3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1996

Bill Clinton vs Bob Dole

A 35-minute lesson on the 1996 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) · 379 EV	RUNNER-UP Bob Dole (Republican) · 159 EV
KEY ISSUE Budget surplus; economic boom; welfare reform; Newt Gingrich's Republican Revolution	TURNOUT 51.7%

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

1996: Bill Clinton vs Bob Dole

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When an incumbent president faces opposing-party congressional majority, what political conditions favor or disfavor his re-election?
15 min	**Reading**	1996 election was 53rd U.S. presidential election. Produced Bill Clinton's 379-159 EV victory over Republican Bob Dole in three-way race with Reform Party's Ross Perot (8.4% popular vote). Clinton became first Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944. Election structurally shaped by 1995-96 government shutdowns + strong economy + Welfare reform + Clinton-Gingrich political dynamics. Clinton had been president 4 years. First-term troubles: (1) 1993-94 healthcare reform attempt led by Hillary Clinton (Task Force chair) failed September 26, 1994 when Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell announced he was withdrawing the bill from Senate floor consideration. Politically damaging - perceived Clinton overreach + Hillary Clinton role created cultural conservative backlash. (2) November 8, 1994 Republican Revolution midterm - Republicans gained 54 House seats + 8 Senate seats. First Republican House since 1955; first Republican Senate since 1987. Newt Gingrich (GA) became Speaker January 4, 1995. "Contract with America" framework. Politically damaging to Clinton initially. But Clinton recovered through 1995-96: (1) November 13-19, 1995 + December 15, 1995 - January 6, 1996 federal government shutdowns over Clinton-Gingrich budget dispute. Republicans Senate + House passed budget reducing Medicare growth + tax cuts; Clinton vetoed. Two shutdowns: 5 days + 21 days. Public blamed Republicans + Gingrich (a December 1995 New York Daily News cover showed Gingrich as crying baby with headline "CRY BABY"). Republicans accepted Clinton's budget February 1996. Politically damaging for Republicans + Gingrich; helped Clinton 1996 re-election. (2) Strong economy - GDP growing 3.7% (1996); unemployment 5.4% (October 1996); inflation 3% (1996); stock market rising. (3) August 22, 1996 Welfare reform (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, PRWORA) - replaced AFDC with TANF; work requirements; lifetime benefit limits. Operationalized Reagan-era welfare-skepticism within Democratic Party. Clinton signed legislation that liberals opposed but it was politically beneficial. (4) August 21, 1996 Telecommunications Act - first major rewrite of federal telecommunications law since 1934. (5) April 19, 1995 Oklahoma City bombing - 168 deaths. Clinton structurally healing response politically masterful. (6) 1996 wage growth + employment. Republican primary 1996. Sen Bob Dole (KS, 72) - Senate Majority Leader, 1976 Republican VP nominee (with Ford), 1988 Republican primary candidate. Faced challengers: Pat Buchanan (conservative culture-war candidate from 1992); pub-

lisher/businessman Steve Forbes (flat-tax candidate, son of Malcolm Forbes); Sen Phil Gramm (TX); former TN Governor Lamar Alexander; commentator Alan Keyes; California Rep Bob Dornan; Pete Wilson (CA Governor). Dole won Iowa caucuses February 12, 1996 + New Hampshire February 20, 1996. Buchanan won New Hampshire close (Buchanan 27%; Dole 26%; Alexander 23%) but Dole consolidated establishment support. Dole secured nomination by March 1996.

Dole was 72 years old in 1996 - oldest major-party presidential nominee to that point. He had to resign Senate Majority Leader May 15, 1996 + Senate June 11, 1996 to focus on campaign. His resignation speech: "I leave behind not my heart or my faith in this country, only some duties which I gladly lay down in order to do those that I now must take up." Politically masterful framing of Senate departure.

Republican Convention San Diego August 12-15, 1996 nominated Dole-Kemp. Rep Jack Kemp (NY, 61, former Buffalo Bills quarterback + 9-term U.S. Rep 1971-89 + Bush 41 HUD Secretary 1989-93) was VP - structural balance: supply-side economist + civil rights moderate. Dole-Kemp ticket attempted to mobilize conservative economic + moderate civil rights voters.

Dole acceptance speech August 15, 1996: "Let me be the bridge to an America that only the unknowing call myth. Let me be the bridge to a time of tranquility, faith and confidence in action." Speechwriter Mark Helprin crafted the passage. Politically devastating - made Dole sound backward-looking + dismissive of contemporary concerns ("only the unknowing call myth"). Clinton campaign immediately seized on framing.

