3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1936

Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Alf Landon

A 35-minute lesson on the 1936 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA New Deal Coalition	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Franklin D. Roosevelt (Democratic) · 523 EV	RUNNER-UP Alf Landon (Republican) · 8 EV
KEY ISSUE New Deal defense; Supreme Court battles; economic recovery	TURNOUT 61.0%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1936: Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Alf Landon

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a president's first-term policies appear to have worked, what political conditions produce a re-election landslide?
15 min	**Reading**	1936 election was 38th U.S. presidential election. Produced FDR's 523-8 EV victory over Republican Alf Landon - largest electoral landslide in U.S. history up to that point (later matched by Nixon 1972, exceeded by Reagan 1984). FDR's 60.8% popular vote highest since 1820 (Monroe unopposed). 1936 result was structural confirmation of New Deal Democratic coalition that would dominate U.S. politics until 1968. Political conditions transformed by FDR's First New Deal (1933-35). FDR took office March 4, 1933 with U.S. economy in catastrophic collapse: unemployment 25%; ~9,000 banks had failed since 1929; industrial production -46% from 1929; agricultural prices collapsed; Bonus Army incident July 1932 produced public revulsion at Hoover. FDR's First 100 Days (March 9 - June 16, 1933) produced 15 major federal laws: Emergency Banking Act (closed banks for examination), Glass-Steagall Banking Act (created FDIC), Securities Act, Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA created PWA + NRA), Tennessee Valley Authority Act, Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Homeowners' Loan Corporation, Federal Emergency Relief Act (FERA), and others. The First 100 Days was the most productive federal legislative period in U.S. history. FDR's Second New Deal (1935-36) deepened reform: Wagner Act (July 1935 - federal protection for union organizing); Social Security Act (August 1935 - federal old-age pensions, unemployment insurance, aid to dependent children); Public Utility Holding Company Act (August 1935 - utility regulation); Banking Act of 1935 (centralized Federal Reserve authority); Revenue Act of 1935 ("Wealth Tax Act" - raised tax rates on top incomes); Works Progress Administration (WPA, May 1935 - federal employment of artists, writers, construction workers). The Second New Deal was more redistributive and structurally transformative than the First. Economic conditions had improved substantially by 1936 but had not fully recovered. Unemployment had fallen from 25% (1933) to 17% (1936). Industrial production had risen approximately 50% from 1933. GDP growth was strong. Bank failures had stopped after the FDIC. Agricultural prices had recovered partially. Federal Reserve had stabilized banking. But structural opposition to New Deal had emerged: (1) Conservative Democrats (Bourbon Democrats including Al Smith) opposed federal welfare-state expansion.

The American Liberty League (founded August 1934) was the leading conservative anti-New Deal organization. (2) Supreme Court had struck down key New Deal laws (1935 NRA in Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States; 1936 AAA in U.S. v. Butler) on constitutional grounds. (3) Father Charles Coughlin (Detroit radio priest with ~30M listeners) had attacked FDR from the populist right. (4) Senator Huey Long of Louisiana had attacked FDR from the populist left with his "Share Our Wealth" program before Long's September 1935 assassination.

Democratic National Convention met in Philadelphia June 23-27, 1936 and renominated FDR by acclamation. John Nance Garner of Texas was renominated as VP. The Democratic platform endorsed continued New Deal expansion: federal labor protection, Social Security expansion, federal regulation of monopoly, conservation, federal aid to youth.

Republican National Convention met in Cleveland June 9-12, 1936 and nominated Governor Alf Landon of Kansas on the first ballot. Landon was 49, a moderate Republican who had balanced Kansas's budget during the Depression. He was honest, dignified, and politically inoffensive. Frank Knox - publisher of the Chicago Daily News - was VP. The Republican platform attacked the New Deal as too expensive, too radical, and unconstitutional. But the platform also endorsed most specific New Deal welfare programs - reflecting the political reality that even Republican voters supported them.

Third parties were significant. The Union Party (Father Coughlin's populist movement plus Dr. Francis Townsend's old-age pension movement plus Reverend Gerald L. K. Smith's residual Huey Long supporters) nominated Representative William Lemke of North Dakota. Lemke would win 892,267 votes (1.9%). The Socialist Party renominated Norman Thomas - 187,910 votes (0.4%). The Communist Party USA nominated Earl Browder - 79,315 votes (0.2%).

FDR's campaign was structurally aggressive. He embraced the New Deal Democratic coalition with explicit class-conflict rhetoric. October 31, 1936 Madison Square Garden speech: "Never before in all our history have these forces been so united against one candidate as they stand today. They are unanimous in their hate for me - and I welcome their hatred." The speech identified "economic royalists" - corporate interests, Wall Street, conservative media - as the structural opposition to the New Deal.

The campaign produced one of the most embarrassing polling failures in U.S. history. The Literary Digest magazine had correctly predicted every U.S. presidential election since 1916 through its mail-survey methodology. Its 1936 prediction: Landon would win 57-43%. The actual result: FDR 60.8-36.5%. The Literary Digest had relied on telephone and automobile-owner samples which over-represented Republican voters in 1936. George Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion correctly predicted FDR's victory through probability sampling. The Literary Digest folded in 1938; Gallup

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FDR won 523 electoral votes to Landon's 8. FDR carried 46 states; Landon carried only Maine and Vermont. The popular vote: FDR 27,752,648 (60.8%); Landon 16,681,862 (36.5%); Lemke (Union) 892,267 (1.9%); Thomas (Socialist) 187,910 (0.4%); Browder (Communist) 79,315 (0.2%). FDR-Landon popular-vote margin: 11,070,786.

