2016

Donald Trump vs Hillary Clinton

A 50-minute lesson on the 2016 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 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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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 you would expect to make voters willing to support a candidate who had never held public office. For each, suggest one specific 2015-2016 development that fits the pattern.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2016 election was the largest political surprise in modern American history. Donald Trump - a Manhattan real-estate developer with no prior public office, no military service, and a long record of contradictory political statements - defeated Hillary Clinton in an upset that contradicted nearly every major poll and every major newspaper's prediction. The result reshaped both political parties and exposed structural weaknesses in American electoral analysis. The Republican primary was the most contested in decades. Seventeen candidates filed by August 2015. Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, Senator Marco Rubio of Florida, and former Florida Governor Jeb Bush had each entered as plausible nominees. Donald Trump entered on June 16, 2015, with a speech announcing that some Mexican immigrants were criminals. The statement drew widespread condemnation but vaulted him to the lead in Republican polls within a week. Trump's primary campaign combined nonstop free media coverage (he received an estimated $5 billion in free media during the primary, far more than any rival), aggressive personal attacks on his rivals ("Low-Energy Jeb," "Lyin' Ted," "Little Marco"), and direct populist appeals to voters frustrated with the political establishment. He won the nomination at the Republican Convention in Cleveland in July 2016. The Democratic primary was also more contested than expected. Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, a self-described democratic socialist who had not been a Democrat before the campaign, challenged Clinton from the left. Sanders's focus on inequality, healthcare, and student debt mobilized younger voters and progressives. Clinton eventually won the nomination by a 4-million-vote margin but with deeper Democratic Party divisions than her campaign had anticipated. She selected Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia as her running mate. The general election was the most personally vicious in modern memory. Trump promised to build a wall on the Mexican border (which Mexico would pay for), to renegotiate trade deals, to ban Muslims temporarily, to drain the swamp in Wash-

ington, to defeat ISIS, and to bring back manufacturing jobs. His campaign slogan was Make America Great Again. Clinton promised to continue Obama's policies with new investments in childcare, paid family leave, college affordability, infrastructure, and clean energy. She campaigned heavily on Trump's personal character, treatment of women, and statements about minorities.

Two October events reshaped the race. On October 7, 2016, the Washington Post released the Access Hollywood tape, in which Trump bragged about sexually harassing women. Senior Republicans called for him to leave the race; Speaker Paul Ryan said he would no longer campaign with Trump. Then on October 28, FBI Director James Comey announced in a letter to Congress that he had reopened the investigation into Clinton's private email server. Comey's letter dominated news coverage for the final ten days. On November 6, Comey sent a second letter saying the new emails contained no important new information; the second letter received far less coverage than the first.

On November 8, 2016, Trump won 304 electoral votes to Clinton's 227. Seven faithless electors voted against their state's winner - the most since 1872. Trump won 46.1 percent of the popular vote to Clinton's 48.2 percent. Clinton's 2.87-million-vote popular-vote margin was the largest popular-vote loss for an electoral-vote winner in U.S. history. The decisive states were Michigan (Trump won by 10,704 votes), Pennsylvania (44,292), and Wisconsin (22,748) - a combined 77,744-vote margin out of more than 13 million votes cast in those three states.

The demographic story was clear. Trump improved on Republican performance among non-college-educated white voters in the industrial Midwest, particularly older men and women who had voted Democratic in earlier cycles. Clinton improved on Democratic performance among college-educated suburbanites, particularly women. Black voter turnout fell from the 2012 level - the first such decline since at least 1996 - costing Clinton several thousand votes in Detroit, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia. Hispanic and Asian-American voters supported Clinton at margins similar to Obama 2012. Younger voters supported Clinton but at lower turnout than 2008 or 2012.

Trump's presidency (2017-2021) delivered the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, the appointments of three Supreme Court justices (Gorsuch, Kavanaugh, Barrett), trade conflicts with China, withdrawal from the Paris Climate Agreement and the Iran nuclear deal, the renegotiated USMCA trade agreement with Canada and Mexico, and two impeachments. The 2016 election's structural lessons - the underestimation of populist appeal, the role of social media in political coordination, the popular-vote / Electoral College disconnect, and the FBI's role in election administration - would all reshape every subsequent cycle.

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

Populism

A political style that claims to represent ordinary people against a corrupt elite. Trump's 2016 campaign was populist, as was Bernie Sanders's primary challenge to Clinton. Both campaigns attacked Washington and Wall Street establishments.

Access Hollywood tape

The video, released by the Washington Post on October 7, 2016, of Trump on a 2005 NBC Access Hollywood show bragging about sexually harassing women. The tape's release caused many Republicans to call for Trump to leave the race; he refused.

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 their state's 2016 winner - the most since 1872.

Make America Great Again

Trump's 2016 campaign slogan, often abbreviated MAGA. Suggests an earlier era was better than the present and promises to return to it. The slogan was reused in Trump's 2020 and 2024 campaigns and became the unofficial name of the political movement around him.

