1932

Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Herbert Hoover

A 50-minute lesson on the 1932 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA New Deal Coalition	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Franklin D. Roosevelt (Democratic) · 472 EV	RUNNER-UP Herbert Hoover (Republican) · 59 EV
KEY ISSUE Great Depression; unemployment; New Deal relief, recovery, and reform	TURNOUT 56.9%

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1932: Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Herbert Hoover

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 situations in which Americans might decide they want their federal government to do more, not less. For each, suggest one specific federal program that grew out of such a moment.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1932 presidential election was the most pivotal of the twentieth century. It was held in the depths of the Great Depression, which had begun with the October 1929 stock market crash and worsened steadily for three years. By the summer of 1932, unemployment had reached 23.6 percent. Industrial production had fallen by half. Five thousand banks had failed, wiping out the savings of nine million Americans. Tent cities of homeless families had appeared on the outskirts of every major city, mocked in the press as Hoovervilles. The incumbent president, Herbert Hoover, was a Republican who had been elected in 1928 by a 444-87 electoral landslide. Hoover's response to the Depression had been bound by his political philosophy: the federal government should not provide direct relief to individuals, only indirect aid through banks and businesses. He had created the Reconstruction Finance Corporation in 1932 to lend money to failing banks and railroads, but he resisted federal jobs programs or direct cash payments. Critics called this trickle-down economics and noted that no trickle had reached the unemployed. The Democratic Party nominated Franklin D. Roosevelt, the popular governor of New York. Roosevelt had been Woodrow Wilson's Assistant Secretary of the Navy and the Democratic vice-presidential candidate in 1920. He had been paralyzed from the waist down by polio in 1921 - a fact he and his press allies carefully hid from voters. Reporters agreed not to photograph him in his wheelchair or being lifted into automobiles. Roosevelt's campaign was thin on specifics. He promised what he called a New Deal for the American people but rarely described what it would contain. He attacked Hoover for indecision and Republican economic orthodoxy. His acceptance speech famously declared: "I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people." Voters did not need policy detail. They needed the assurance that someone in Washington would act.

		On election day Roosevelt carried 472 electoral votes to Hoover's 59 - a landslide that ended Republican dominance of the executive branch and ushered in a generation of Democratic control. He won the popular vote 57.4 percent to 39.7 percent. Democrats also took huge majorities in the House (313 to 117) and Senate (59 to 36). The result represented the largest single-cycle shift in American political coalitions in a century. The new administration acted with unprecedented speed. The Hundred Days (March 9 - June 16, 1933) saw fifteen major laws pass Congress. The Emergency Banking Act stabilized the financial system. The Civilian Conservation Corps put 250,000 young men to work within months. The Agricultural Adjustment Act, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the National Industrial Recovery Act restructured entire economic sectors. The Social Security Act, passed in 1935 in a second wave of legislation, created federal retirement payments and unemployment insurance. By 1936 Roosevelt had reshaped the federal government's relationship to ordinary Americans for the next eighty years - and was re-elected in another landslide.
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

Great Depression

The economic crisis lasting from the October 1929 stock market crash until about 1939. Peak unemployment hit 24.9 percent in 1933. The longest and deepest contraction in American economic history.

Hundred Days

The first three months of Roosevelt's first term (March 9 - June 16, 1933), when Congress passed fifteen major laws restructuring American economic life. Has become the benchmark against which every later president's opening is measured.

Hooverville

A makeshift shantytown of homeless Americans during the early 1930s. The mocking name attributed the homelessness to President Hoover's policies. By 1932 every major city had at least one.

New Deal

The name Franklin Roosevelt gave to his domestic agenda. Spans 1933-1938 and includes banking reform, agricultural price supports, federal jobs programs, electrification, and Social Security.

Reconstruction Finance Corporation

A 1932 Hoover-created federal agency that lent money to failing banks, railroads, and corporations. Roosevelt kept and expanded it, using it to lend to states and local governments as well.

