1956

Dwight D. Eisenhower vs Adlai Stevenson II

A 50-minute lesson on the 1956 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 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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2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
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1956: Dwight D. Eisenhower vs Adlai Stevenson II

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 1953-56 America that would produce a 1956 Eisenhower re-election landslide. For each identify the specific 1953-56 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	1956 election was 43rd U.S. presidential election. Produced Eisenhower's 457-73 EV victory over Stevenson - second consecutive landslide over Stevenson. Eisenhower's 57.4% popular vote higher than 1952 (55.2%). 1956 election structurally confirmed Eisenhower's "Modern Republican" framework and 1950s political-economic consensus. 1953-56 Eisenhower achievements: July 27, 1953 Korean armistice; 1953-54 covert operations (Iran Mossadegh coup August 1953; Guatemala Arbenz coup June 1954); May 17, 1954 Brown v. Board; 1954 Geneva Accords on Vietnam; 1954-55 McCarthy decline + Senate censure December 2, 1954; June 29, 1956 Interstate Highway Act ($25B); economic prosperity (GDP growth 4%/year; unemployment 4-5%; suburban expansion). Eisenhower health campaign issue. September 24, 1955 heart attack at Aspen Lodge Denver. Hospitalized 7 weeks. June 9, 1956 emergency ileitis surgery. Doctors cleared him to run. 65 at 1956 election; 66 at second inauguration; 70 by end of second term. Republican National Convention San Francisco August 20-23, 1956 renominated Eisenhower-Nixon by acclamation. "Dump Nixon" movement led by Harold Stassen failed structurally. Eisenhower endorsed Nixon. Democratic National Convention Chicago August 13-17, 1956 re-nominated Stevenson on first ballot. Stevenson had lost 1952 by 6.7M votes. 1956 nomination went to Stevenson largely because no stronger Democratic alternative was available. Truman, LBJ, Sen Symington declined to seek nomination. Stevenson declined to choose VP, throwing choice to convention. August 17 open VP fight between Sen Estes Kefauver (TN) and Sen JFK (MA, 39). Kefauver won on second ballot 755.5-589. JFK's near-miss VP candidacy structurally elevated his national profile for 1960 presidential campaign - graceful concession speech established him as

Democratic Party future leader.

Campaign focused on Eisenhower's record and health. Republican slogan: "Peace, Progress, Prosperity." Stevenson attacked H-bomb testing (proposed 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 second term) backfired.

October 23 - November 11, 1956 Hungarian Revolution. Hungarian uprising against Soviet rule. Soviet tanks crushed revolution November 4-11. ~2,500 Hungarians killed; ~200,000 fled. U.S. did not intervene despite Voice of America broadcasts. Demonstrated Cold War limits of U.S. liberation rhetoric.

October 29 - November 7, 1956 Suez Crisis. Israel invaded Egyptian Sinai October 29. Britain-France issued ultimatum October 30. October 31 British-French airstrikes. November 5 British-French paratroop landings at Suez. Eisenhower opposed invasion: not consulted; viewed as 19th-century European colonialism; feared Soviet response. U.S. pressured allies through UN General Assembly resolutions + economic pressure. November 6 (U.S. Election Day) Britain announced ceasefire. British government of Anthony Eden fell January 9, 1957. Ended British role as Middle East power.

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.

Eisenhower won 457 EV; Stevenson 73. Eisenhower 41 states; Stevenson 7. Popular vote: Eisenhower 35,579,180 (57.4%); Stevenson 26,028,028 (42.0%); minor candidates ~410K. Eisenhower-Stevenson margin: 9,551,152 - larger than 1952.

Geographic pattern: Eisenhower expanded 1952 Southern breakthrough. Carried Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana (first Republican LA victory since 1876 Reconstruction collapse), Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia. Stevenson held only Deep South Democratic remnant: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, Missouri (no MO went Eisenhower), North Carolina, South Carolina. Louisiana breakthrough particularly structural - foreshadowed 1960s Deep South Republican realignment.

