AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

2016

Donald Trump vs Hillary Clinton

A 105-minute lesson on the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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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3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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2016: Donald Trump vs Hillary Clinton

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in American politics by 2016 that would have produced a populist breakthrough regardless of which Republican was nominated. For each, identify the specific 2008-2016 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2016 election is the textbook case of a populist breakthrough in a system where elite forecasting had become structurally disconnected from working-class political reality. Donald Trump's victory over Hillary Clinton - despite losing the popular vote by 2.87 million - reshaped both political parties, exposed methodological weaknesses in American electoral analysis, and consolidated a coalition transition that had been underway since at least 2008. The 2016 result is now treated by political scientists as the culmination of a fifteen-year process rather than a discrete shock. The structural conditions were three. First, the 2008 financial crisis had bypassed many working-class regions. By 2016 unemployment had returned to pre-crisis levels but median household income in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Ohio was still below 2007 levels. The Obama recovery had been geographically uneven in ways that created durable grievance. Second, public trust in established political institutions - Congress, the two major parties, the mainstream media - had collapsed in survey data through 2015. Gallup's confidence-in-Congress measure stood at 9 percent. Third, the Republican Party's establishment had lost control of its own primary process. The 2012 candidacies of Herman Cain, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Santorum had previewed the establishment's declining ability to channel primary energy toward conventional candidates. 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, former Florida Governor Jeb Bush, Governor John Kasich of Ohio, and several others were all plausible nominees. Donald Trump entered on June 16, 2015. Trump's primary strategy combined three innovations: massive free media exposure (an estimated $5 billion in equivalent paid-media value), aggressive personal attacks on rivals delivered through nicknames and social media, and direct populist appeals on immigration, trade, and elite-versus-people framing. He won the Iowa caucuses (third place but exceeding expectations), the New Hampshire primary, and the South Carolina primary in early 2016. By Super Tuesday on March 1, the establishment

had no plausible path to deny him the nomination. He was officially nominated at the Republican Convention in Cleveland on July 19, 2016.

The Democratic primary was structurally similar in shape: an establishment candidate (Clinton) facing a populist challenger (Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, a self-described democratic socialist who had not been a Democrat before the campaign). Clinton eventually won the nomination by a 4-million-vote margin, but the Sanders insurgency exposed real generational and ideological tensions inside the Democratic coalition. Clinton selected Senator Tim Kaine of Virginia as her running mate.

The general election broke into three phases. Phase one (June-September): Clinton held a stable 4-7-point lead in national polling. Trump's August campaign reorganization (Steve Bannon brought in as CEO; Kellyanne Conway as campaign manager) tightened the race. Phase two (October 7-28): the Access Hollywood tape's release on October 7 - in which Trump bragged about sexually harassing women - prompted Republicans including Speaker Paul Ryan and Senator John McCain to call for him to leave the race. Trump refused. Clinton's lead expanded to 7 points by mid-October. Phase three (October 28 - November 8): FBI Director James Comey's October 28 letter reopening the Clinton email investigation dominated news coverage. Comey's November 6 follow-up clearing Clinton received roughly one-tenth the coverage of the original. Polling tightened sharply. By Election Day Clinton's lead had compressed to 3 points - within typical polling margin of error in swing states.

The result: Trump won 304 electoral votes to Clinton's 227. Seven faithless electors split the remaining 7 votes - 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 three states - Michigan (Trump won by 10,704), Pennsylvania (44,292), and Wisconsin (22,748) - had each voted Democratic in every presidential election since 1988 (Michigan and Pennsylvania) or 1984 (Wisconsin).

The demographic analysis was clear within days. Trump improved on Republican performance among non-college-educated white voters - particularly in the industrial Midwest, particularly older voters, particularly evangelical Christians. Clinton improved on Democratic performance among college-educated whites in the suburbs - particularly women - but the gains were concentrated in non-swing states (California, Texas) and could not offset losses in Rust Belt swing states. Black voter turnout fell several points from the 2012 level - the first such decline since at least 1996 - costing Clinton an estimated 100,000 votes in Detroit, Milwaukee, and Philadelphia combined. Hispanic and Asian-American voters supported Clinton at margins similar to Obama 2012. Younger voters supported Clinton but turnout fell below 2008 and 2012 levels.

