3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1992

Bill Clinton vs George H. W. Bush

A 35-minute lesson on the 1992 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Modern Polarization	ELECTORAL VOTES 538 total
WINNER Bill Clinton (Democratic) · 370 EV	RUNNER-UP George H. W. Bush (Republican) · 168 EV
KEY ISSUE Economic recession; NAFTA; healthcare reform; 'It's the economy, stupid'	TURNOUT 58.1%

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

1992: Bill Clinton vs George H. W. Bush

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When an incumbent president has high foreign-policy approval but low economic approval, what political conditions favor a challenger's victory?
15 min	**Reading**	1992 election was 52nd U.S. presidential election. Produced Bill Clinton's 370-168 EV victory over incumbent Republican President George H.W. Bush in three-way race with independent Ross Perot. Clinton won 43.0% popular vote (plurality); Bush 37.5%; Perot 18.9%. Election structurally shaped by 1990-91 recession + Bush's 1990 tax-increase pledge violation + Perot independent campaign + Clinton DLC centrism. Bush had been hugely popular after 1991 Gulf War victory. Bush approval reached 89% (March 1991, post-Operation Desert Storm) - highest since Truman after Pearl Harbor. But subsequent events damaged him: (1) 1990-91 recession - GDP -1.4% (1991); unemployment rose from 5.4% (June 1990) to 7.8% (June 1992). (2) Bush's November 5, 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act tax increase (top income tax rate 28% ’ 31%) violated his August 1988 "Read my lips: no new taxes" pledge. Conservative Republicans felt betrayed. (3) Slow recovery through 1991-92 + perceived Bush economic-policy indifference (Bush had said October 1992 "I'm not interested in shenanigans" when asked about economic policy) damaged him further. (4) October 4, 1991 Anita Hill confirmation hearings + Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation politicized Bush administration. (5) April 29 - May 4, 1992 Los Angeles riots after Rodney King verdict damaged Bush's civil-rights image. By 1992 Bush approval was 29% (July 1992). Republican primary 1992 structurally wounded Bush. Pat Buchanan (ex-Nixon speechwriter, conservative commentator, columnist) challenged Bush from the right February 1992. Buchanan won 37% in February 18, 1992 New Hampshire primary - Bush 53%, Buchanan 37%, write-ins 10%. Buchanan continued through March-May primaries winning ~3M total votes. Buchanan's August 17, 1992 Republican Convention keynote speech: "There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself, for this war is for the soul of America." The "culture war" framing damaged Bush's moderate Republican image + alienated suburban swing voters. Republican Convention Houston August 17-20, 1992 renominated Bush-Quayle. Bush's acceptance speech attempted to repair image but the Buchanan speech had structurally damaged the convention.

Democratic primary 1992 had clear front-runner: Bill Clinton, 45-year-old Arkansas Governor (1979-81, 1983-92). Clinton was Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) Chair 1990-91. DLC framework explicitly positioned against McGovernite-Mondale-Dukakis Northern liberalism: fiscal responsibility + welfare reform + free trade + cultural moderation. Clinton called himself "New Democrat."

Clinton faced multiple structural challenges. January 1992 Star tabloid story about 12-year affair with Gennifer Flowers (Little Rock cabaret singer + state employee). January 26, 1992 Bill + Hillary appeared on CBS 60 Minutes after Super Bowl. Clinton denied affair specifically but acknowledged "wrongdoing" in marriage. Hillary: "I'm not sitting here as some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette. I'm sitting here because I love him and I respect him and I honor what he's been through and what we've been through together." Clinton survived but damaged.

Draft-dodging accusations damaged Clinton through primary. Clinton had received Vietnam-era draft deferments (graduate student deferment 1968-69; Rhodes Scholar at Oxford 1968-70; ROTC commitment that was not fulfilled). December 3, 1969 Clinton letter to Col Eugene Holmes (Arkansas ROTC commander) expressing "loathing" for the military + reasoning for not entering ROTC. Letter surfaced February 1992. Politically damaging.

Sen Bob Kerrey (NE, Medal of Honor Vietnam veteran, lost half his right leg in Vietnam combat) primary challenger contrasted structurally with Clinton.

Clinton emerged from primary after surviving multiple crises. New Hampshire February 1992: Clinton came in second to former MA Sen Paul Tsongas + declared himself "Comeback Kid." "I'll be with you till the last dog dies." Won Super Tuesday March 10, 1992 (multiple Southern primaries) + structural Democratic establishment endorsements. By April 1992 Clinton was clear nominee.

Sen Al Gore Jr (TN, 44) VP - balanced ticket structurally: regional (both Southern Democrats - first time since Polk-Dallas 1844 the ticket had no Northerner); generational (Clinton 45 + Gore 44 were youngest ticket since Kennedy-Johnson 1960); ideological (both DLC centrist). Gore had been Sen since 1985 + 1988 presidential candidate.