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. FDR's 1936 coalition - the New Deal Democratic coalition - included: (1) Urban Northern industrial workers (Catholic and Jewish immigrants and their American-born children). (2) Solid South (still loyal despite FDR's racial liberalism). (3) African Americans (who shifted from Republican to Democratic for first time since Reconstruction - "Black voters left Lincoln's party"). (4) Western farmers and miners. (5) Intellectuals, academics, professionals. (6) Organized labor. The coalition was the structural foundation of Democratic dominance 1932-68.

FDR's 1936 mandate was massive. But his 1937 attempt to "pack" the Supreme Court (the Judicial Procedures Reform Bill of 1937 would have added one Justice for each Justice over 70 years old - up to 6 additional Justices) produced a structural backlash. The plan failed in the Senate (rejected July 1937). The 1937 court-packing controversy + the 1937-38 recession + the 1938 midterm losses ended the New Deal's political momentum. The New Deal effectively ended by 1939; subsequent FDR policy was structurally defensive.

The 1936 election's structural significance was twofold. First, it confirmed the New Deal Democratic coalition that would dominate U.S. politics until 1968. Second, FDR's 1936 mandate was used immediately for the 1937 court-packing fight - demonstrating that even landslide mandates can be politically over-extended.

10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1936 Election

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Key words

Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR)	32nd U.S. president (1933-45). Only president elected four times. Led U.S. through Great Depression and WWII. Died April 12, 1945. 12-year presidency longest in U.S. history.
New Deal	FDR's 1933-39 federal response to Great Depression. Transformed U.S. federal government from limited 1920s governance to active welfare-state governance.

"As Maine goes, so goes Vermont"	Famous 1936 joke. Landon carried only Maine and Vermont. The original saying "As Maine goes, so goes the nation" had been used to predict national results from Maine's September elections.
Alf Landon	Kansas Governor (1933-37) and 1936 Republican presidential nominee. Lost 523-8 EV to FDR. Retired from elective politics after 1936; lived until 1987 (age 100).
Literary Digest poll failure	The 1936 polling failure of Literary Digest magazine. Its mail-survey methodology predicted Landon 57-43%. Actual result: FDR 60.8-36.5%. The magazine had over-sampled telephone and automobile owners - structurally Republican-leaning groups in 1936. The Literary Digest folded in 1938; George Gallup's probability sampling became the industry standard.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did FDR win in 1936?

( ) A. 435
( ) B. 472
( ) C. 486
( ) D. 523

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which two states did Republican Alf Landon carry in 1936?

( ) A. New Hampshire and Vermont
( ) B. Maine and Vermont
( ) C. Massachusetts and Maine
( ) D. Vermont and Connecticut

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the New Deal Democratic coalition and why did it dominate U.S. politics 1932-68?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Literary Digest poll failure of 1936 change U.S. polling methodology?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

523. FDR 523; Landon 8. FDR's 515-EV margin was the largest in U.S. history at the time.

AP students should know the 523-8 split.

QUESTION 2

Maine and Vermont. Maine 5 EV + Vermont 3 EV = 8 EV total. These were the only two states Landon carried.

AP students should know Maine + Vermont.

QUESTION 3

The New Deal Democratic coalition was the structural Democratic majority assembled by FDR through New Deal policy. Component groups: (1) Urban Northern industrial workers (Catholic and Jewish immigrants and their American-born children) - drawn to Democrats by Wagner Act union protection, WPA jobs, federal welfare expansion. (2) Solid South (former Confederate states + Border States) - traditionally Democratic since Reconstruction; New Deal added economic motivation. (3) African Americans - shifted from Republican to Democratic for first time since Reconstruction; "Black voters left Lincoln's party" because New Deal helped them economically (though FDR did not address civil rights). (4) Western farmers and miners - drawn by Agricultural Adjustment Act, TVA, federal land policy. (5) Intellectuals, academics, professionals - drawn by New Deal's progressive policy framework. (6) Organized labor - protected by Wagner Act. Coalition dominated U.S. politics through 1968. It broke in 1968 when: (a) Southern Democrats defected over Civil Rights (1964 Civil Rights Act, 1965 Voting Rights Act). (b) Working-class whites in Northern cities defected over urban unrest and Vietnam. (c) Wallace 1968 Independent campaign demonstrated the cleavage.

AP students should be able to articulate both the coalition and its endpoint.

QUESTION 4

The Literary Digest poll failure of 1936 changed U.S. polling methodology fundamentally. The magazine had correctly predicted every U.S. presidential election since 1916 through mail-survey methodology - mailing approximately 10 million ballots and tabulating the returns. In 1936, the Literary Digest predicted Landon 57-43%; actual result: FDR 60.8-36.5%. The failure had two structural causes: (1) The Literary Digest had sampled from telephone directories and automobile-registration lists - which over-represented wealthier voters who were structurally Republican-leaning in 1936. (2) The mail-survey response rate was approximately 25%; the respondents were structurally different from non-respondents in ways that biased the result. George Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion correctly predicted FDR's victory through probability sampling - smaller samples (~5,000) drawn to represent the full electorate. Gallup's methodology demonstrated that probability sampling was structurally superior to large-N convenience sampling. The Literary Digest folded in 1938. Gallup polling became the industry standard. The 1936 lesson: a large biased sample is worse than a small representative sample. The structural lesson would shape U.S. polling methodology through the 20th century.

AP students should be able to articulate the polling-methodology revolution.