The 2016 election produced four durable consequences. First, the populist-estab-

		lishment fault line that defined Trump's primary became the defining cleavage in Republican politics through 2024. Second, the Democratic Party fragmented along college-degree-divide lines that would dominate every subsequent cycle. Third, the role of FBI and intelligence-community institutions in U.S. electoral administration became a permanent partisan controversy (Comey letter; Russian interference findings; subsequent investigations). Fourth, the 2016 disconnect between popular vote and Electoral College - the second such disconnect in sixteen years - revived serious debate over the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact and broader Electoral College reform proposals. The conservative coalition that Trump built - non-college-educated whites, working-class men, evangelical Christians, anti-elite populists - remains the structural core of the Republican Party.
20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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 on the left. Populism has been a recurring feature of American politics since the 1890s.

Blue wall
The eighteen states plus DC that had voted Democratic in every presidential election from 1992 through 2012. Trump's 2016 breach of the blue wall (Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin) provided his Electoral College margin.

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

Russian interference
The Russian government's 2016 campaign to influence the U.S. presidential election through hacked email releases (Democratic National Committee, Clinton campaign chair John Podesta), social media disinformation, and probing of state election infrastructure. Confirmed by the 2017 Intelligence Community Assessment and the 2019 Mueller Report.

Tea Party
The 2009-2014 conservative political movement that emerged in opposition to the Obama administration. Its core grievances (immigration, federal spending, anti-establishment populism) became the foundation of Trump's 2016 Republican primary coalition.

Rust Belt
The deindustrializing manufacturing region of the upper Midwest and Northeast. Trump's 2016 Electoral College victory was built on Rust Belt margins among non-college-educated white voters who had voted Democratic in earlier cycles.

College-degree divide
The polarization of American voting patterns by educational attainment. By 2016, college-educated white voters were Democratic; non-college white voters were Republican. The divide widened sharply in 2016 and has dominated every subsequent cycle.

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. Internal FBI inspector general reports later criticized Comey for the unusual public announcement.

National Popular Vote Interstate Compact
A multi-state agreement under which each signatory state agrees to award its electoral votes to the national popular vote winner. As of 2025, 17 jurisdictions with 209 electoral votes have signed; the compact takes effect when signatories total 270 electoral votes. Direct response to the 2000 and 2016 Electoral College / popular vote disconnects.

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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Inaugural Address

DONALD TRUMP, JANUARY 20, 2017

“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.

SOURCE B

Concession Speech

HILLARY CLINTON, NOVEMBER 9, 2016

“Last night, I congratulated Donald Trump and offered to work with him on behalf of our country. I hope that he will be a successful president for all Americans. This is not the outcome we wanted or we worked so hard for, and I'm sorry that we did not win this election for the values we share and the vision we hold for our country. But I feel pride and gratitude for this wonderful campaign that we built together - this vast, diverse, creative, unruly, energized campaign. We have seen that our nation is more deeply divided than we thought. But I still believe in America and I always will. And if you do, then we must accept this result, and then look to the future.”

Clinton, "Concession Speech" (New York, NY, November 9, 2016). Public domain.

The 2016 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Trump's Inaugural) that articulates the populist framing of the 2016 result. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Clinton's concession) that acknowledges the depth of national division revealed by the result. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address the 2016 result but they frame the country differently. Identify the specific framing each source uses.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B was delivered November 9, 2016. Source A was delivered January 20, 2017. What does the seventy-three-day gap tell you about how the political character of the transition was contested?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A claims that "Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth." Identify one specific 2008-2016 economic development that supports this claim and one that complicates it.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

By how many votes did Trump win the three decisive Rust Belt states (Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin) combined?

( ) A. 37,128
( ) B. 77,744
( ) C. 143,902
( ) D. 237,488

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many faithless electors voted against their state's winner in 2016?