Democratic National Convention met in New York City July 13-16, 1992 and nominated Clinton-Gore. Clinton acceptance speech July 16: "I still believe in a place called Hope" - referenced Clinton's birthplace Hope, Arkansas.

Ross Perot (61, Texas billionaire, EDS founder 1962, sold EDS to GM 1984 + structurally clashed with GM Chair Roger Smith) entered race as independent February 20, 1992 on Larry King Live (CNN): "If you, the people, will register me in 50 states - it has to be all 50, no fewer - if you're willing to organize and do that, I'll agree to run. We'll set the agenda for both major parties' candidates." Built

grassroots organization ("United We Stand America") that ballot-qualified him in all 50 states. Self-funded ~$65M campaign. June 1992 polls showed Perot leading 3-way race ~37%; Bush 31%; Clinton 25%. But July 16, 1992 (the same day as Clinton's Democratic Convention acceptance) Perot withdrew citing Republican plot to disrupt his daughter's August wedding (later proven baseless; Perot's withdrawal was widely viewed as politically destructive). October 1, 1992 Perot re-entered race. Diminished from peak but still drew significant share.

Clinton campaign theme "It's the economy, stupid" - James Carville (Clinton strategist) wall sign in Little Rock "war room": (1) Change vs more of the same. (2) The economy, stupid. (3) Don't forget health care. Sign was structurally aimed at Clinton campaign staff. Phrase became cultural shorthand.

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Clinton won 370 electoral votes; Bush 168; Perot 0. Clinton carried 32 states + DC; Bush 18 states; Perot 0. The popular vote: Clinton 44,909,889 (43.0%); Bush 39,104,545 (37.5%); Perot 19,743,821 (18.9%); minor candidates ~700,000. Clinton-Bush popular-vote margin: 5,805,344.

The geographic pattern: Clinton's 32 states + DC included entire Northeast + entire West Coast + most Midwest + selected Southern states (AR home + TN home of Gore + LA + GA + KY + WV). The Solid South had splintered: Clinton-Gore Southern Democratic ticket carried 4 Southern states + 3 Border States; Bush carried 7 Southern states + Florida + Mississippi + Alabama + South Carolina + North Carolina + Virginia + Texas (Bush's home state). Perot took ~19% across most states - drew approximately equal share from Bush + Clinton voters (some analyses suggest slight Bush advantage among Perot voters).

Clinton inaugurated January 20, 1993. He governed as DLC centrist: (1) February 5, 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act. (2) August 10, 1993 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (deficit-reduction package - raised top income tax rate 31%’39.6%). (3) November 8, 1993 Brady Handgun Violence Protection Act. (4) November 30, 1993 NAFTA (signed by Bush December 17, 1992; Clinton signed implementing legislation). (5) 1993-94 healthcare reform attempt (Hillary Clinton chaired Task Force) - failed September 1994. (6) 1994 Crime Bill (Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act) September 13, 1994. (7) 1994 Republican Revolution midterm

		- Republicans gained 54 House seats + 8 Senate seats (Newt Gingrich became Speaker; first Republican House since 1955). (8) August 22, 1996 Welfare reform (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act). (9) 1997 balanced-budget agreement. (10) 1998 Monica Lewinsky scandal + December 19, 1998 impeachment + February 12, 1999 Senate acquittal. (11) 1999 budget surplus (first since 1969). (12) 1999 Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act + Glass-Steagall repeal. Clinton would be re-elected 1996 (379-159 EV over Dole; popular vote 49.2% Clinton vs 40.7% Dole vs 8.4% Perot). Two terms 1993-2001. Hillary Clinton would run for Senate 2000 (won) and presidential candidate 2008 (lost to Obama) + 2016 (lost to Trump 304-227 EV despite winning popular vote by 2.86M votes). 1992 election's structural significance was fourfold. First, Clinton 1992 was first DLC centrist Democratic president - operationalized "New Democrat" framework that would shape Democratic presidential politics through 2024. Second, Perot 1992 was highest third-party performance since TR 1912 (27.4%) - demonstrated structural appetite for independent + anti-establishment candidates. Third, Bush 1992 loss was the first incumbent Republican defeat since Hoover 1932 (Ford 1976 was an exception but Ford had not been elected to the presidency). Fourth, the 1992 election interrupted Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance (1980-92) but did not structurally reverse it: Bush 43 2000 + 2004 would resume the ascendance.
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 1992 Election

