2016

Donald Trump vs Hillary Clinton

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

2016: Donald Trump vs Hillary Clinton

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 2016 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-2016 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: list two ways an election could be won decisively in the Electoral College but lost in the popular vote. Identify whether you find such outcomes legitimate, and explain your reasoning.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2016 election sent Donald Trump, a real estate developer and television personality with no prior elected experience, to the presidency over Democrat Hillary Clinton. The certified count was 304 electoral votes for Trump to 227 for Clinton (with seven faithless electors splitting from their pledges). Clinton won the national popular vote by nearly 2.9 million votes, the largest popular-vote loss for a winning candidate in U.S. history. The decisive states were Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin — three Rust Belt states the Democrats had carried in every election since 1992. Trump won them by combined margins of roughly 78,000 votes. The election revealed a sharp realignment along educational lines: counties with bachelor's degrees swung Democratic, counties without swung Republican, and the rural-urban divide widened. The result also raised post-election questions about Russian disinformation operations on social media and the role of late-cycle FBI announcements about Clinton's email server. 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 2016 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

Electoral College gap
A divergence in which a candidate wins the presidency without winning the national popular vote. 2016 had the largest such gap in U.S. history at 2.9 million votes.

Blue Wall
Pre-2016 shorthand for the assumption that Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin would consistently vote Democratic in presidential elections. Trump broke it in 2016.

Faithless electors (2016)
The 2016 cycle saw seven faithless electors -- five from Clinton, two from Trump -- the most in any single U.S. election in over a century.

Rust Belt
The de-industrialized region from western New York through Wisconsin, marked by manufacturing decline since the 1970s. Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin were the decisive 2016 states.

Educational realignment
The post-2012 trend of college-educated voters moving Democratic and non-college voters moving Republican, accelerating sharply in 2016 across both parties' racial coalitions.

Russian interference
Documented 2016 Russian intelligence operations targeting the U.S. election, including social-media influence campaigns and the hack of Democratic email servers. Detailed in the 2019 Mueller Report.

Inaugural Address (excerpt)

DONALD J. TRUMP, JANUARY 20, 2017

Trump's inaugural broke decisively with the bipartisan tradition of inaugural-day conciliation. The address was widely characterized as the darkest in U.S. inaugural history; the phrase "American carnage" became its defining label.

> *"But for too many of our citizens, a different reality exists: Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential. This American carnage stops right here and stops right now. We are one nation – and their pain is our pain."*

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

The 2016 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 Donald Trump win in 2016 (certified count)?

( ) A. 232
( ) B. 270
( ) C. 304
( ) D. 326

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Name the three Rust Belt states that decided the 2016 election and explain why their flip was historically significant.

QUESTION 3 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Roughly how many votes did Clinton win the national popular vote by?

( ) A. 500,000
( ) B. 1.3 million
( ) C. 2.9 million
( ) D. 5.7 million

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Describe in two sentences what the educational realignment of 2016 was, and identify one specific demographic group on each side.

QUESTION 5 · MAP-READ

On the 2016 state map, compare against 2012 (Obama-Romney). Identify three states that flipped, and label any state that was extraordinarily close (under 1 percent margin).

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the exact phrase in the excerpt where Trump labels the situation he is describing. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 7 · SHORT-ANSWER

The inaugural tradition before 2017 emphasized national unity and gratitude. Compare Trump's 2017 framing in this excerpt with that tradition. Identify two specific ways his framing diverges and explain in two sentences why a voter in a Rust Belt state might have received the divergence as validating rather than divisive. Cite a phrase from the excerpt.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

304

Trump won 306 pledged electors but two defected to other candidates. Clinton had 232 pledged but lost five to faithless electors. Final certified totals: Trump 304, Clinton 227.

QUESTION 2

Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin. The flip was historically significant because all three had voted Democratic in every presidential election since 1992 — a 24-year streak — and were widely treated as the Democratic Blue Wall until the morning after the 2016 election.

Trump won PA by ~44,000 votes, MI by ~10,700, and WI by ~22,700. The combined three-state margin of ~78,000 votes determined the presidency in an election with over 136 million ballots cast.

QUESTION 3

2.9 million

Clinton received 65.85 million votes (48.2 percent); Trump received 62.98 million (46.1 percent). The 2.9-million-vote popular vote loss for a winning candidate is the largest in U.S. history.

QUESTION 4

The educational realignment is the post-2012 trend in which voters with a four-year college degree moved toward Democrats while voters without one moved toward Republicans — across both parties' racial coalitions. College-educated suburban women shifted Democratic; non-college white men in the industrial Midwest shifted Republican.

The split was visible in 2012 but accelerated sharply in 2016 and again in 2020. It reshaped the partisan map at the county level: Atlanta, Phoenix, and Dallas suburbs moved Democratic while Scranton and Youngstown moved Republican.

QUESTION 5

Flipped states (R to D or D to R): Florida (D-R), Iowa (D-R), Ohio (D-R), Pennsylvania (D-R), Michigan (D-R), Wisconsin (D-R). Sub-1-percent margins: Michigan (0.23%), Pennsylvania (0.72%), Wisconsin (0.77%).

Two more states flipped at margins under 1.5 percent: Florida (1.2%) and New Hampshire (Clinton +0.37%). The 2016 map was a series of knife-edge results across the upper Midwest.

QUESTION 6

Accept: "American carnage" -- the singular labeling phrase Trump uses. Also accept any verbatim quotation that includes the surrounding clause "This American carnage stops right here and stops right now."

The label became the address's shorthand in subsequent journalism and rhetorical-history scholarship.

QUESTION 7

Accept any of: (1) Trump names specific failures (poverty, factories, crime) rather than offering general gratitude -- a Rust Belt voter facing factory closures hears their own experience validated, e.g., "rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation"; (2) he assigns blame to a "political establishment" rather than appealing to common citizenship -- a voter who felt forgotten by both parties hears recognition; (3) he frames the inauguration as the start of remediation rather than a ceremonial handover -- a voter who voted for change hears immediacy. Accept any quoted phrase the student can anchor to the Rust Belt or working-class voter experience.

Pew Research's 2018 typology study documented the political-typology realignment underlying this reception. The 2016 inaugural is widely treated as a deliberate genre break in rhetorical scholarship.

Discussion prompts

1. Trump lost the popular vote by 2.9 million but won the Electoral College. Identify one argument that the Electoral College worked as designed in 2016 and one that it failed, then evaluate which you find more persuasive.

2. The educational realignment in 2016 split white voters into two coalitions: college-educated whites moved Democratic, non-college whites moved Republican. Identify two structural reasons that split deepened in 2016 and one possible consequence for future Republican strategy.

3. Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Wisconsin had not voted Republican since the 1980s. Identify one economic and one cultural reason those three states swung in 2016, and explain which you think was more decisive.