1992

Bill Clinton vs George H. W. Bush

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1992: Bill Clinton vs George H. W. Bush

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1992 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1992 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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); Bush 37.5%; Perot 18.9%. Bush 1991 Gulf War approval (89% March 1991) faded. 1990-91 recession + 1990 tax-increase pledge violation + slow recovery damaged him. Approval 29% July 1992. Republican primary 1992: Pat Buchanan challenged Bush from right. Won 37% New Hampshire February 18, 1992. ~3M primary votes. August 17, 1992 Buchanan Convention keynote "culture war" speech damaged Bush moderate image. Democratic primary 1992 front-runner Clinton (45, AR Governor, DLC Chair 1990-91, "New Democrat"). Survived January 1992 Gennifer Flowers scandal + draft-dodging accusations. "Comeback Kid" after second-place NH February finish. Won March 1992 Super Tuesday. Sen Al Gore Jr (TN, 44) VP - all-Southern ticket first since Polk-Dallas 1844. Democratic Convention NY July 13-16, 1992 nominated Clinton-Gore. "I still believe in a place called Hope." Ross Perot (61, Texas billionaire EDS founder) entered February 20, 1992 on Larry King Live. United We Stand America organization. Self-funded ~$65M. June 1992 polls Perot leading 3-way ~37%. July 16, 1992 withdrew. October 1, 1992 re-entered. Campaign theme "It's the economy, stupid" - James Carville Little Rock war room

sign. October 15, 1992 town-hall debate "Bush check watch" moment cultural shorthand.

Clinton 370 EV / Bush 168 / Perot 0. Clinton 32 states + DC; Bush 18; Perot 0. Margin 5,805,344.

Clinton inaugurated January 20, 1993. DLC centrist: Family and Medical Leave Act February 1993; Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act August 1993 (top rate 31%'39.6%); Brady Bill November 1993; NAFTA November 1993; 1993-94 healthcare reform failed; 1994 Crime Bill; 1994 Republican Revolution midterm; 1996 Welfare reform; 1997 balanced-budget agreement; 1998 Monica Lewinsky scandal + impeachment + acquittal; 1999 budget surplus; 1999 Glass-Steagall repeal.

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: (1) Clinton first DLC centrist Democratic president. (2) Perot 18.9% highest third-party since TR 1912. (3) Bush 1992 loss first incumbent Republican defeat since Hoover 1932. (4) 1992 interrupted Reagan-era ascendance but didn't reverse - Bush 43 2000 + 2004 resumed.

The 1992 election can be analyzed retrospectively as the first major break in the 1968-2008 Republican-conservative ascendance. The Republican coalition that Nixon 1968 + Reagan 1980 + Bush 1988 had assembled (Southern realignment + Mountain West + suburban-Northeast + working-class whites + religious conservatives) was structurally weakened by 1992 by: (1) 1990-91 recession + slow recovery damaging working-class economic confidence. (2) Bush's 1990 tax-pledge violation alienating fiscal conservatives. (3) Religious right discontent with Bush's perceived moderation. (4) Ross Perot drawing approximately 19% of voters disaffected from establishment politics. (5) Clinton's DLC centrist Southern Democratic identity neutralizing Northern liberal Democratic vulnerabilities. The Clinton 1992 victory operated within Reagan-era policy framework rather than reversing it: Clinton signed NAFTA (free trade); welfare reform 1996; balanced budgets 1997-2001; financial deregulation 1999 (Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act + Glass-Steagall repeal). The structural Reagan-era ideological dominance persisted through Clinton presidency.

The DLC centrism framework that Clinton 1992 operationalized would shape Democratic presidential politics for the next 32 years. The DLC framework: fiscal responsibility + welfare reform + free trade + cultural moderation. Subsequent Democratic candidates: Gore 2000 (DLC centrist; lost narrowly); Kerry 2004 (DLC adapted; lost); Obama 2008 + 2012 (DLC extended with multicultural-progressive elements; won twice); Hillary Clinton 2016 (DLC centrist; lost despite popular vote win); Biden 2020 (DLC centrist + Obama-Biden continuity; won); Harris 2024 (DLC centrist + Biden incumbent; lost). The DLC framework operationalized Democratic presidential strategy for 32 years (1992-2024). Critics argued the framework was too

