1996

Bill Clinton vs Bob Dole

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

1996: Bill Clinton vs Bob Dole

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 1996 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1996 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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 first Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944. Clinton first-term troubles: 1993-94 healthcare reform failed September 1994; November 1994 Republican Revolution midterm (Republicans gained 54 House + 8 Senate; Gingrich Speaker January 1995). Recovery 1995-96: November-December 1995 + January 1996 government shutdowns (public blamed Republicans); strong economy (GDP +3.7%; unemployment 5.4%); August 1996 Welfare reform (PRWORA); 1996 wage growth. Republican primary 1996: Bob Dole (KS, 72) defeated Buchanan + Forbes + Gramm + Alexander + Keyes + Dornan + Wilson. Dole won Iowa Feb 12 + New Hampshire Feb 20. Secured nomination March 1996. Resigned Senate Majority Leader May 15, 1996 + Senate June 11, 1996. Republican Convention San Diego August 12-15, 1996 nominated Dole-Kemp. Jack Kemp (former Buffalo Bills QB) VP. Dole acceptance August 15, 1996: "Let me be the bridge to an America that only the unknowing call myth." Politically devastating backward-looking framing. Democratic Convention Chicago August 26-29, 1996 renominated Clinton-Gore. Clinton August 29 acceptance: "Tonight, let us resolve to build that bridge to the 21st century, to meet our challenges and protect our values." "Bridge to the 21st Century" theme. Ross Perot Reform Party (1995 founded). Self-funded ~$25M. Excluded from Octo-

ber 1996 debates (15% polling threshold). Won 8.4% popular vote + 0 EV.

Clinton 379 EV; Dole 159; Perot 0. Clinton 31 states + DC; Dole 19. Popular: Clinton 49.2%; Dole 40.7%; Perot 8.4%. Margin 8,203,716.

Clinton expanded 1992 coalition. Gained FL + AZ (first Democratic AZ since Truman 1948). Lost GA + MT + CO. Clinton coalition: Northeast (except NH) + West Coast + most Midwest + 4 South + 3 Border + AZ + NM + HI + DC.

Clinton second term 1997-2001: 1997 balanced-budget agreement; 1998 first budget surplus since 1969; 1998 Monica Lewinsky scandal; December 19, 1998 House impeached Clinton (perjury + obstruction); February 12, 1999 Senate acquitted (45-55 + 50-50; both failed 67-vote threshold); 1999 Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act repealing Glass-Steagall.

1996 election structural significance: (1) First Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944. (2) Dole-Kemp last classic establishment-Republican ticket. (3) Perot 8.4% confirmed third-party appetite. (4) Clinton-Gingrich confrontation demonstrated divided-government dynamics. (5) Welfare reform 1996 defined post-1996 federal welfare framework through 2024.

The Clinton 1996 re-election can be analyzed retrospectively as confirmation of DLC centrism viability + extension of Clinton-era Democratic dominance interlude (1993-2001) within Reagan-era Republican-conservative ascendance (1980-2008). Clinton 1992 + 1996 victories operated within Reagan-era policy framework (NAFTA, welfare reform, balanced budgets, financial deregulation, crime expansion). Subsequent Democratic candidates (Gore 2000, Kerry 2004, Obama 2008+12, Hillary Clinton 2016, Biden 2020, Harris 2024) operated within or adapted from DLC framework. Critics argued the framework was structurally inadequate for post-2008 economic crisis + post-2016 populist moment - DLC produced 4 victories (1992, 1996, 2008, 2012, 2020) + 4 losses (2000, 2004, 2016, 2024) in 9 elections.

The 1995-96 Clinton-Gingrich confrontation was structurally important for divided-government U.S. politics. Subsequent divided-government periods (Obama vs Boehner-Ryan 2011-15; Trump vs Pelosi 2019-21; Biden vs McCarthy-Johnson 2023-25) followed similar patterns: incumbent president vs opposing-party Congress; periodic shutdown threats; eventual compromise. The Clinton-Gingrich 1995-96 + 1997 balanced-budget framework was structurally instructive: divided government can produce significant policy through compromise + presidential triangulation strategy.

The Welfare reform 1996 + financial deregulation 1999 were structurally Reagan-era conservative achievements operationalized by Democratic president. The 1999 Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act repealing Glass-Steagall would later be cited as structurally contributing to 2008 financial crisis (financial institution mergers + securitization

		+ structural complexity). Clinton-era prosperity 1995-2001 was partially built on financial deregulation framework that would prove structurally fragile. 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 1996 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

Bob Dole
Kansas Senator and 1996 Republican presidential nominee. 72 in 1996. WWII Army veteran.

