1992

Bill Clinton vs George H. W. Bush

A 50-minute lesson on the 1992 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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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1992: Bill Clinton vs George H. W. Bush

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 1990-92 America that would produce a three-way presidential race. For each identify the specific 1990-92 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	1992 election was 52nd U.S. presidential election. Clinton 370 EV / Bush 168 EV / Perot 0 EV (18.9% popular vote). Clinton 43.0% (plurality, not majority); Bush 37.5%; Perot 18.9%. Bush's 1991 Gulf War approval (89% March 1991) had faded. 1990-91 recession + Bush's 1990 tax-increase pledge violation + slow recovery damaged him. Approval 29% July 1992. Republican primary 1992 wounded Bush. Pat Buchanan (ex-Nixon speechwriter) challenged from right - won 37% in February 18, 1992 New Hampshire primary. Buchanan ~3M total primary votes. August 17, 1992 Republican Convention keynote "culture war" speech damaged Bush's moderate image: "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." Republican Convention Houston August 17-20, 1992 renominated Bush-Quayle. Democratic primary 1992 had clear front-runner: Bill Clinton, 45, AR Governor (1979-81, 1983-92). DLC Chair 1990-91. "New Democrat" framework. Clinton faced challenges: (1) January 1992 Star tabloid Gennifer Flowers affair story. January 26, 1992 Bill + Hillary 60 Minutes appearance after Super Bowl. Clinton denied affair; Hillary: "I'm not sitting here as some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette." (2) Draft-dodging accusations - Vietnam-era ROTC commitment Clinton hadn't fulfilled; December 3, 1969 Clinton letter to Col Holmes expressing "loathing" for military surfaced February 1992. (3) Sen Bob Kerrey (NE, Medal of Honor Vietnam veteran) primary challenger contrasted structurally. Clinton survived. New Hampshire February 1992: came in second to Paul Tsongas + declared himself "Comeback Kid." "I'll be with you till the last dog dies." Won March

10, 1992 Super Tuesday + structural Democratic establishment endorsements.

Sen Al Gore Jr (TN, 44) VP - balanced ticket regionally (both Southern Democrats - first all-Southern ticket since Polk-Dallas 1844); generationally (youngest ticket since JFK-LBJ 1960); ideologically (both DLC centrist).

Democratic Convention NY July 13-16, 1992 nominated Clinton-Gore. Clinton acceptance speech July 16: "I still believe in a place called Hope" - referenced birthplace Hope, Arkansas.

Ross Perot (61, Texas billionaire EDS founder 1962 + GM director 1984-86) entered race February 20, 1992 on Larry King Live: "If you, the people, will register me in 50 states... I'll agree to run." Built "United We Stand America" grassroots organization. Self-funded ~$65M campaign. June 1992 polls showed Perot leading 3-way race ~37%. July 16, 1992 (same day Clinton accepted nomination) Perot withdrew citing baseless Republican plot. October 1, 1992 re-entered race.

Clinton campaign theme "It's the economy, stupid" - James Carville sign in Little Rock war room: (1) Change vs more of the same. (2) The economy, stupid. (3) Don't forget health care. Aimed at Clinton campaign staff. Cultural shorthand.

October 1992 debates. October 15 town-hall debate University of Richmond. Audience member Marisa Hall: "How has the national debt personally affected each of your lives?" Bush appeared confused + glanced at watch during question - "Bush check watch" moment became cultural shorthand for political tone-deafness. Clinton answered with personal anecdotes about Arkansas businesses + factories closing. Perot answered with blunt economic analysis.

Clinton 370 EV / Bush 168 / Perot 0. Clinton 32 states + DC; Bush 18; Perot 0. Popular: Clinton 44,909,889 (43.0%); Bush 39,104,545 (37.5%); Perot 19,743,821 (18.9%); minor ~700K. Clinton-Bush margin: 5,805,344.

Geographic: Clinton's 32 states + DC included entire Northeast + entire West Coast + most Midwest + 4 Southern states + 3 Border States. The Solid South had splintered: Clinton-Gore Southern Democratic ticket carried AR + TN + LA + GA + KY + WV. Bush carried 7 former Confederate states + FL + AL + MS + SC + NC + VA + TX. Perot took ~19% across most states.

