1996

Bill Clinton vs Bob Dole

A 20-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Story (with a picture)
3. Three questions
4. Teacher notes

1996

Clinton had been president 4 years. First-term troubles: (1) 1993-94 healthcare reform failed Sept 1994; (2) 1994 Republican Revolution midterm (Republicans gained 54 House + 8 Senate seats; Newt Gingrich Speaker, first Republican House since 1955). But Clinton recovered: (1) 1995-96 Gingrich confrontation - November 1995 + December 1995-January 1996 federal government shutdowns over budget. Gingrich politically damaged. (2) Strong economy - GDP growing 3.7% (1996); unemployment 5.4% (October 1996); inflation 3% (1996). (3) August 22, 1996 Welfare reform (PRWORA - Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act). (4) August 21, 1996 Telecommunications Act. (5) April 1995 Oklahoma City bombing - Clinton structurally healing response. (6) 1996 wage growth + employment.

Republican primary 1996: Sen Bob Dole (KS, 72) - Senate Majority Leader, 1976 Republican VP nominee, 1988 Republican presidential primary candidate. Faced challengers Pat Buchanan + Steve Forbes + Lamar Alexander. Won Iowa caucuses February 12, 1996 + New Hampshire February 20, 1996. Republican Convention San Diego August 12-15, 1996 nominated Dole-Kemp. Rep Jack Kemp (NY) VP - structural balance. Dole acceptance speech August 15: "Let me be the bridge to an America that only the

unknowing call myth." Politically devastating - made Dole sound backward-looking.

Look at picture. That Bill Clinton - re-elected 1996 by structural margin.

Democratic Convention Chicago August 26-29, 1996 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." "Bridge to the 21st Century" theme contrasted with Dole's "bridge to an America" speech.

Ross Perot ran again as Reform Party candidate. 1995 founded Reform Party. Self-funded ~$25M (less than 1992 ~$65M). Excluded from October 1996 debates - structurally significant. Won 8.4% popular vote + 0 EV - less than 1992 18.9% but still significant.

Clinton campaign mostly avoided risks. Strong economy + Dole-Gingrich Republican obstruction framing dominated.

Election Day November 5, 1996: Clinton 379 EV vs Dole 159 vs Perot 0. Popular vote: Clinton 49.2% vs Dole 40.7% vs Perot 8.4%. Clinton became first Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944.



Bill Clinton, the 42nd U.S. president. He was re-elected in 1996 - the first Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944.

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Let's talk about the story

1.

How many electoral votes did Bill Clinton win in 1996?

2.

Who was Bob Dole?

3.

What was the "Bridge to the 21st Century" theme?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1996 Clinton won re-election over Sen Bob Dole + Ross Perot. Clinton 379 EV / Dole 159 / Perot 0. "Bridge to the 21st Century" theme. First Democrat re-elected since FDR 1944.

Answer key

1.

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

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

2.

Bob Dole (1923-2021) was Kansas Senator (1969-96) and 1996 Republican presidential nominee. WWII Army veteran severely wounded April 14, 1945 in Italy (Hill 913 near Castel d'Aiano) - shrapnel destroyed his right arm + spine permanently damaged. Recovered through 39 months of hospitalization. House Member (Kansas, 1961-69). Senate Majority Leader (1985-87, 1995-96). 1976 Republican VP nominee (with Ford; lost to Carter-Mondale 297-240 EV). 1988 Republican primary candidate (lost to Bush). 72 years old in 1996. Republican Convention San Diego August 12-15, 1996 nominated Dole-Kemp. Lost 379-159 EV to Clinton. Continued as elder statesman 1997-2021. Awarded Presidential Medal of Freedom January 17, 1997 (Clinton) + Congressional Gold Medal January 17, 2018. Died December 5, 2021 at age 98 - lay in state at U.S. Capitol Rotunda.

AP students should know Bob Dole.

3.

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." Politically masterful contrast with Dole's August 15, 1996 Republican Convention acceptance speech: "Let me be the bridge to an America that only the unknowing call myth." Dole's framing was structurally inverted: he positioned himself as bridge to PAST American virtue + dismissed concerns as "myth"; Clinton positioned himself as bridge to FUTURE prosperity + opportunity. The contrast made Clinton appear forward-looking + Dole appear backward-looking. Subsequent campaign analysts have studied the contrast as masterclass in framing political competitions: candidate offering future-oriented narrative typically defeats candidate offering past-oriented narrative. Clinton 1996 re-election was widely attributed to this structural framing advantage. Cultural shorthand: "bridge to the 21st century" became reference for forward-looking political appeal. Subsequent campaigns invoked similar framings: Obama 2008 "Yes We Can" (forward-looking); Trump 2016 "Make America Great Again" (past-oriented but framed as restoration).

AP students should know the "Bridge to the 21st Century" theme.