3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1956

Dwight D. Eisenhower vs Adlai Stevenson II

A 35-minute lesson on the 1956 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA New Deal Coalition	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Dwight D. Eisenhower (Republican) · 457 EV	RUNNER-UP Adlai Stevenson II (Democratic) · 73 EV
KEY ISSUE Cold War; Suez Crisis; prosperity; Eisenhower's health	TURNOUT 60.2%

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

1956: Dwight D. Eisenhower vs Adlai Stevenson II

Timing

5 min	Warm-up	When an incumbent president wins re-election by a bigger margin than his initial victory, what does this reveal about voter satisfaction with his first term?
15 min	Reading	1956 election was 43rd U.S. presidential election. Produced Dwight D. Eisenhower's 457-73 EV victory over Democrat Adlai Stevenson II - Eisenhower's second consecutive landslide over Stevenson. Eisenhower's 57.4% popular vote was higher than 1952 (55.2%) - one of the few re-election landslides bigger than the initial victory. 1956 election structurally confirmed Eisenhower's "Modern Republican" governance framework and the 1950s political-economic consensus. Political conditions had been transformed by Eisenhower's first-term governance. Major 1953-56 achievements: July 27, 1953 Korean armistice; 1953-54 covert operations (Iran, Guatemala); May 17, 1954 Brown v. Board of Education; 1954 Geneva Accords on Vietnam; 1954-55 Joseph McCarthy decline + Senate censure December 2, 1954; June 29, 1956 Interstate Highway Act ($25B authorization); economic prosperity (GDP growth 4%/year average; unemployment 4-5%; consumer-credit-driven suburban expansion). Eisenhower's health was a campaign issue. September 24, 1955 heart attack at Aspen Lodge in Denver, Colorado - hospitalized 7 weeks. June 9, 1956 emergency ileitis surgery. Doctors cleared him to run but health was structurally concerning. Eisenhower was 65 at 1956 election (66 at second inauguration; 70 by end of second term). Republican National Convention met in San Francisco August 20-23, 1956 and renominated Eisenhower-Nixon by acclamation. Some Republicans had quietly pushed to drop Nixon (his cold, calculating reputation contrasted with Eisenhower's warmth) but Eisenhower endorsed Nixon. The "dump Nixon" movement led by Harold Stassen failed structurally. Democratic National Convention met in Chicago August 13-17, 1956. The convention re-nominated Adlai Stevenson II on the first ballot. Stevenson had lost 1952 by 6.7 million popular votes and was widely seen as having low chances against Eisenhower. The 1956 nomination went to Stevenson largely because no stronger Democratic alternative was available. Major Democratic figures (Truman, LBJ, Sen Symington) had declined to seek the nomination. Sen Estes Kefauver of Tennessee (1952 nomination challenger) was a candidate but Stevenson won.

The Democratic VP nomination was unusual. Stevenson declined to choose a running mate, throwing the choice to the convention. The August 17, 1956 open VP fight was between Sen Estes Kefauver (Tennessee, racket-busting investigator) and Sen John F. Kennedy of Massachusetts (39, future president). Kefauver won on the second ballot 755.5-589. JFK's near-miss VP candidacy structurally elevated his national profile for the 1960 presidential campaign - JFK gave a graceful concession speech that established him as a Democratic Party future leader. The Stevenson-Kefauver ticket was a moderate-Democratic Tennessee-Illinois pairing.

The campaign focused on Eisenhower's record and health. Eisenhower's campaign emphasized peace and prosperity. Republican slogan: "Peace, Progress, Prosperity." Stevenson attacked H-bomb testing (proposed a Test Ban Treaty) but the issue did not connect with voters who trusted Eisenhower's judgment. Stevenson's health attacks (suggesting Eisenhower could not survive a second term) backfired - voters resented attacks on the popular incumbent.

October 23 - November 11, 1956 Hungarian Revolution: Hungarian uprising against Soviet rule. Began as student protests in Budapest October 23. October 24 Soviet troops entered Budapest. October 28-November 3 ceasefire and tentative negotiations. November 4 Soviet tanks invaded Budapest in force. November 4-11 fighting killed ~2,500 Hungarians and ~700 Soviets; ~200,000 Hungarians fled as refugees. U.S. did not intervene despite Voice of America broadcasts encouraging the uprising. The non-intervention demonstrated Cold War limits of U.S. liberation rhetoric: Eisenhower's rollback rhetoric (Dulles's "rollback" of Communism) was structurally limited by the risk of nuclear escalation.