Clinton inaugurated January 20, 1993. DLC centrist governance: (1) February 5, 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act. (2) August 10, 1993 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (top income tax rate 31%’39.6% for deficit reduction). (3) November 8, 1993 Brady Handgun Violence Protection Act. (4) November 30, 1993 NAFTA signed (Bush had signed December 17, 1992). (5) 1993-94 healthcare reform attempt failed September 1994. (6) September 13, 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act. (7) 1994 Republican Revolution midterm - Republicans gained 54

		House seats + 8 Senate seats (Newt Gingrich Speaker; first Republican House since 1955). (8) August 22, 1996 Welfare reform (PRWORA). (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 repealing Glass-Steagall. Clinton re-elected 1996 (379-159 EV over Dole; popular 49.2% Clinton vs 40.7% Dole vs 8.4% Perot). 1992 election structural significance fourfold: (1) Clinton first DLC centrist Democratic president - "New Democrat" framework shaped Democratic presidential politics through 2024. (2) Perot 18.9% highest third-party performance since TR 1912 (27.4%) - demonstrated structural appetite for independent + anti-establishment candidates. (3) Bush 1992 loss first incumbent Republican defeat since Hoover 1932. (4) 1992 election interrupted Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance (1980-92) but did not structurally reverse - Bush 43 2000 + 2004 resumed.
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

Bill Clinton

42nd U.S. president (1993-2001). Arkansas Governor. DLC Chair 1990-91. Won 1992 with 370-168 EV over Bush in 3-way race with Perot. Re-elected 1996. Impeached December 1998; acquitted February 1999.

"It's the economy, stupid"

Clinton campaign strategist James Carville's 1992 mantra. Wall sign in Little Rock war room.

Pat Buchanan culture war speech

August 17, 1992 Republican Convention keynote. "Culture war" framing damaged Bush's moderate Republican image.

"Bush check watch" moment

October 15, 1992 town-hall debate University of Richmond. Bush glanced at his watch during audience question about national debt. Became cultural shorthand for political tone-deafness.

Ross Perot

Texas billionaire entrepreneur and 1992 + 1996 independent presidential candidate. EDS founder. Self-funded ~$65M 1992 campaign. Won 18.9% popular vote + 0 EV - highest third-party percentage since TR 1912.

New Democrat

Clinton's 1992 political identity. DLC framework: fiscal responsibility + welfare reform + free trade + cultural moderation.

"Comeback Kid"

Clinton's February 1992 New Hampshire primary self-designation after surviving Gennifer Flowers + draft-dodging crises. Came in second to Tsongas but framed result as comeback. Won subsequent Super Tuesday March 10, 1992.

Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention

BILL CLINTON, JULY 16, 1992

Clinton delivered this acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention at Madison Square Garden in New York City on July 16, 1992. The "place called Hope" passage referenced Clinton's birthplace Hope, Arkansas - structural framing tying his outsider Southern Democratic identity to American hope/optimism. The "New Covenant" framework articulated DLC centrist policy commitments: personal responsibility + government opportunity + national community. The speech is widely cited as one of the most politically effective convention acceptance speeches. Clinton's structural rhetorical advantage: he could attack Republican incumbent + position himself as outsider while presenting moderate "New Democrat" policy framework.

> *"I end tonight where it all began for me - I still believe in a place called Hope. My fellow Americans, I end tonight where it all began for me: I still believe in a place called Hope, a place called America. The choice we offer is not conservative or liberal; in many ways it is not even Republican or Democratic. It is different. It is new. And it will work. It is a new covenant. We need a new covenant. We need a new beginning. We need a new tomorrow."*

Clinton, "Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention" (New York, July 16, 1992). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ≈150 words.

The 1992 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE
How many electoral votes did Clinton win in 1992?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE
What percentage of the popular vote did Perot receive?

( ) 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
Clinton says "I still believe in a place called Hope, a place called America." What is the rhetorical purpose?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Who was Ross Perot and what was his structural significance?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1992 election map, identify Clinton's 32 states + DC and Bush's 18 states. What does the geographic pattern reveal about post-Reagan partisan alignment?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

370. Clinton 370; Bush 168; Perot 0.

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

QUESTION 2

18.9%.