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Key words

Bill Clinton	42nd U.S. president (1993-2001). Arkansas Governor (1979-81, 1983-92). DLC Chair (1990-91). Won 1992 with 370-168 EV over Bush in 3-way race with Perot. Re-elected 1996 with 379-159 EV over Dole. Impeached December 19, 1998; acquitted February 12, 1999.
Ross Perot	Texas billionaire entrepreneur and 1992 + 1996 independent presidential candidate. EDS founder. Self-funded ~$65M 1992 campaign. Won 18.9% popular vote (~19.7M votes) and 0 EV - highest third-party percentage since TR 1912.
"It's the economy, stupid"	Clinton campaign strategist James Carville's 1992 mantra. Wall sign in Little Rock war room. Cultural shorthand for economic-focused political campaigning.
New Democrat	Clinton's 1992 political identity. DLC framework: fiscal responsibility + welfare reform + free trade + cultural moderation.
Pat Buchanan culture war speech	August 17, 1992 Republican Convention keynote: "There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America. It is a cultural war, as critical to the kind of nation we will one day be as was the Cold War itself." Damaged Bush's moderate Republican image + alienated suburban swing voters.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Bill Clinton win in 1992?

( ) A. 339
( ) B. 370
( ) C. 391
( ) D. 413

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

What percentage of the popular vote did Ross Perot receive in 1992?

( ) A. 12.4%
( ) B. 15.7%
( ) C. 18.9%
( ) D. 22.3%

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the "Read my lips" promise Bush violated, and how did it affect 1992?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Who was Ross Perot and what was his structural significance?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

370. Clinton 370; Bush 168; Perot 0. Clinton carried 32 states + DC; Bush 18 states; Perot 0. Popular vote: Clinton 43.0% (plurality, not majority); Bush 37.5%; Perot 18.9%.

AP students should know the 370-168-0 split.

QUESTION 2

18.9%. Ross Perot received 19,743,821 popular votes (18.9%) - highest third-party percentage since Theodore Roosevelt 1912 (27.4%). But 0 EV - structural Electoral College disadvantage of third parties.

AP students should know Perot's 18.9%.

QUESTION 3

Bush's "Read my lips: no new taxes" was his Republican Convention acceptance speech pledge August 18, 1988 (speechwriter Peggy Noonan). Operationally violated November 5, 1990 with Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (raised top income tax rate from 28% to 31% as part of deficit-reduction budget deal with Democratic Congress). The violation affected 1992 in five structural ways: (1) Conservative Republican base felt betrayed. Pat Buchanan 1992 primary challenge mobilized conservative anger; Buchanan won 37% in February 18, 1992 New Hampshire primary. (2) "Read my lips: I lied" framing by Democrats made the pledge violation politically toxic throughout 1992. (3) Ross Perot 1992 third-party challenge (19% popular vote; 0 EV) attracted disaffected Republican voters who would have voted Bush in normal partisan election. (4) Clinton 1992 won 43% popular vote vs Bush 37.5% + Perot 19% - Bush's loss was structurally produced by Republican coalition fractures from broken pledge + Perot challenge + conservative Buchanan primary threat. (5) The "Read my lips: I lied" attack would shape Republican strategy: subsequent Republican candidates generally avoided absolute pledges (or made them conditional).

AP students should be able to articulate the "Read my lips" impact.

QUESTION 4

Ross Perot (1930-2019) was Texas billionaire entrepreneur and 1992 + 1996 independent presidential candidate. EDS founder 1962 (sold to GM 1984 for $2.5B). 1979 funded private rescue of EDS employees from Iran. 61 years old in 1992. Entered race February 20, 1992 on Larry King Live with conditional commitment: "If you, the people, will register me in 50 states - it has to be all 50, no fewer - if you're willing to organize and do that, I'll agree to run." Grassroots organization ("United We Stand America") ballot-qualified Perot in all 50 states. Self-funded ~$65M campaign (~$140M in 2024 dollars). June 1992 polls showed Perot leading 3-way race ~37%. July 16, 1992 (same day as Clinton's Democratic Convention acceptance) Perot withdrew citing baseless Republican plot to disrupt daughter's wedding. October 1, 1992 re-entered race. Won 19,743,821 popular votes (18.9%) + 0 EV. Structural significance: (1) Highest third-party percentage since TR 1912 (27.4%). (2) Demonstrated structural appetite for independent + anti-establishment candidates. (3) Took approximately equal share from Bush + Clinton voters but cumulative anti-Bush effect because Perot voters were disproportionately disaffected Republicans. (4) Reform Party founding 1995 + Perot 1996 second run (8.4% popular vote, 0 EV). (5) Inaugurated era of high-profile third-party challenges that would continue through subsequent elections (Nader 2000 2.7%; Stein 2016 1.1%; West 2024 0.3%; Kennedy 2024 began as independent then withdrew + endorsed Trump). Ross Perot died July 9, 2019 at age 89.

AP students should be able to articulate Perot.