October 29 - November 7, 1956 Suez Crisis: Israel invaded Egyptian Sinai October 29. Britain and France issued ultimatum October 30 demanding Egyptian withdrawal from Suez Canal area. October 31 British-French airstrikes on Egypt. November 5 British-French paratroop landings at Suez. The invasion responded to Egyptian President Nasser's July 26, 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal (previously owned by British-French Suez Canal Company). Eisenhower opposed the invasion: he had not been consulted; he viewed it as 19th-century European colonialism; he feared Soviet response. U.S. pressured allies through United Nations General Assembly resolutions (passed November 2 demanding ceasefire) and economic pressure (refusal to provide British currency support). November 6 - the day of the U.S. presidential election - Britain announced ceasefire effective November 7. The British government of Anthony Eden fell January 9, 1957. The crisis ended British role as major Middle East power; established U.S. as Western leader in the region.

Both October-November crises strengthened Eisenhower's position. Voters wanted experienced foreign-policy leadership during international crises. Eisenhower's structural management of Suez (siding against Britain and France in support of UN principles) was politically masterful - establishing him as fair, principled, and

decisive. The November 6 election was already structurally settled by the time the Suez ceasefire was announced.

Eisenhower won 457 electoral votes to Stevenson's 73. Eisenhower carried 41 states; Stevenson 7 states. The popular vote: Eisenhower 35,579,180 (57.4%); Stevenson 26,028,028 (42.0%); minor candidates ~410,000. Eisenhower-Stevenson popular-vote margin: 9,551,152 - larger than 1952's 6,700,439.

The geographic pattern was structurally significant. Eisenhower expanded his 1952 Southern breakthrough: he carried Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana (first Republican Louisiana victory since Reconstruction), Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. Stevenson held only the Deep South Democratic remnant: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri (no, Missouri went Eisenhower), North Carolina, South Carolina. The Louisiana breakthrough was particularly structural: it was the first Republican Louisiana victory since Reconstruction's 1876 collapse, foreshadowing the 1960s Deep South Republican realignment.

Eisenhower's second term (1957-61) included: (1) September 1957 Little Rock crisis - Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne to enforce school desegregation at Little Rock Central High School. Federal-state confrontation over Brown implementation. (2) September 1957 Civil Rights Act of 1957 - first federal civil rights legislation since 1875. Established U.S. Civil Rights Commission. (3) October 4, 1957 Sputnik launch - Soviet space race victory. Response: 1958 NASA founding; 1958 National Defense Education Act (federal aid to education); 1958 ARPA (later DARPA, internet origins). (4) 1958 economic recession - structural reminder of post-WWII recession cycles. (5) 1959 Cuban Revolution (Fidel Castro overthrew Batista January 1, 1959) - Cold War Latin American crisis. (6) May 1, 1960 U-2 incident - Soviet shot down U.S. spy plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers over Sverdlovsk. Eisenhower initially denied the operation; Soviets produced Powers alive. May 16-17 Paris Summit collapsed. Politically damaging in Eisenhower's final year. (7) January 17, 1961 farewell address - "military-industrial complex" warning.

The 1956 election's structural significance was twofold. First, it confirmed Eisenhower's "Modern Republican" framework and the 1950s political-economic consensus. Second, the Eisenhower Southern expansion (gaining LA, KY, TN, TX, VA, WV plus FL) foreshadowed the 1960s Republican Southern realignment. Eisenhower's personal popularity had broken Southern Democratic loyalty in many former Confederate states - establishing the structural foundation for Goldwater 1964 and Nixon 1968.

The 1960 election (Kennedy 303 EV over Nixon 219) would be close - the first close election since 1916. JFK's 1956 VP near-miss had elevated him for the 1960 race; his August 17, 1956 graceful concession speech was structurally important for his future political career.

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 1956 Election

1956 election was 43rd U.S. presidential election. Produced Dwight D. Eisenhower's 457-73 EV victory over Democrat Adlai Stevenson II - Eisenhower's second consecutive landslide over Stevenson. Eisenhower's 57.4% popular vote was higher than 1952 (55.2%) - one of the few re-election landslides bigger than the initial victory. 1956 election structurally confirmed Eisenhower's "Modern Republican" governance framework and the 1950s political-economic consensus.