Realigning election

A presidential election that produces a durable shift in partisan coalitions, lasting one or more generations. 1932 is a classic case: it built the Democratic coalition that would dominate national politics for the next thirty-six years.

First Inaugural Address

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, MARCH 4, 1933

Roosevelt took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1933 - the lowest point of the Depression. Banks were collapsing nationwide. Unemployment had reached 24.9 percent. Roosevelt's address combined emergency rhetoric with a deliberate refusal to blame his predecessor by name. The famous opening line is the address's most quoted phrase.

> *"This is preeminently the time to speak the truth, the whole truth, frankly and boldly. Nor need we shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today. This great Nation will endure as it has endured, will revive and will prosper. So, first of all, let me assert my firm belief that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself - nameless, unreasoning, unjustified terror which paralyzes needed efforts to convert retreat into advance."*

Roosevelt, "First Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1933). Public domain.

The 1932 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Franklin Roosevelt receive in 1932?

( ) A. 332
( ) B. 442
( ) C. 472
( ) D. 531

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which famous phrase comes from Roosevelt's 1933 inaugural address?

( ) A. Ask not what your country can do for you
( ) B. The only thing we have to fear is fear itself
( ) C. Speak softly and carry a big stick
( ) D. The buck stops here

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific Hundred Days programs and what each one did.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Herbert Hoover's response to the Depression fail to satisfy voters by 1932?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Roosevelt was disabled from polio but most voters did not know. Identify one way the press helped Roosevelt hide this, and explain why.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1932 election map, identify which six states Hoover managed to carry. What regional pattern do they share?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

472. Roosevelt won 472 electoral votes; Hoover won 59. The popular vote was 57.4 percent to 39.7 percent.

The 1932 result is the largest single-cycle electoral shift in American political history. Roosevelt flipped 41 states from 1928.

QUESTION 2

The only thing we have to fear is fear itself. The phrase comes from the second paragraph of the First Inaugural.

The phrase is one of the most-quoted lines in American political rhetoric. It was directed at the bank panic, which was driven partly by depositors' rational and irrational fears.

QUESTION 3

Accept any three of: (1) Emergency Banking Act - stabilized the failing banking system. (2) Civilian Conservation Corps - put 250,000 young men to work building parks and planting trees. (3) Agricultural Adjustment Act - paid farmers to grow less food to raise prices. (4) Tennessee Valley Authority - built dams and brought electricity to rural areas. (5) National Industrial Recovery Act - established codes of fair competition and recognized labor unions. (6) Federal Emergency Relief Administration - gave direct federal grants to states for unemployment relief.

The Hundred Days included fifteen major laws. Naming three specific programs shows the student grasped both the speed and the breadth of federal action.

QUESTION 4

Hoover believed the federal government should not provide direct relief to individuals - only indirect aid through banks and businesses. After three years of worsening unemployment, breadlines, and homelessness, most voters had decided this approach was failing. The Hooverville shantytowns and the Bonus Army crackdown in July 1932 sharpened the public perception that Hoover was indifferent.

Hoover's political philosophy - rugged individualism - did not match a crisis in which individual effort could not produce work. The 1932 result was almost entirely a verdict on this mismatch.

QUESTION 5

Accept any of: (1) Reporters agreed not to photograph Roosevelt in his wheelchair or being lifted into cars. (2) The Secret Service confiscated film from photographers who tried. (3) Roosevelt practiced walking short distances with leg braces and a son's arm for newsreels. (4) Press conferences were held seated. The press agreed to this in part because they shared the consensus that a disabled candidate could not be elected.

The press-political bargain around FDR's disability is one of the clearest examples of how the line between news and propaganda was drawn before the 1960s.

QUESTION 6

Six states: Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Vermont. All six are in the Northeast. They are the residual core of historic Republican strength.

The Northeast was the last Republican stronghold in 1932. Even there, Hoover's margins were thin. Pennsylvania (with 38 electoral votes) was the largest of his six states and tipped the most.