K-2 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1992

Bill Clinton vs George H. W. Bush

A 20-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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1992

Bush had been hugely popular after 1991 Gulf War victory (89% approval March 1991). But 1990-91 recession + Bush's 1990 tax-increase betraying "Read my lips" pledge + slow recovery damaged him. By 1992 Bush approval was 29%.

Republican primary 1992 wounded Bush. Pat Buchanan (ex-Nixon speechwriter, conservative commentator) challenged from right. Won 37% in February 1992 New Hampshire primary. Won ~3M total primary votes. Damaged Bush politically. Republican Convention Houston August 17-20, 1992 renominated Bush-Quayle. Buchanan keynote speech August 17 culture-war framing damaged moderate Republican image.

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 - explicitly positioned against McGovernite-Mondale liberalism. DLC framework: fiscal responsibility + welfare reform + free trade + cultural moderation. Clinton called himself "New Democrat."

Clinton faced challenges. January 1992 Star tabloid story about 12-year affair with Gennifer Flowers. January 26, 1992 Clinton +

wife Hillary appeared on CBS 60 Minutes after Super Bowl. Clinton denied affair. Hillary: "I'm not sitting here as some little woman standing by my man like Tammy Wynette." Clinton survived but damaged.

Look at picture. That Bill Clinton - 42nd U.S. president.

Draft-dodging accusations damaged Clinton through 1992 primary. Clinton had received Vietnam-era draft deferments + structurally avoided Vietnam service. Sen Bob Kerrey (NE, Medal of Honor Vietnam veteran) primary challenger contrasted with Clinton.

Clinton emerged from primary having survived. New Hampshire February 1992: "I'll be with you till the last dog dies." Came in second to former MA Sen Paul Tsongas - declared himself "Comeback Kid." Won Super Tuesday March 1992. Sen Al Gore Jr (TN, 44) VP - balanced ticket ideologically + regionally + signaled generational change.

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

Ross Perot (61, Texas billionaire, EDS founder + GM director) en-



Bill Clinton, the 42nd U.S. president. He won the 1992 election in a three-way race with Bush and Perot.

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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 42nd U.S. president after the 1992 election?

2.

Who was Ross Perot?

3.

What does "It's the economy, stupid" mean?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1992 Bill Clinton - young Arkansas governor - defeated incumbent George H.W. Bush in a three-way race. Texas billionaire Ross Perot ran as independent + won 18.9% popular vote (highest third-party % since TR 1912) but 0 EV. Clinton became first DLC centrist Democrat to win.

Answer key

1.

Bill Clinton. 42nd U.S. president (1993-2001). Arkansas Governor (1979-81, 1983-92). Won 1992 with 370 EV over Bush's 168 EV. Popular vote: Clinton 43.0%; Bush 37.5%; Perot 18.9%. Clinton carried 32 states + DC. Three-way race produced narrow plurality. Clinton became first Democratic president since Carter 1977-81.

AP students should know Clinton as 42nd president.

2.

Ross Perot (1930-2019) was Texas billionaire entrepreneur and 1992 + 1996 independent presidential candidate. EDS founder + GM director + 1979 Iran hostage rescue operation funder. 61 years old in 1992. Entered race February 20, 1992 on Larry King Live: "If you, the people, will register me in 50 states... I will run." Grassroots organization (United We Stand America) ballot-qualified in all 50 states. Self-funded ~$65M campaign (would have been ~$140M in 2024 dollars). June 1992 polls showed Perot leading 3-way race ~37%. July 16, 1992 Perot withdrew citing Republican plot to disrupt his daughter's August wedding (later proven baseless). October 1, 1992 Perot re-entered race. Won 19,743,821 popular votes (18.9%) - highest third-party percentage since Theodore Roosevelt 1912 (27.4%). Won 0 EV - structural Electoral College disadvantage of third parties. Ran again 1996 (Reform Party, 8.4% popular vote, 0 EV). Died July 9, 2019 at age 89.

AP students should know Ross Perot.

3.

"It's the economy, stupid" was Clinton campaign strategist James Carville's 1992 campaign mantra. Carville posted a sign on the wall of Clinton's "war room" in Little Rock, Arkansas with three points: (1) Change vs more of the same. (2) The economy, stupid. (3) Don't forget health care. The "stupid" was directed at Clinton campaign staff (don't lose focus on the economy) rather than voters or Bush. The phrase became cultural shorthand for economic-focused political campaigning. The 1992 economic context: 1990-91 recession; slow recovery; unemployment 7.5% (October 1992); consumer confidence low. Bush had been politically vulnerable on economic issues; his 1991 Gulf War triumph + 89% approval had faded by November 1992. The Clinton campaign's relentless economic focus + Carville's strategic discipline was politically effective. The "It's the economy, stupid" mantra became cultural shorthand for the structural insight that economic conditions usually determine presidential election outcomes. Subsequent campaigns have invoked the same insight: Clinton 1996 prosperity (won re-election); Bush 2004 modest recovery (won re-election); Obama 2008 financial crisis (won); McCain 2008 recession (lost); Obama 2012 modest recovery (won); Trump 2016 working-class economic anxiety (won); Biden 2020 COVID economic disruption (won); Harris 2024 inflation concerns (lost).

AP students should know the "It's the economy, stupid" phrase.