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Key words

Hungarian Revolution 1956	October 23 - November 11, 1956 Hungarian uprising against Soviet rule. Began as student protests in Budapest. Soviet tanks crushed revolution November 4-11; ~2,500 Hungarians killed; ~200,000 fled as refugees. U.S. did not intervene despite Voice of America broadcasts. Demonstrated Cold War limits of U.S. liberation rhetoric.
Suez Crisis 1956	October 29 - November 7, 1956 invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, and Israel after Nasser's July 26, 1956 nationalization of Suez Canal. Eisenhower opposed; pressured allies through UN and economic pressure. November 6 (U.S. Election Day) Britain announced cease-fire. British PM Eden government fell January 1957. Ended British role as Middle East power.
Eisenhower 1955 heart attack	September 24, 1955 Eisenhower suffered heart attack at Aspen Lodge in Denver, Colorado. Hospitalized 7 weeks. June 9, 1956 emergency ileitis surgery. Doctors cleared him to run.
Estes Kefauver	Tennessee Senator (1949-63) and 1956 Democratic VP nominee. Defeated Sen JFK at August 1956 Democratic Convention open VP fight (755.5-589 second ballot). Had been famous racket-busting investigator (1950-51 Kefauver Committee). Lost 1952 Democratic presidential nomination to Stevenson.
Civil Rights Act of 1957	The September 9, 1957 federal civil rights law - first federal civil rights legislation since 1875. Established U.S. Civil Rights Commission; provided modest federal voting-rights enforcement. Operationalized 1957-58 in limited cases. Predecessor to 1960 + 1964 + 1965 Civil Rights Acts.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Eisenhower win in 1956?

( ) A. 419
( ) B. 432
( ) C. 457
( ) D. 486

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who defeated JFK at the 1956 Democratic Convention's open VP fight?

( ) A. Sen Stuart Symington
( ) B. Sen Estes Kefauver
( ) C. Sen Hubert Humphrey
( ) D. Sen John Sparkman

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What were the two October-November 1956 Cold War crises, and how did they affect the U.S. election?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Eisenhower's 1956 Louisiana victory structurally significant?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

457. Eisenhower 457; Stevenson 73. Eisenhower carried 41 states. Even bigger than 1952 (442-89).

AP students should know the 457-73 split.

QUESTION 2

Sen Estes Kefauver (Tennessee). Kefauver defeated JFK 755.5-589 on the second ballot of the August 1956 Democratic Convention's open VP fight. Stevenson had declined to choose a running mate, throwing the choice to the convention. JFK's near-miss VP candidacy structurally elevated his national profile for the 1960 presidential campaign.

AP students should know Kefauver as JFK's 1956 VP rival.

QUESTION 3

Two October-November 1956 Cold War crises: (1) Hungarian Revolution October 23 - November 11, 1956. Hungarian uprising against Soviet rule crushed by Soviet tanks November 4-11; ~2,500 Hungarians killed; ~200,000 fled. U.S. did not intervene despite Voice of America broadcasts encouraging the uprising. (2) Suez Crisis October 29 - November 7, 1956. Britain, France, Israel invaded Egypt after Nasser's July 26 Suez Canal nationalization. Eisenhower opposed and pressured allies through UN and economic pressure. November 6 (U.S. Election Day) Britain announced ceasefire. Both crises strengthened Eisenhower's position: voters wanted experienced foreign-policy leadership during international crises. Eisenhower's structural management of Suez (siding against Britain and France in support of UN principles) was politically masterful - establishing him as fair, principled, and decisive. The November 6 election was already structurally settled by the time the Suez ceasefire was announced.

AP students should know both crises.

QUESTION 4

Eisenhower's 1956 Louisiana victory was structurally significant because it was the first Republican Louisiana victory since Reconstruction's 1876 collapse - an 80-year gap. Louisiana had been a structural Democratic state since the 1880s due to: (1) Solid South loyalty after Reconstruction. (2) Black population disenfranchisement that kept the white-only electorate Democratic. (3) Catholic Cajun-French south Louisiana culture that aligned with Northern Catholic immigrant Democrats. Eisenhower's 1956 Louisiana victory broke this structural alignment through: (1) Eisenhower's personal popularity (war hero, peace, prosperity). (2) Stevenson's weakness as a candidate. (3) Eisenhower's relatively moderate civil rights position (he had sent troops to Little Rock 1957 only after 1956 election; his 1956 position was less aggressive). (4) Suez Crisis prestige - Eisenhower's management of foreign crisis was politically powerful. The Louisiana breakthrough foreshadowed the 1960s Deep South Republican re-alignment: 1964 Goldwater carried Louisiana; 1968 Wallace carried Louisiana; 1972 Nixon carried Louisiana; from 1980+ Louisiana has been structurally Republican in presidential elections. The 1956 breakthrough was the first crack in the Solid South's structural Democratic loyalty.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance.