1936

Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Alf Landon

A 50-minute lesson on the 1936 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) · 523 EV	RUNNER-UP Alf Landon (Republican) · 8 EV
KEY ISSUE New Deal defense; Supreme Court battles; economic recovery	TURNOUT 61.0%

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1936: Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Alf Landon

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 1933-36 America that would produce a presidential re-election landslide. For each identify the specific New Deal policy most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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. FDR's 60.8% popular vote highest since 1820. 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 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, Glass-Steagall Banking Act (FDIC), Securities Act, Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA), National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA - 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); Banking Act of 1935; Revenue Act of 1935 ("Wealth Tax Act"); Works Progress Administration (WPA, May 1935). 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 ~50% from 1933. GDP growth was strong. Bank failures had stopped after the FDIC. 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: May 27, 1935 NRA struck down in Schechter Poultry Corp. v. United States (the "sick chicken case"); January 6, 1936 AAA struck down in U.S. v. Butler. (3) Father Charles Coughlin (Detroit radio priest with ~30M listeners) had attacked FDR from the populist right. (4) Senator Huey Long of Louisiana attacked FDR from the populist left with "Share Our Wealth" program before Long's September 8, 1935 assassination by Carl Weiss.

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 1936 Convention also abolished the Democratic Party's two-thirds rule for presidential nominations (a structural Southern veto over nominees) - structurally weakening the Southern conservative wing of the party. The Democratic platform endorsed continued New Deal expansion.

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 + Dr. Francis Townsend + 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 - mailing ~10M ballots and tabulating returns. Its 1936 prediction: Landon would win 57-43%. The actual result: FDR 60.8-36.5%. The Literary Digest had relied on telephone-directory and automobile-registration 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 polling became the industry standard.

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 - largest in U.S. history up to that point.

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. (3) African Americans (who shifted from Republican to Democratic for first time since Reconstruction). (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 Court had struck down major New Deal programs (NRA 1935, AAA 1936) and was expected to strike down Social Security (1935) and the Wagner Act (1935) as well. FDR proposed adding Justices to overcome the Court's conservative majority. The plan was politically devastating: Democratic Senate leader Joseph Robinson (who would have shepherded the bill) died July 14, 1937 of a heart attack; the Senate rejected the plan July 22, 1937 by a 70-20 vote. 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.

But the Supreme Court had effectively switched its position before the court-packing fight ended. On March 29, 1937, the Court in West Coast Hotel Co. v. Parrish upheld a minimum-wage law for women - reversing its 1923 Adkins v. Children's Hospital precedent. Justice Owen Roberts had shifted from the conservative bloc to the liberal bloc - "the switch in time that saved nine." Subsequent 1937 decisions upheld the Wagner Act (NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp., April 12, 1937) and Social Security (Helvering v. Davis and Steward Machine Co. v. Davis, May 24, 1937). The Court's constitutional position shifted permanently; New Deal programs were upheld.

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 **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

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.

First New Deal
FDR's 1933-35 emergency response. Major laws from First 100 Days: Emergency Banking Act, Glass-Steagall (FDIC), AAA, NIRA (PWA + NRA), TVA, CCC, FERA, Homeowners' Loan Corp, Securities Act.

"As Maine goes, so goes Vermont"
Famous 1936 joke. Landon carried only Maine and Vermont.

Literary Digest poll failure
1936 polling failure. Mail-survey methodology predicted Landon 57-43%; actual: FDR 60.8-36.5%. Literary Digest folded 1938.

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.

Second New Deal
FDR's 1935-36 redistributive expansion. Wagner Act (union organizing); Social Security Act; PUHCA; Banking Act 1935; Revenue Act 1935 ("Wealth Tax"); WPA.

Alf Landon
Kansas Governor and 1936 Republican presidential nominee. Lost 523-8 EV. Lived until 1987 (age 100).

Madison Square Garden Address

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, OCTOBER 31, 1936

FDR delivered this address at Madison Square Garden on October 31, 1936 - the Saturday before Election Day. The speech was FDR's closing argument and most aggressive class-conflict rhetoric of the 1936 campaign. The "economic royalists" passage articulated the structural class-based critique of 1920s and pre-New-Deal American politics: corporate interests, Wall Street, and conservative media as the structural opposition to the New Deal. The "I welcome their hatred" passage was FDR's explicit embrace of the New Deal Democratic coalition. The speech is widely cited as the most aggressive class-conflict rhetoric by any U.S. president in the 20th century. It contributed to FDR's 60.8% popular-vote margin three days later.