Democratic National Convention met in Chicago August 26-29, 1996 - first Chicago Convention since 1968 chaos. Renominated Clinton-Gore. Clinton acceptance speech August 29, 1996: "Tonight, let us resolve to build that bridge to the 21st century, to meet our challenges and protect our values. Let us build a bridge to help our parents raise their children, to help our young people and adults to get the education and training they need... a bridge to be repaired and rebuilt, a bridge of opportunity for every American." The "Bridge to the 21st Century" theme contrasted structurally with Dole's "bridge to an America." Politically masterful.

Ross Perot ran again as Reform Party candidate. 1995 founded Reform Party (Perot, Pat Choate, others). Self-funded ~$25M (less than 1992 ~$65M). Excluded from October 1996 presidential debates (Commission on Presidential Debates required 15% polling threshold; Perot polled 8-12% - below threshold). The exclusion was structurally significant + damaging to Perot campaign.

Clinton campaign mostly avoided risks. Strong economy + Dole-Gingrich Republican obstruction framing dominated. Clinton campaign theme: "Building a Bridge to the 21st Century" + Dick Morris triangulation strategy (incumbent positions himself between Republican Congress + Democratic base).

October 6, 1996 first presidential debate Hartford. October 16, 1996 second debate San Diego. Clinton-Dole debates structurally calm + policy-focused. Dole's "Where's the outrage?" October 23, 1996 final-week framing attempted to mobilize voters against Clinton character/scandal concerns but didn't change election trajectory.

Clinton won 379 electoral votes; Dole 159; Perot 0. Clinton carried 31 states + DC; Dole 19 states; Perot 0. The popular vote: Clinton 47,401,185 (49.2%); Dole 39,197,469 (40.7%); Perot 8,085,294 (8.4%); minor candidates ~1.4M. Clinton-Dole popular-vote margin: 8,203,716.

Geographic pattern: Clinton expanded 1992 coalition. Gained Florida (1992 Bush; 1996 Clinton) + Arizona (1992 Bush; 1996 Clinton - first Democratic AZ since Truman 1948). Lost Georgia + Montana + Colorado from 1992 coalition. Clinton's 31 states + DC: Northeast except NH; Mid-Atlantic; most Midwest; West Coast; selected Southern + Border (AR home, TN home of Gore, LA, FL, KY, WV, MD, DE); selected Mountain (AZ, NM); HI + DC. Dole 19 states: 7 former Confederate (TX, GA, MS, AL, NC, SC, VA) + Border (NC, MS - wait MS was Dole + AL Dole) + Mountain West (most of) + Plains states + IN.

Clinton second term 1997-2001: (1) 1997 balanced-budget agreement (Clinton + Gingrich + Republican Congress). (2) 1998 budget surplus first since 1969. (3) 1998 Monica Lewinsky scandal - January 1998 + ongoing through 1998-99 + September 1998 Starr Report. (4) December 19, 1998 House impeached Clinton on perjury + obstruction-of-justice charges (228-206 perjury + 221-212 obstruction; 2 articles approved). (5) February 12, 1999 Senate acquitted Clinton (45-55 perjury; 50-50 obstruction; both failed 67-vote conviction threshold). (6) 1999 Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act repealing Glass-Steagall + financial deregulation. (7) Clinton-era prosperity continued through January 2001.

1996 election's structural significance: (1) First Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944 - confirmed Clinton DLC centrist framework. (2) Dole-Kemp last classic establishment-Republican ticket - subsequent Republican candidates (Bush 43; Trump 2016+24) would adopt more populist + culture-war framings. (3) Perot 8.4% confirmed structural appetite for independent candidates + foreshadowed subsequent third-party challenges. (4) Clinton-Gingrich 1995-96 + 1997 balanced-budget agreements demonstrated divided-government policy coordination possibility. (5) Welfare reform 1996 operationalized Reagan-era welfare-skepticism within Democratic Party - structural Clinton DLC centrist achievement that defined post-1996 federal welfare framework through 2024.

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 1996 Election

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reform 1996 operationalized Reagan-era welfare-skepticism within Democratic Party - structural Clinton DLC centrist achievement that defined post-1996 federal welfare framework through 2024.

