1996

Bill Clinton vs Bob Dole

A 50-minute lesson on the 1996 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) · 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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1996: Bill Clinton vs Bob Dole

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 1993-96 America that would produce a Clinton re-election. For each identify the specific 1993-96 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	1996 election was 53rd U.S. presidential election. Clinton 379 EV / Dole 159 EV / Perot 0 EV (8.4% popular vote). Clinton became first Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944. Clinton first-term troubles: (1) 1993-94 healthcare reform led by Hillary Clinton failed September 26, 1994. (2) November 8, 1994 Republican Revolution midterm - Republicans gained 54 House + 8 Senate seats. First Republican House since 1955. Gingrich Speaker January 4, 1995. "Contract with America." Clinton recovered through 1995-96: (1) November 13-19, 1995 + December 15, 1995 - January 6, 1996 federal government shutdowns over Clinton-Gingrich budget. Public blamed Republicans. Gingrich approval fell. Republicans accepted Clinton budget February 1996. (2) Strong economy: GDP +3.7% (1996); unemployment 5.4% (October 1996); inflation 3% (1996). (3) August 22, 1996 Welfare reform (PRWORA) replaced AFDC with TANF + work requirements + lifetime benefit limits. Operationalized Reagan-era welfare-skepticism within Democratic Party. (4) August 21, 1996 Telecommunications Act. (5) April 19, 1995 Oklahoma City bombing healing response. (6) 1996 wage growth + employment. Republican primary 1996. Sen Bob Dole (KS, 72) - Senate Majority Leader, 1976 Ford VP nominee, 1988 primary candidate. Faced Pat Buchanan + Steve Forbes + Phil Gramm + Lamar Alexander + Alan Keyes + Bob Dornan + Pete Wilson. Won Iowa Feb 12 + New Hampshire Feb 20 (Buchanan 27%; Dole 26% close). Secured nomination by March 1996. Dole 72 - oldest major-party nominee to that point. Resigned Senate Majority Leader May 15, 1996 + Senate June 11, 1996. 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." Republican Convention San Diego August 12-15, 1996 nominated Dole-Kemp. Rep

Jack Kemp (NY, 61, former Buffalo Bills QB + 9-term U.S. Rep + Bush 41 HUD Secretary 1989-93) VP - supply-side economist + civil rights moderate.

Dole acceptance 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. Politically devastating - made Dole sound backward-looking.

Democratic Convention Chicago August 26-29, 1996 (first Chicago Convention since 1968) renominated Clinton-Gore. Clinton acceptance August 29: "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..." "Bridge to the 21st Century" theme contrasted with Dole.

Ross Perot Reform Party candidate. 1995 founded Reform Party. Self-funded ~$25M (less than 1992 $65M). Excluded from October 1996 debates (Commission on Presidential Debates 15% polling threshold; Perot polled 8-12%). Structurally damaging.

Clinton campaign avoided risks. Strong economy + Dole-Gingrich Republican obstruction framing. Dick Morris triangulation strategy.

October 6, 1996 first debate Hartford. October 16, 1996 second debate San Diego. Calm + policy-focused. Dole "Where's the outrage?" October 23, 1996 final-week framing didn't change trajectory.

Clinton 379 EV; Dole 159; Perot 0. Clinton 31 states + DC; Dole 19. Popular: Clinton 47,401,185 (49.2%); Dole 39,197,469 (40.7%); Perot 8,085,294 (8.4%). Margin 8,203,716.

Geographic: Clinton expanded 1992 coalition. Gained Florida + Arizona (first Democratic AZ since Truman 1948). Lost Georgia + Montana + Colorado. Clinton 31 states + DC: Northeast except NH; Mid-Atlantic; most Midwest; West Coast; selected South + Border; selected Mountain (AZ, NM); HI + DC.

Clinton second term 1997-2001: 1997 balanced-budget agreement; 1998 budget surplus first since 1969; 1998 Monica Lewinsky scandal; December 19, 1998 House impeached Clinton; February 12, 1999 Senate acquitted; 1999 Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act repealing Glass-Steagall; Clinton-era prosperity through January 2001.

1996 election structural significance: (1) First Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944. (2) Dole-Kemp last classic establishment-Republican ticket - subsequent Republicans more populist. (3) Perot 8.4% confirmed third-party appetite. (4) Clinton-Gingrich 1995-96 + 1997 balanced budget demonstrated divided-government policy possibility. (5) Welfare reform 1996 defined post-1996 federal welfare framework through 2024.

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

Bob Dole

Kansas Senator (1969-96) and 1996 Republican presidential nominee. 72 in 1996. Senate Majority Leader (1985-87, 1995-96). 1976 Ford VP nominee. WWII Army veteran severely wounded 1945. Died December 5, 2021.

1994 Republican Revolution

November 8, 1994 midterm. Republicans gained 54 House + 8 Senate seats. Gingrich Speaker. "Contract with America."

Welfare reform 1996

August 22, 1996 PRWORA. Replaced AFDC with TANF. Operationalized Reagan-era welfare-skepticism within Democratic Party.

Newt Gingrich

Republican Speaker of the House (1995-99). GA Republican Congressman (1979-99). Architect of 1994 "Contract with America" + Republican Revolution. 1995-96 government shutdowns vs Clinton damaged Gingrich politically. Resigned Speakership after 1998 midterm Republican losses. Republican presidential primary candidate 2012.

Bridge to the 21st Century

Clinton's 1996 campaign theme from August 29, 1996 acceptance speech.

Government shutdowns 1995-96

November 1995 + December 1995-January 1996 federal shutdowns. Public blamed Republicans. Helped Clinton.