Eisenhower's second term 1957-61: (1) September 1957 Little Rock crisis - 101st Airborne to enforce school desegregation. (2) September 9, 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: NASA 1958; National Defense Education Act 1958; ARPA 1958 (later DARPA, internet origins). (4) 1958 recession. (5) January 1, 1959 Cuban Revolution - Castro overthrew Batista. (6) May 1, 1960 U-2 incident - Francis Gary Powers shot

		down over Sverdlovsk. Paris Summit May 16-17 collapsed. (7) January 17, 1961 farewell "military-industrial complex" address. 1956 election structural significance: (1) Confirmed Eisenhower's "Modern Republican" framework and 1950s political-economic consensus. (2) Southern expansion (LA + KY + TN + TX + VA + WV + FL) foreshadowed 1960s Republican Southern realignment. Eisenhower's personal popularity broke Southern Democratic loyalty in many former Confederate states - establishing structural foundation for Goldwater 1964 and Nixon 1968. 1960 election would be close - first close election since 1916 - between Nixon and JFK. JFK's 1956 VP near-miss had elevated him for 1960.
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

Hungarian Revolution 1956

October 23 - November 11, 1956 Hungarian uprising against Soviet rule. Soviet tanks crushed November 4-11. ~2,500 Hungarians killed; ~200,000 fled.

Eisenhower 1955 heart attack

September 24, 1955 Eisenhower heart attack at Aspen Lodge Denver. Hospitalized 7 weeks. June 1956 emergency ileitis surgery. Doctors cleared him to run.

Civil Rights Act of 1957

September 9, 1957 federal civil rights law - first since 1875. Established U.S. Civil Rights Commission; modest federal voting-rights enforcement.

Sputnik (October 4, 1957)

Soviet satellite launched October 4, 1957 - first artificial Earth satellite. ~184 lbs; orbited at ~575 miles. Triggered U.S. "Sputnik crisis" - perception that U.S. had fallen behind Soviets in space race and science education. Responses: NASA founding July 29, 1958; National Defense Education Act September 2, 1958; ARPA February 7, 1958 (later DARPA - internet origins).

Suez Crisis 1956

October 29 - November 7, 1956 invasion of Egypt by Britain, France, Israel after Nasser's July 26, 1956 nationalization of Suez Canal. Eisenhower opposed; pressured allies.

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.

Little Rock crisis 1957

September 1957 federal-state confrontation over Brown v. Board implementation at Little Rock Central High School. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus deployed National Guard September 4 to block 9 Black students from entering school. Eisenhower federalized Arkansas National Guard September 24 + sent 101st Airborne September 25 to enforce desegregation. Students attended school under federal protection.

Address Regarding the Suez Crisis

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER, OCTOBER 31, 1956

Eisenhower delivered this address to the nation on October 31, 1956 - approximately one week before the November 6 U.S. presidential election. The address explained Eisenhower's opposition to the British-French-Israeli invasion of Egypt that had begun October 29. The "use of force" passage articulated the structural Eisenhower commitment to international-law principles: the U.S. would not support military intervention by its allies if the intervention violated United Nations principles. The speech was politically risky: it sided against Britain (the closest U.S. WWII ally) and France (a NATO partner) in support of Egypt (a non-aligned Arab state). The structural lesson: principled foreign-policy positions can be politically effective when they project moral authority and rule-of-law commitment.

> *"We do not accept the use of force as a wise or proper instrument for the settlement of international disputes. To say this in this particular instance is in no way to minimize our friendship with these nations - nor our determination to maintain those friendships. We are fully aware of the grave anxieties of Israel, of Britain and of France. We know that they have been subjected to grave and repeated provocations. The present fact, nonetheless, seems clear: the action taken can scarcely be reconciled with the principles and purposes of the United Nations to which we have all subscribed. We believe these actions to have been taken in error. For we do not accept the use of force as a wise or proper instrument for the settlement of international disputes. To say this - in this particular instance - is in no way to minimize our friendship with these nations - nor our determination to maintain those friendships."*

Eisenhower, "Address Regarding the Suez Crisis" (Washington, DC, October 31, 1956). Public domain.

The 1956 Election

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

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

Eisenhower says "we do not accept the use of force as a wise or proper instrument for the settlement of international disputes." What is the political risk of this position, and why did Eisenhower take it?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Eisenhower's 1956 Louisiana victory structurally significant?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1956 election map, identify Eisenhower's 41 states and Stevenson's 7 states (Deep South AL, AR, GA, MS, NC, SC + MO). What does the geographic pattern reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

457. Eisenhower 457; Stevenson 73.

AP students should know the 457-73 split.