		accommodating to Reagan-era conservatism + structurally inadequate for post-2008 economic crisis + post-2016 populist moment. The Ross Perot 1992 campaign's long-term structural significance: (1) Demonstrated structural appetite for independent + anti-establishment candidates. (2) Reform Party founding 1995 (Perot, Pat Choate). (3) Perot 1996 second run (8.4% popular vote, 0 EV). (4) Subsequent third-party challenges: Nader 2000 (2.7% popular vote - widely blamed for Gore's narrow Florida loss); Stein 2016 (1.1%); West 2024 (0.3%); Kennedy 2024 (began as independent then withdrew October 2024 + endorsed Trump). (5) Trump 2016 + 2024 victories can be analyzed as the operationalization of Perot 1992 + 1996 anti-establishment populism within the Republican Party. The Perot 1992 voter coalition (working-class whites + Midwestern industrial workers + small-business owners + government-distrust voters) was structurally similar to Trump's 2016 + 2024 coalition. The lesson: third-party movements can structurally migrate into major-party victories within 24 years. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.
15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1992 election tells you about the Modern Polarization era that the textbook didn't?"

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).

"It's the economy, stupid"
Clinton campaign strategist James Carville's 1992 mantra.

Pat Buchanan culture war speech
August 17, 1992 Republican Convention keynote.

"Bush check watch" moment
October 15, 1992 town-hall debate.

Ross Perot
Texas billionaire entrepreneur and 1992 + 1996 independent presidential candidate.

New Democrat
Clinton's 1992 political identity.

"Comeback Kid"
Clinton's February 1992 New Hampshire primary self-designation.

Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention

BILL CLINTON, JULY 16, 1992

Clinton delivered this acceptance speech at Madison Square Garden in New York City on July 16, 1992. "Place called Hope" referenced his birthplace Hope, Arkansas.

> *"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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

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?

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how the Clinton 1992 victory operated within Reagan-era policy framework rather than reversing it.

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

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

Answer key

QUESTION 1

370.

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 pledge. Violated November 5, 1990 Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act. Affected 1992 through conservative Republican betrayal (Buchanan 37% NH), Perot challenge, Clinton 43% via Republican coalition fractures.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

Clinton's "place called Hope" passage uses rhetorical strategies: geographical-biographical framing (Hope, AR birthplace); generational/historical framing; place-as-promise dual reference; closing-circle structure. Political function: authentic outsider + American renewal framing.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 5

Ross Perot Texas billionaire EDS founder. Entered February 20, 1992 on Larry King Live. Self-funded ~$65M. Won 18.9% popular vote + 0 EV - highest third-party % since TR 1912. Significance: structural appetite for anti-establishment candidates; Reform Party 1995; subsequent third-party challenges; Trump 2016+2024 can be analyzed as Perot-style populism within Republican Party.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

The Clinton 1992 victory operated within Reagan-era policy framework rather than reversing it through five structural moves: (1) NAFTA November 30, 1993 - Clinton signed free-trade agreement that Bush 41 had negotiated. Operationalized Reagan-era free-trade framework. (2) Welfare reform August 22, 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act - structurally restricted federal welfare entitlements (replaced AFDC with TANF; imposed work requirements; lifetime benefit limits). Operationalized Reagan-era welfare-skepticism. (3) Balanced budget 1997-2001 - Clinton-Gingrich 1997 balanced-budget agreement produced first budget surpluses since 1969. Operationalized Reagan-era fiscal-conservatism rhetoric. (4) Financial deregulation 1999 - Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act repealed parts of 1933 Glass-Steagall Act separating commercial + investment banking. Operationalized Reagan-era deregulation framework. (5) Crime policy 1994 - Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act expanded federal death penalty + mandatory minimum sentences + "three strikes" provisions. Operationalized Reagan-era tough-on-crime framework. The structural lesson: Clinton 1992 victory did not reverse Reagan-era ascendance; it operationalized DLC centrist Democratic Party that accepted much of Reagan-era policy framework while opposing Republican electoral interests. The Clinton-era Democratic Party was structurally closer to Eisenhower-era Republican Party than to McGovern-era Democratic Party.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural continuity.

QUESTION 7

Clinton states (32 + DC): Northeast + West Coast + most Midwest + selected South (4 states + Border) + selected Mountain + HI. Bush states (18): 7 former Confederate + Mountain West + Plains + IN. Pattern reveals: Northeast structurally Democratic; West Coast structurally Democratic (CA 1992 first time since 1964); Solid South splintered; Mountain West + Plains structurally Republican.

AP students should be able to articulate.

Discussion prompts

1. Ross Perot won 19% popular vote but 0 electoral votes in 1992. Identify three structural reasons the Electoral College systematically disadvantages third-party candidates.

2. Clinton 1992 was first DLC centrist Democratic president - operationalized "New Democrat" framework. Identify three specific 1993-2024 Democratic presidents/candidates who operated within the framework.