> *"For nearly four years you have had an Administration which instead of twirling its thumbs has rolled up its sleeves. We will keep our sleeves rolled up. We had to struggle with the old enemies of peace - business and financial monopoly, speculation, reckless banking, class antagonism, sectionalism, war profiteering. They had begun to consider the Government of the United States as a mere appendage to their own affairs. We know now that Government by organized money is just as dangerous as Government by organized mob. 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. I should like to have it said of my first Administration that in it the forces of selfishness and of lust for power met their match. I should like to have it said of my second Administration that in it these forces met their master."*

Roosevelt, "Address at Madison Square Garden" (New York, October 31, 1936). Public domain.

The 1936 Election

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

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

FDR says "they are unanimous in their hate for me - and I welcome their hatred." What political strategy does this articulate?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1936 election map, identify FDR's 46 states and Landon's 2 states (Maine and Vermont). What does the geographic pattern reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

523. FDR 523; Landon 8.

AP students should know the 523-8 split.

QUESTION 2

Maine and Vermont. 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: urban Northern industrial workers (Catholic and Jewish immigrants); Solid South; African Americans (shifted from Republican to Democratic for first time since Reconstruction); Western farmers and miners; intellectuals, academics, professionals; organized labor. Coalition dominated 1932-68. Broke 1968 when: (a) Southern Democrats defected over Civil Rights. (b) Working-class whites defected over urban unrest and Vietnam. (c) Wallace 1968 Independent campaign demonstrated the cleavage. (d) Nixon's "Southern Strategy" exploited the cleavage.

AP students should be able to articulate the coalition.

QUESTION 4

FDR's "I welcome their hatred" articulates aggressive class-conflict political strategy. Core elements: (1) Identify a specific class enemy ("economic royalists" - corporate interests, Wall Street, conservative media). (2) Embrace explicit conflict with that class - rather than seeking compromise or unity. (3) Use the conflict to mobilize the coalition (urban workers, farmers, intellectuals, African Americans) that benefits from the class enemy's defeat. (4) Frame the conflict in moral terms - "the forces of selfishness and of lust for power met their match." The strategy was structurally novel for a U.S. president: prior presidents had typically sought unity rhetoric. FDR's strategy was modeled on European labor and social-democratic politics. It worked in 1936 (60.8% popular vote) but produced lasting conservative opposition - the structural foundation of the post-1937 anti-New Deal coalition. The lesson: aggressive class-conflict rhetoric can mobilize a winning coalition but produces structural opposition that constrains future governance.

AP students should be able to articulate the strategy.

QUESTION 5

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 ~10M ballots and tabulating returns. In 1936, the Literary Digest predicted Landon 57-43%; actual result: FDR 60.8-36.5%. The failure had two structural causes: (1) Sampling bias - telephone directories and automobile-registration lists over-represented wealthier voters who were structurally Republican-leaning. (2) Response bias - 25% response rate; respondents structurally different from non-respondents. George Gallup correctly predicted FDR through probability sampling. The Literary Digest folded in 1938. Gallup polling became the industry standard. The lesson: a large biased sample is worse than a small representative sample. The structural lesson shaped U.S. polling through the 20th century.

AP students should be able to articulate the methodology revolution.

QUESTION 6

FDR states (46): everything except Maine and Vermont. Including all Northeast (except ME, VT), all Mid-Atlantic, all Midwest, all Mountain West, all West Coast, all Solid South, all Border States. Landon states (2): Maine, Vermont. The geographic pattern reveals: (1) FDR's coalition was geographically comprehensive - the New Deal had political support in every region. (2) Maine and Vermont were structurally Republican-loyal small New England states that had been Republican since 1856 (Frémont). They were the most-Republican states in the country. (3) Even strongly Republican states like Vermont (which had voted Republican every election since 1856) gave FDR significant minority support. (4) The 1936 map demonstrated FDR's 1936 mandate. The next decisive Democratic landslide (LBJ 1964) would carry 44 states - similar in scale. The 1936 map would not be matched until Nixon 1972 (49 states) and Reagan 1984 (49 states).

AP students should be able to articulate the structural mandate.