( ) A. 2
( ) B. 5
( ) C. 7
( ) D. 15

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 2016 result a structural break, a contingent outcome, or a consolidation of prior shifts? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Trump's Inaugural (Source A) frames the 2016 result as the restoration of working-class authority against a Washington establishment. Clinton's concession (Source B) acknowledges the result while characterizing the country as more deeply divided than her campaign had recognized. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 2008-2017 period, evaluate the extent to which the 2016 result represented a structural break in American politics, a contingent outcome produced by specific October 2016 events, or the consolidation of demographic shifts already underway since 2008. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the break-vs-contingent-vs-consolidation axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Sanders primary, the Access Hollywood tape, the Comey letter, the Russian interference, the 77,744-vote Rust Belt margin. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent - break vs. contingent vs. consolidation - rather than treating them as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "a small group in our nation's Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost", "The establishment protected itself, but not the citizens of our country", "this moment is your moment: it belongs to you". The "small group ... has reaped the rewards" phrase is the cleanest populist articulation.

The 2017 Inaugural is one of the most explicitly populist American presidential speeches. AP students should be able to identify the populist frame.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "our nation is more deeply divided than we thought", "this is not the outcome we wanted or we worked so hard for", "we must accept this result, and then look to the future". The "more deeply divided" phrase is the most direct acknowledgment of the structural diagnosis.

Clinton's concession is one of the most-cited examples of democratic acceptance under conditions of partisan grievance. AP students should be able to identify it as deliberate norm preservation.

QUESTION 3

Source A frames America as a country in which an establishment elite has betrayed ordinary citizens; the 2016 result is restorative justice. Source B frames America as a country more deeply divided than her campaign had recognized; the 2016 result is diagnostic - it reveals the division rather than resolving it. The two framings are politically incompatible: Source A treats the division as evidence of betrayal, Source B treats it as evidence requiring further democratic engagement.

The two framings define the two halves of post-2016 American political discourse. AP students should be able to identify each as a coherent worldview rather than a mere stylistic difference.

QUESTION 4

The seventy-three-day gap covers the 2016 transition, during which the country processed the Electoral College / popular vote disconnect, the Russian interference revelations, the December 1 House recount challenges, and the December 19 Electoral College vote. Clinton's November 9 concession set a frame of democratic acceptance; Trump's January 20 Inaugural set an incompatible frame of populist restoration. The temporal ordering tells you that the transition itself was politically contested at the level of meaning, not just of office, and that the eventual partisan polarization of the 2017-2024 period was foreshadowed in this gap.

The contested-transition framing is structurally important. AP students should recognize that the 2016-17 transition was not merely procedural but ideological.

QUESTION 5

Supports the claim: (1) Median household income in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Ohio was still below 2007 levels in 2016. (2) The 2008-2016 economic recovery was geographically uneven, with coastal urban areas recovering much faster than industrial inland regions. (3) Manufacturing employment had fallen 35 percent from 2000 to 2016. Complicates the claim: (1) The national unemployment rate by 2016 had returned to pre-crisis levels (4.7%). (2) The Obama administration's response to the 2008 crisis (TARP continuation, stimulus, Dodd-Frank) had been opposed by Republican leadership, not just by Washington broadly. (3) The growth in upper-income and college-educated employment had been larger than the decline in non-college employment - a question of distribution rather than absolute decline.

AP students should be able to engage Trump's claims as analytical propositions rather than mere campaign rhetoric.

QUESTION 6

77,744. Trump won Michigan by 10,704, Pennsylvania by 44,292, Wisconsin by 22,748 - a combined margin of 77,744 votes out of more than 13 million cast.

The 77,744-vote margin is one of the most-cited statistics in modern American electoral analysis. AP students should be able to recall it.

QUESTION 7

7.

Seven faithless electors voted against their state's winner in 2016 - the most since 1872. Two from Texas, three from Washington, one each from Hawaii and an originally-Colorado vote later corrected. The 2020 Chiafalo v. Washington Supreme Court decision later upheld state laws penalizing faithless electors.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the break-vs-contingent-vs-consolidation axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric on the next page evaluates the full essay.