AP students should know Perot's 18.9%.

QUESTION 3

Bush's "Read my lips: no new taxes" August 1988 acceptance speech pledge. Violated November 5, 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act (top income tax rate 28%’31%). Affected 1992 through: conservative Republican base betrayal (Buchanan 37% NH primary; ~3M primary votes); "Read my lips: I lied" framing; Perot third-party challenge attracted disaffected Republicans; Clinton 43% won through Republican coalition fractures.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

Clinton's "place called Hope" passage uses four rhetorical strategies: (1) Geographical-biographical framing - Hope, Arkansas as Clinton's actual birthplace. The literal place name gives metaphorical "hope" rhetorical anchor in personal narrative. (2) Generational/historical framing - "where it all began for me" connects Clinton's individual story to American national-historical narrative. (3) Place-as-promise framing - "Hope" becomes both proper noun (Arkansas town) + common noun (national aspiration). The dual reference creates rhetorical depth. (4) Closing-circle structure - "I end tonight where it all began for me" creates circular narrative that connects acceptance speech to Clinton's personal origin. The political function: position Clinton as authentic outsider from rural Southern small town + embody American hope/optimism. The framing was politically powerful: voters associated Clinton with American renewal rather than Washington politics. Subsequent presidential candidates have invoked similar place-based identity framings (Obama Chicago/Hawaii/Indonesia; Trump Queens/Manhattan/Mar-a-Lago; Biden Scranton; Harris Oakland). The structural lesson: presidential candidates can connect personal biography to national identity through place-based rhetoric.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy.

QUESTION 5

Ross Perot (1930-2019) Texas billionaire entrepreneur and 1992 + 1996 independent presidential candidate. EDS founder 1962. Entered 1992 race February 20, 1992 on Larry King Live. United We Stand America grassroots organization ballot-qualified Perot in all 50 states. Self-funded ~$65M. June 1992 polls Perot leading 3-way race ~37%. July 16, 1992 withdrew. October 1, 1992 re-entered. Won 18.9% (19.7M votes) + 0 EV - highest third-party % since TR 1912. Structural significance: (1) Highest third-party performance since TR 1912 (27.4%). (2) Demonstrated structural appetite for independent + anti-establishment candidates. (3) Took ~equal share from Bush + Clinton voters but disproportionately disaffected Republicans. (4) Reform Party founding 1995. (5) Inaugurated era of high-profile third-party challenges (Nader 2000; Stein 2016; West 2024; Kennedy 2024).

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

Clinton states (32 + DC): entire Northeast (NY, NJ, PA, CT, MA, MD, DE, RI, ME, NH, VT) + entire West Coast (CA, OR, WA) + most Midwest (IL, IA, MI, MN, MO, OH, WI, KY, WV) + selected South (AR home, TN home of Gore, LA, GA + Border States MD, DE) + selected Mountain (CO, MT, NM) + Hawaii + DC. Bush states (18): 7 former Confederate states (FL, AL, MS, SC, NC, VA, TX) + Mountain West (AZ, ID, NV, UT, WY) + Plains states (KS, NE, ND, SD) + IN. Geographic pattern reveals post-Reagan partisan alignment: (1) Northeast becoming structurally Democratic - even Connecticut + Vermont + New Hampshire went Clinton 1992. (2) West Coast becoming structurally Democratic - California (last Republican CA victory was Bush 1988) shifted Democratic for first time since 1964. (3) Solid South splintered - Southern Democratic ticket (Clinton-Gore) carried 4 Southern states; Republican Southern dominance interrupted but not reversed. (4) Mountain West + Plains structurally Republican. (5) Industrial Midwest contested - Clinton carried MI, IL, OH, WI, MN; Bush carried IN. The 1992 map established the Clinton-era Democratic coalition: Northeast + West Coast + Industrial Midwest + selected Southern + Border + Mountain swing states. This coalition would persist with adjustments through Obama 2008/12 + Biden 2020 + Harris 2024 attempts.

AP students should be able to articulate.