Comey letter

FBI Director James Comey's October 28, 2016 letter to Congress reopening the investigation into Hillary Clinton's private email server. Dominated news coverage for the final ten days of the campaign. Comey's November 6 follow-up clearing Clinton received far less coverage than the original letter.

Rust Belt

The deindustrializing manufacturing region of the upper Midwest and Northeast (Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Indiana, parts of New York and New Jersey). Trump's 2016 victory was built on Rust Belt margins among non-college-educated white voters who had voted Democratic in earlier cycles.

Inaugural Address

DONALD TRUMP, JANUARY 20, 2017

Trump took the oath of office at the West Front of the U.S. Capitol on January 20, 2017. The address was unusually combative for an inaugural. The "American carnage" passage was widely treated as the defining moment of the speech.

> *"For too long, a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. Politicians prospered, but the jobs left, and the factories closed. The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories; their triumphs have not been your triumphs; and while they celebrated in our nation's Capital, there was little to celebrate for struggling families all across our land. That all changes, starting right here, and right now, because this moment is your moment: it belongs to you."*

Trump, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, January 20, 2017). Public domain.

The 2016 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Donald Trump win in 2016?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which three Rust Belt states delivered Trump's Electoral College victory in 2016?

( ) A. Ohio, Indiana, Iowa
( ) B. Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin
( ) C. Florida, North Carolina, Georgia
( ) D. Virginia, Colorado, Nevada

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Trump had never held public office before 2016 - the first major-party nominee in U.S. history without prior elected office or high military rank. Identify two specific 2015-2016 conditions that allowed voters to overlook this norm.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Hillary Clinton lose the Electoral College while winning the popular vote by 2.87 million? What does this tell you about the structure of U.S. presidential elections?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Trump says in the excerpt that "this moment is your moment: it belongs to you." What political message was he sending, and how did the framing differ from prior modern inaugural addresses?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 2016 election map, identify the three states Trump carried by margins of less than 1 percent. What pattern do they share, and why was that pattern decisive?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

304. Trump won 304 electoral votes; Clinton won 227. Seven faithless electors split the remaining 7 votes among other candidates.

The 7 faithless electors voted for Bernie Sanders (1), Faith Spotted Eagle (1), John Kasich (1), Ron Paul (1), Colin Powell (3). The total faithless count is the highest of the modern era.

QUESTION 2

Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin. Trump carried these three states by a combined margin of 77,744 votes out of more than 13 million cast. All three had voted Democratic in every presidential election since 1988.

The "blue wall" of Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin had been a Democratic structural advantage since 1992. Trump's 2016 sweep of all three reshaped Democratic electoral strategy for every subsequent cycle.

QUESTION 3

Accept any two of: (1) Trump's pre-existing celebrity from The Apprentice and decades of New York tabloid coverage gave him name recognition equivalent to a sitting senator. (2) Public trust in established political institutions (Congress, parties, media) had fallen to historic lows in surveys throughout 2015. (3) The 2008-2012 economic recovery had bypassed many working-class regions, creating durable economic grievance. (4) Voters distinguished between political experience and competence; Trump's business career was treated by his supporters as relevant executive experience. (5) Social media platforms enabled Trump to communicate directly to voters without traditional media filtering.

The Trump exception to the prior-office norm has been widely studied. AP students should recognize it as the product of multiple converging conditions, not a single cause.

QUESTION 4

Clinton won the popular vote 48.2% to 46.1% - a 2.87-million-vote margin. But Trump won the Electoral College 304 to 227 because he carried the right combination of states. The U.S. picks the president state by state, not by total nationwide vote. The 2016 disconnect tells you that the popular-vote / electoral-vote system can produce structurally different outcomes when one party's votes are heavily concentrated in a small number of large states (Clinton in California, New York, Massachusetts) while the other party's votes are distributed more efficiently across many smaller states.

The 2016 disconnect was much wider than the 2000 disconnect (540,000 votes). It revived debate about the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact and Electoral College reform.

QUESTION 5

Trump was positioning his presidency as the restoration of ordinary citizens' power against a Washington establishment that had marginalized them. The framing differed from prior modern inaugurals by treating the federal establishment itself as a hostile entity rather than an extension of the American people. Obama (2009), Bush (2001, 2005), Clinton (1993, 1997), Bush (1989), and Reagan (1981, 1985) had all framed the federal government as the people's instrument; Trump's 2017 framing reversed the relationship.

The "this moment is your moment" framing is one of the most-quoted lines from the 2017 inaugural. AP students should be able to identify it as a populist inversion of the standard inaugural rhetorical structure.

QUESTION 6

Michigan (0.22%), Wisconsin (0.77%), Pennsylvania (0.72%). All three are Rust Belt manufacturing states that had voted Democratic in every presidential election since 1988. Trump carried all three by margins under 1 percent. Their combined 77,744-vote margin was the difference between a Clinton presidency and a Trump presidency.

The 77,744-vote three-state margin is one of the most-cited statistics in modern American electoral analysis. AP students should be able to recall both the states and the combined margin.