Jack Kemp

1996 Republican VP nominee. 61 in 1996. Former Buffalo Bills quarterback (AFL MVP 1965). 9-term U.S. Rep (NY, 1971-89). Bush 41 HUD Secretary (1989-93). Supply-side economist + civil rights moderate. Lost 1996 election. Died May 2, 2009.

Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention

BILL CLINTON, AUGUST 29, 1996

Clinton delivered this acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago on August 29, 1996. The "Bridge to the 21st Century" passage was structurally consequential: it framed Clinton as forward-looking + contrasted with Dole's August 15, 1996 backward-looking "bridge to an America that only the unknowing call myth." The speech operationalized DLC centrist policy + future-oriented rhetoric. The contrast with Dole became cultural shorthand for forward-looking vs backward-looking political appeal. Clinton's 1996 re-election was widely attributed to this structural framing advantage.

> *"My fellow Americans, after these four good, hard years, I still believe in a place called Hope, a place called America. 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, to help our families be successful at home and at work. We need a bridge to be repaired and rebuilt, a bridge of opportunity for every American."*

Clinton, "Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention" (Chicago, August 29, 1996). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, 150 words.

The 1996 Election

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

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

Clinton says "build a bridge to be repaired and rebuilt, a bridge of opportunity for every American." What is the rhetorical purpose?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the 1996 Welfare reform (PRWORA) and why was it structurally significant?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1996 election map, identify Clinton's 31 states + DC and Dole's 19 states. What does the geographic pattern reveal about Clinton-era Democratic coalition?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

379. Clinton 379; Dole 159; Perot 0.

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

QUESTION 2

Bob Dole.

AP students should know Dole.

QUESTION 3

The 1995-96 government shutdowns helped Clinton through five structural mechanisms: (1) Public blamed Republicans + Gingrich for shutdowns. (2) Republicans accepted Clinton budget February 1996. (3) Gingrich approval fell from ~40% to ~25%. (4) Clinton approval rose from ~45% to ~55%. (5) "Clinton defending federal programs vs Republican obstruction" became 1996 campaign narrative. Confirmed Clinton political victory + produced 1997 balanced-budget agreement.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

Clinton's "bridge of opportunity for every American" uses three rhetorical strategies: (1) Inclusive framing - "every American" appeals to multiple demographic groups + signals universal benefit. (2) Concrete-metaphorical balance - "bridge" is concrete physical structure + abstract metaphor for connecting present to future. (3) Action-oriented framing - "repaired and rebuilt" suggests active improvement rather than passive maintenance. The political function: position Clinton's policy framework as practical + universal + forward-oriented. The structural lesson: forward-oriented political rhetoric typically appeals to wider electorate than backward-oriented rhetoric. Subsequent campaigns have adopted similar future-oriented framings: Obama 2008 "Yes We Can"; Obama 2012 "Forward"; Biden 2020 "Build Back Better"; Harris 2024 "New Way Forward." Trump 2016 "Make America Great Again" was structurally exceptional as past-oriented framing that nevertheless succeeded - but it was framed as restoration toward American greatness rather than nostalgia for static past.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy.

QUESTION 5

The 1996 Welfare reform was the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) signed by Clinton August 22, 1996. The law structurally transformed federal welfare: (1) Replaced AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children, established 1935 New Deal) with TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). (2) Established 60-month lifetime limit on federal welfare benefits per family. (3) Required able-bodied adults to work within 2 years of receiving TANF benefits. (4) Devolved federal welfare administration to states through block grants. (5) Restricted welfare eligibility for legal immigrants. Three structural reasons PRWORA was significant: (1) Operationalized Reagan-era welfare-skepticism within Democratic Party - first major federal welfare restriction since New Deal expansion 1935+. (2) DLC centrist achievement - Clinton signed legislation that liberals opposed (Donna Shalala HHS Secretary publicly disagreed; Marian Wright Edelman + Children's Defense Fund opposed; Peter Edelman + 2 other Clinton-era HHS officials resigned in protest). Clinton signed anyway through DLC framework: government should "reward work" + impose responsibility on welfare recipients. (3) Operationalized Clinton 1992 campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it." Subsequent welfare reform debates 1996-2024 generally operated within PRWORA framework. Trump 2017+ proposals to add work requirements to Medicaid + SNAP built on PRWORA precedent. The 1996 law shaped post-1996 federal welfare framework through 2024.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural significance.

QUESTION 6

Clinton states (31 + DC): Northeast except NH (NY, NJ, PA, CT, MA, MD, DE, RI, ME, VT) + Mid-Atlantic + most Midwest (IL, MI, MN, OH, IA, WI, MO, KY, WV) + West Coast (CA, OR, WA) + selected South + Border (AR home, TN home, LA, FL, KY, WV) + selected Mountain (AZ first Democratic since Truman 1948; NM) + HI + DC. Dole states (19): 7 former Confederate (TX, GA, MS, AL, NC, SC, VA) + Mountain West + Plains + IN. Geographic pattern reveals: (1) Clinton expanded 1992 coalition (gained FL + AZ). (2) Northeast + West Coast structurally Democratic - confirmed post-Reagan Democratic geographic base. (3) Solid South splintered - Southern Democratic ticket (Clinton-Gore) carried 4 Southern states + Border. (4) Mountain West + Plains structurally Republican. (5) The Clinton-era Democratic coalition: Northeast + West Coast + Industrial Midwest + selected Southern + Border + Mountain swing states. This coalition (with adjustments) would persist through Obama 2008 + 2012 + Biden 2020 + Harris 2024 attempts. The 1996 map demonstrated DLC centrist Democratic viability in close to landslide proportions.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural pattern.