QUESTION 2

Sen Estes Kefauver (Tennessee). Defeated JFK 755.5-589 on second ballot.

AP students should know Kefauver.

QUESTION 3

Two crises: (1) Hungarian Revolution Oct 23 - Nov 11, 1956 - Hungarian uprising against Soviet rule. Soviet tanks crushed. U.S. did not intervene. (2) Suez Crisis Oct 29 - Nov 7, 1956 - Britain, France, Israel invaded Egypt after Nasser's July 26 nationalization of Suez Canal. Eisenhower opposed. November 6 (Election Day) Britain announced ceasefire. Both crises strengthened Eisenhower: voters wanted experienced foreign-policy leadership during international crises.

AP students should know both crises.

QUESTION 4

Eisenhower's "we do not accept the use of force" position carried three political risks: (1) Alienated Britain (closest U.S. WWII ally) and France (NATO partner). British government of Anthony Eden fell January 9, 1957 partly due to U.S. opposition. (2) Politically alienated American Anglophiles and pro-Israel constituencies. (3) Created Cold War risk: Soviet Union exploited the Suez Crisis to crush the Hungarian Revolution simultaneously (October-November 1956). U.S. opposition to Britain-France complicated the structural Western alliance during a Cold War moment. Eisenhower took the position despite these risks for three structural reasons: (1) Principled commitment to United Nations Charter principles (Eisenhower had been a key drafter of post-WWII international institutions). (2) Strategic recognition that European colonialism was structurally untenable in the post-WWII era. The U.S. needed to position itself as different from European colonial powers to win Cold War influence in newly independent states. (3) Personal Eisenhower belief that aggressive use of force should be reserved for genuine national-security threats, not commercial or status interests. The position was politically effective in three ways: (1) Established Eisenhower as fair, principled, and decisive. (2) Strengthened U.S. credibility in non-aligned nations. (3) Boosted his 1956 election landslide.

AP students should be able to articulate the political risks and rationale.

QUESTION 5

Eisenhower's 1956 Louisiana victory was structurally significant because it was first Republican Louisiana victory since 1876 Reconstruction collapse - 80-year gap. Louisiana had been structural Democratic state since 1880s due to: (1) Solid South loyalty after Reconstruction. (2) Black population disenfranchisement keeping white-only electorate Democratic. (3) Catholic Cajun-French south Louisiana culture aligned with Northern Catholic immigrant Democrats. Eisenhower's 1956 Louisiana victory broke this through: (1) Eisenhower's personal popularity. (2) Stevenson weakness. (3) Eisenhower's relatively moderate civil rights position (Little Rock troops came 1957, after 1956 election). (4) Suez Crisis prestige. The Louisiana breakthrough foreshadowed 1960s Deep South Republican realignment: 1964 Goldwater LA; 1968 Wallace LA; 1972 Nixon LA; from 1980+ structurally Republican.

AP students should be able to articulate the significance.

QUESTION 6

Eisenhower states (41): everything except 7. Including all Northeast + Midwest + Mountain West + West Coast + Solid South except 6 Deep South states + Missouri. Eisenhower's 7 Southern states: FL, KY, LA, TN, TX, VA, WV. Stevenson states (7): AL, AR, GA, MS, NC, SC, MO. Geographic pattern reveals: (1) Eisenhower expanded 1952 Southern breakthrough - gained LA + KY + WV (Border state) compared to 1952. (2) Stevenson held only Deep South Democratic remnant - foreshadowed structural Republican Southern realignment of 1960s-70s. (3) Eisenhower's personal popularity broke Southern Democratic loyalty in 7 former Confederate/Border states. (4) The 1956 Louisiana breakthrough was particularly structural - first Republican LA since 1876. (5) The Deep South remnant (AL, AR, GA, MS, NC, SC) would later break: Goldwater 1964 carried AL, GA, LA, MS, SC; Wallace 1968 carried AL, AR, GA, LA, MS; Nixon 1972 carried all Southern states.

AP students should be able to articulate the geographic pattern.