2016

Donald Trump vs Hillary Clinton

A 35-minute lesson on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Modern Polarization	ELECTORAL VOTES 538 total
WINNER Donald Trump (Republican) · 304 EV	RUNNER-UP Hillary Clinton (Democratic) · 227 EV
KEY ISSUE Immigration; trade deals; 'Make America Great Again'; Clinton email controversy; globalization backlash	TURNOUT 60.1%

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

2016: Donald Trump vs Hillary Clinton

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Most TV and newspaper experts said Donald Trump would lose in 2016. They were wrong. Why might experts be wrong about an election? What kind of information could they miss?
15 min	**Reading**	The 2016 election was one of the biggest surprises in American political history. Almost every newspaper, TV network, and political expert predicted Hillary Clinton would win. They were wrong. The Democratic candidate was Hillary Clinton, 69 years old. She had served eight years as First Lady (1993-2001), eight years as senator from New York, and four years as Barack Obama's Secretary of State. She had run for the Democratic nomination once before, in 2008, and lost to Obama. She faced a tough primary challenge from Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, a self-described democratic socialist who had not even been a Democrat before the campaign. Clinton eventually won the nomination but with deeper Democratic Party divisions than expected. The Republican candidate was Donald Trump, 70 years old. Trump was a Manhattan real-estate developer who had never held public office. He had been the host of the NBC reality show The Apprentice from 2004 to 2015. He entered the Republican primary in June 2015 with a speech announcing that some Mexican immigrants were criminals - a statement that drew condemnation but vaulted him to the lead in Republican polls. Trump defeated sixteen other Republican candidates in the primary through a combination of nonstop free media coverage, aggressive personal attacks on his rivals, and direct outreach to voters frustrated with the political establishment. The general election was the angriest in modern memory. Trump promised to build a wall on the Mexican border, to renegotiate trade deals he said were unfair to American workers, to ban Muslims from entering the U.S. temporarily, and to drain the swamp in Washington. His campaign slogan was Make America Great Again. Clinton promised to continue Obama's policies, with new investments in childcare, college affordability, and infrastructure. Her campaign focused heavily on Trump's personal character and his treatment of women. Two October events reshaped the race. On October 7 the Washington Post released the Access Hollywood tape, in which Trump bragged about sexually harassing women. Many Republican leaders called for him to leave the race. Then on October 28, FBI Director James Comey announced that he had reopened the investigation into Clinton's use of a private email server during her time as Secretary of State. The Comey announcement dominated news coverage for the final ten days of the

		campaign. Polling tightened sharply. On election night, November 8, 2016, Trump won 304 electoral votes to Clinton's 227. Two electors from Texas, three from Washington state, and one each from Hawaii and Colorado voted faithlessly. Trump won 46.1 percent of the popular vote to Clinton's 48.2 percent. Clinton's popular-vote margin was 2.87 million votes - almost five times Al Gore's 2000 margin - yet she lost the Electoral College. The decisive states were Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, which Trump carried by a combined 77,744 votes out of more than 13 million cast in those three states. Trump's presidency cut taxes (the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act), appointed three Supreme Court justices (Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, Barrett), started trade conflicts with China and the European Union, withdrew the U.S. from the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, and faced two impeachments (December 2019 over Ukraine pressure; January 2021 over the Capitol riot). Trump lost re-election to Joe Biden in 2020.
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 2016 Election

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Key words

Reality television	A type of TV show featuring real people in dramatic situations. Donald Trump hosted The Apprentice on NBC from 2004 to 2015, which made him famous and recognizable to American voters before his 2016 campaign.

Populism	A political style that says ordinary people are being ignored or exploited by the rich and powerful elite. Trump's 2016 campaign was populist; so was Bernie Sanders's primary challenge to Clinton.
Faithless elector	A presidential elector who casts a ballot for someone other than the candidate they were pledged to support. Seven faithless electors voted against the candidate who won their state in 2016 - the most since 1872.
Make America Great Again	Trump's 2016 campaign slogan, often shortened to MAGA. The slogan suggested an earlier era was better than the present and promised to return to it. The same slogan was used in his 2020 and 2024 campaigns.
Email server controversy	The dispute over Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server during her time as Secretary of State. FBI Director James Comey's October 28, 2016 letter reopening the investigation dominated news coverage for the final week of the campaign.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Donald Trump win in 2016?

( ) A. 232
( ) B. 270
( ) C. 304
( ) D. 332

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Trump's nomination by the Republican Party unusual in U.S. political history?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the Comey letter, and why did it become so important in the final two weeks of the campaign?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Hillary Clinton get more total votes than Donald Trump but still lose the election?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

304. Trump won 304 electoral votes; Clinton won 227. Seven faithless electors voted against their state's winner - the most since 1872.

Trump's 304 reflects faithless electors in Hawaii (1), Texas (2), Washington (3) plus one from Colorado who was replaced. The 2016 faithless-elector count is the highest of the modern era.

QUESTION 2

Trump had never held public office before. He had never been a mayor, governor, member of Congress, or any elected position. He had also never served in the military. Every previous Republican nominee since the party was founded in 1854 had either held elected office or been a high-ranking military officer. Trump's nomination by a major party was unprecedented.

Trump's lack of prior public office is one of the most distinctive features of the 2016 cycle. AP students should recognize it as a break from a longstanding party norm.

QUESTION 3

On October 28, 2016 - eleven days before the election - FBI Director James Comey sent a letter to Congress announcing that he had reopened the investigation into Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server during her time as Secretary of State. The letter dominated news coverage for the rest of the campaign. Polling tightened sharply: Clinton's national lead dropped from 6 points to 3 points within a week. On November 6 - two days before the election - Comey sent another letter saying the new emails contained nothing important. But the damage to Clinton's campaign had already been done.

The Comey letter is one of the most-debated political interventions of the modern era. FBI inspector general reports later criticized Comey for the unusual public announcement.

QUESTION 4

Hillary Clinton won 48.2 percent of the popular vote (65.8 million votes) to Donald Trump's 46.1 percent (62.9 million) - a margin of 2.87 million votes. But Trump won the Electoral College 304 to 227 because he won the right combination of states. The decisive states were Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin, which Trump carried by a combined margin of only 77,744 votes. The U.S. picks the president state by state, not by total nationwide vote, so a candidate can lose the popular vote and still win the presidency.

2016 was the fifth time in U.S. history (after 1824, 1876, 1888, 2000) that the popular-vote winner did not become president. The 2.87-million margin is the largest popular-vote loss for an electoral-vote winner in U.S. history.