1994 Republican Revolution
November 8, 1994 midterm. Republicans gained 54 House + 8 Senate seats.

Welfare reform 1996
August 22, 1996 PRWORA. Replaced AFDC with TANF.

Newt Gingrich
Republican Speaker of the House (1995-99).

Bridge to the 21st Century
Clinton's 1996 campaign theme.

Government shutdowns 1995-96
November 1995 + December 1995-January 1996 federal shutdowns.

Jack Kemp
1996 Republican VP nominee.

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.

> *"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 (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 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." What is the rhetorical purpose?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how the Clinton 1996 re-election confirmed DLC centrism viability.

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

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

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

1995-96 shutdowns helped Clinton through five mechanisms: public blamed Republicans; Republicans accepted Clinton budget February 1996; Gingrich approval fell ~40%’25%; Clinton approval rose ~45%’55%; "Clinton defending federal programs vs Republican obstruction" 1996 campaign narrative.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

Clinton's "bridge of opportunity" uses inclusive framing + concrete-metaphorical balance + action-oriented framing. Political function: position Clinton's policy framework as practical + universal + forward-oriented. Subsequent Democratic campaigns adopted similar future-oriented framings.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 5

1996 Welfare reform was PRWORA signed by Clinton August 22, 1996. Replaced AFDC with TANF + 60-month lifetime limit + work requirements + state block grants + immigrant restrictions. Three structural reasons significant: (1) Operationalized Reagan-era welfare-skepticism within Democratic Party - first major federal welfare restriction since 1935 New Deal. (2) DLC centrist achievement - Clinton signed legislation liberals opposed (3 HHS officials resigned in protest). (3) Operationalized 1992 Clinton promise to "end welfare as we know it." Shaped post-1996 federal welfare framework through 2024.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

The Clinton 1996 re-election confirmed DLC centrism viability in four structural ways: (1) First Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944 (52 years) demonstrated DLC centrist Democrats could win consecutive presidential elections - structural reversal of Carter 1980 + Mondale 1984 + Dukakis 1988 Democratic losses. (2) Clinton's 49.2% popular vote was 6+ points above his 1992 43.0% - demonstrating that DLC governance produced electoral expansion, not just retention. (3) DLC policy achievements (NAFTA 1993, Welfare reform 1996, balanced-budget agreement 1997, financial deregulation 1999) survived 1994 Republican Revolution + 1995-96 shutdowns + 1998 impeachment + remained politically defensible. (4) Subsequent Democratic candidates explicitly adopted DLC framework: Gore 2000 (Clinton VP); Kerry 2004 (DLC); Obama 2008+12 (extended DLC); Hillary Clinton 2016 (most explicit DLC since Bill); Biden 2020 (DLC + Obama continuity); Harris 2024 (DLC + Biden incumbent). The cumulative effect: DLC framework dominated Democratic presidential strategy for 32 years (1992-2024). Critics argued framework was structurally inadequate post-2008 + post-2016 - DLC produced 4 victories (1992, 1996, 2008, 2012, 2020) + 4 losses (2000, 2004, 2016, 2024). But the 1996 Clinton re-election was the first decisive structural confirmation that DLC centrism could produce sustainable Democratic presidential victories.

AP students should be able to articulate the confirmation.

QUESTION 7

Clinton states (31 + DC): Northeast (except NH) + most Mid-Atlantic + most Midwest + West Coast + 4 Southern + 3 Border + AZ + NM + HI + DC. Dole states (19): 7 former Confederate + Mountain West + Plains + IN. Pattern: Clinton expanded 1992 coalition (gained FL + AZ); Northeast + West Coast structurally Democratic; Solid South splintered with Southern Democratic ticket carrying 4 Southern states; Mountain West + Plains structurally Republican. Clinton-era Democratic coalition (Northeast + West Coast + Industrial Midwest + selected Southern + Border + Mountain swing states) would persist with adjustments through 2024 attempts.

AP students should be able to articulate.

Discussion prompts

1. Clinton 1996 was first Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944. Identify three structural reasons Democrats had structural difficulty winning presidential re-election 1944-1996.

2. 1995-96 government shutdowns helped Clinton politically. Identify three structural reasons government shutdowns generally hurt the party perceived as causing them.