Key words

Bob Dole	Kansas Senator (1969-96) and 1996 Republican presidential nominee. WWII Army veteran severely wounded April 14, 1945 Italy. Senate Majority Leader (1985-87, 1995-96). 1976 Ford's VP nominee. 72 in 1996. Lost 379-159 EV. Died December 5, 2021 at age 98.
Bridge to the 21st Century	Clinton's 1996 campaign theme from August 29, 1996 acceptance speech.
1994 Republican Revolution	November 8, 1994 midterm. Republicans gained 54 House + 8 Senate seats. First Republican House since 1955. Newt Gingrich Speaker. "Contract with America" framework.
Government shutdowns 1995-96	November 1995 + December 1995-January 1996 federal government shutdowns over Clinton-Gingrich budget dispute. Public blamed Republicans. Helped Clinton 1996 re-election.
Welfare reform 1996	August 22, 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). Replaced AFDC with TANF. Work requirements + lifetime benefit limits. Operationalized Reagan-era welfare-skepticism within Democratic Party.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Clinton win in 1996?

( ) A. 340
( ) B. 370
( ) C. 379
( ) D. 413

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who was Clinton's opponent in 1996?

( ) A. Bob Dole
( ) B. Phil Gramm
( ) C. Pat Buchanan
( ) D. Steve Forbes

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the 1995-96 government shutdowns help Clinton's 1996 re-election?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was "Bridge to the 21st Century" and why was it politically effective?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

379. Clinton 379; Dole 159; Perot 0. Clinton carried 31 states + DC; Dole 19 states; Perot 0. Popular vote: Clinton 49.2%; Dole 40.7%; Perot 8.4%. Clinton became first Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944.

AP students should know the 379-159-0 split.

QUESTION 2

Bob Dole. Kansas Senator (1969-96), Senate Majority Leader (1985-87, 1995-96), 1976 Ford's VP nominee, 1988 Republican primary candidate. 72 years old in 1996 - oldest major-party presidential nominee to that point. Resigned Senate Majority Leader May 15, 1996 + Senate seat June 11, 1996 to focus on campaign. WWII Army veteran (severely wounded April 14, 1945 in Italy; permanently lost use of right arm).

AP students should know Dole.

QUESTION 3

The 1995-96 government shutdowns helped Clinton's 1996 re-election through five structural mechanisms: (1) Public blamed Republicans + Gingrich. November 13-19, 1995 + December 15, 1995 - January 6, 1996 federal shutdowns over Clinton-Gingrich budget dispute. Republicans Senate + House passed budget reducing Medicare growth + tax cuts; Clinton vetoed twice. Public sided with Clinton: he was perceived as defending Medicare + federal services; Republicans were perceived as causing structural chaos. December 1995 New York Daily News cover showed Gingrich as crying baby with headline "CRY BABY" - cultural shorthand for Republican overreach. (2) Republicans accepted Clinton's budget February 1996 - confirming Clinton's political victory. (3) Gingrich approval rating fell from ~40% (mid-1995) to ~25% (January 1996). Republican congressional approval fell similarly. (4) Clinton approval rose from ~45% (mid-1995) to ~55% (early 1996). (5) The structural framing of "Clinton defending federal programs vs Republican obstruction" became core 1996 campaign narrative. Clinton-Gingrich confrontation also produced 1997 balanced-budget agreement that benefited Clinton politically. The structural lesson: government shutdowns generally hurt the party perceived as causing them. Subsequent shutdowns (2013 Obama vs Boehner; 2018-19 Trump vs Pelosi; 2025 Trump vs Schumer) followed similar pattern: incumbent president politically advantaged when Congress shuts down government.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural mechanism.

QUESTION 4

Bridge to the 21st Century was Clinton's 1996 campaign theme from August 29, 1996 Democratic Convention acceptance speech in Chicago: "Tonight, let us resolve to build that bridge to the 21st century. To meet our challenges and protect our values. Let us build a bridge to help our parents raise their children, to help our young people and adults to get the education and training they need." Politically effective in five structural ways: (1) Forward-looking framing - the bridge metaphor positioned Clinton as future-oriented leader. (2) Inclusive policy framing - bridge "for every American" appealed to multiple demographic groups. (3) Concrete policy specifics - education + family support + work training created policy substance behind the metaphor. (4) Structural contrast with Dole. Dole's August 15, 1996 acceptance speech: "Let me be the bridge to an America that only the unknowing call myth. Let me be the bridge to a time of tranquility, faith and confidence in action." Dole's framing positioned him as bridge to past American virtue + dismissed contemporary concerns as "myth." The contrast made Clinton appear forward-looking + Dole backward-looking. (5) Cultural shorthand. "Bridge to the 21st Century" became reference for forward-looking political appeal. Subsequent campaign analysts have studied the contrast as masterclass in framing political competitions: future-oriented narrative typically defeats past-oriented narrative.

AP students should be able to articulate the effectiveness.