000 banks failed; agricultural prices collapsed. (3) "Abolition of poverty" rhetoric became one of most cited examples of unjustified pre-Depression optimism. (4) Hoover's political career destroyed by contrast between 1928 promises and 1929-32 catastrophe. Structural analysis: Hoover's 1928 optimism reflected genuine 1920s prosperity but assumed continuation rather than acknowledging structural vulnerabilities (speculative stock market, unsustainable consumer debt, agricultural distress, weak banking regulation) that produced 1929 crash. Optimism structurally unjustified rather than morally dishonest.

AP students should articulate structural irony.

QUESTION 5

Smoot-Hawley Tariff and Bonus Army incident damaged Hoover's political position three ways: (1) Smoot-Hawley Tariff (June 1930) raised average tariff rates to 60% - highest in U.S. history. Prompted retaliatory tariffs from ~25 trading partners. World trade fell ~60% between 1929 and 1933. Tariff demonstrated Hoover's economic policy failure to stabilize Depression. (2) Bonus Army (summer 1932): ~17,000 WWI veterans camped in Washington DC demanding immediate payment of wartime service bonus (legally not due until 1945). July 28, 1932 Hoover ordered U.S. Army troops led by MacArthur to disperse encampment. Army burned camp, killing two veterans (Joseph Angelino and William Hushka). Image of U.S. Army troops attacking U.S. veterans (men who served WWI just 14 years earlier) produced massive public revulsion. (3) Cumulative effect: by November 1932 Hoover's approval extremely low. 1932 election (FDR 472-59 EV, 57.4% to 39.7%) structural rejection of entire Hoover presidency.

AP students should articulate both incidents.

QUESTION 6

Hoover states (40): everything except 8. Including all Northeast, Midwest, Mountain West, West Coast, plus 5 Southern Border/Confederate states (Tennessee, NC, Virginia, Florida, Texas) - first time since Reconstruction Republicans carried significant Confederate states. Smith states (8): Massachusetts, Rhode Island (Catholic-heavy Northeastern), plus 6 Deep South (Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina). Smith lost home state NY. Geographic pattern reveals: (1) 1928 election was structurally about religion, not economics. (2) Catholic-heavy Northeast (MA, RI) voted Smith; Catholic-light rest of country voted Hoover. (3) Even some former Confederate states voted Republican over Catholic Democrat - structural anti-Catholicism overrode 60+ years of Southern Democratic loyalty. (4) Deep South remained loyal to Smith partly because racial composition (Black population partial disenfranchisement) made Republican Southern victories structurally difficult.

AP students should articulate religious-geographic dynamic.