1808

James Madison vs Charles C. Pinckney

A 50-minute lesson on the 1808 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA First Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 175 total
WINNER James Madison (Democratic-Republican) · 122 EV	RUNNER-UP Charles C. Pinckney (Federalist) · 47 EV
KEY ISSUE Embargo Act and neutral trade rights amid the Napoleonic Wars	TURNOUT 36.8%

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1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1808: James Madison vs Charles C. Pinckney

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 political conditions under which an established governing party might lose ground in a national election without losing the presidency. For each, suggest one specific 1807-1808 development that fits the pattern.

15 min **Reading + vocab**

The 1808 election was the fifth U.S. presidential election. Thomas Jefferson had decided to follow George Washington's two-term precedent and retire to Monticello. The Democratic-Republican congressional caucus had nominated his Secretary of State, James Madison of Virginia, as the party's candidate.

Madison was 57 years old, 5'4", and widely regarded as the country's most accomplished political thinker. He had been one of the principal architects of the U.S. Constitution at the 1787 Philadelphia Convention. He had written 29 of the 85 Federalist Papers (1787-88) defending the Constitution's ratification. He had served four terms in the House of Representatives (1789-1797) where he had drafted the Bill of Rights. He had served eight years (1801-1809) as Jefferson's Secretary of State during the Louisiana Purchase, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, and the Tripoli campaign. No presidential candidate before or since has matched his combination of constitutional, legislative, and diplomatic credentials.

The Federalist Party again nominated Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of South Carolina, who had lost decisively to Jefferson in 1804. The Federalist Party had been in structural decline since 1800. By 1808 it controlled no federal branch and only six state governments. Hamilton was dead. The 1804 New England secession plot had embarrassed the party. The Federalists had no organized national machinery.

But the Federalists had one major political gift: the December 1807 Embargo Act. The Act was Jefferson's response to Britain's 1807 Orders in Council and France's 1806 Berlin Decree, both of which interfered with American shipping during the Napoleonic Wars. The British had also been forcibly impressing American sailors into the Royal Navy - by 1807 an estimated 6,000 Americans had been taken. The June 1807 Chesapeake-Leopard incident, in which a British warship fired on the U.S. frigate Chesapeake and forcibly removed four sailors (one of whom was hanged), nearly triggered war.

		Jefferson's response - the Embargo Act - banned U.S. ships from all foreign trade. The theory was peaceful coercion: Britain and France would respect American shipping rights when their economies began to suffer. In practice, the Embargo crippled the U.S. shipping industry, especially in New England. American exports fell from $108 million in 1807 to $22 million in 1808. Sailors went unemployed. Merchant ships rotted at anchor. Smuggling along the Canadian border exploded. New England town governments openly defied federal customs officers. The Federalists ran their 1808 campaign almost entirely against the Embargo. Pinckney carried Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and three of Maryland's 11 electors. Madison carried the other 12 states. The electoral count was 122 Madison to 47 Pinckney - a 75-vote Democratic-Republican margin that was much smaller than Jefferson's 1804 148-vote margin. The Federalist popular vote share rose from about 27 percent in 1804 to about 33 percent in 1808. Madison was inaugurated March 4, 1809. The Embargo Act was repealed just three days before his inauguration; the Non-Intercourse Act (which banned trade only with Britain and France) replaced it. Three years later, in June 1812, Madison would ask Congress to declare war on Britain - the War of 1812.
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

Embargo Act

The December 1807 federal law banning U.S. ships from foreign trade. Intended as peaceful coercion to force Britain and France to respect American shipping. Crippled the U.S. shipping industry instead; repealed March 1, 1809.

Chesapeake-Leopard incident

The June 22, 1807 incident in which the British warship HMS Leopard fired on the U.S. frigate USS Chesapeake off Virginia, killing three Americans and forcibly removing four sailors. Nearly triggered war; directly preceded the Embargo Act.

Non-Intercourse Act

The March 1, 1809 federal law replacing the Embargo Act. Banned trade only with Britain and France, allowing other foreign trade to resume. Did not work either, leading eventually to the War of 1812.

Impressment

The British Royal Navy practice of forcibly recruiting American sailors into British warships. About 6,000 Americans were impressed between 1803 and 1812. Major cause of U.S.-British tension and the eventual War of 1812.

Orders in Council

The 1807 British government decrees authorizing seizure of any neutral ship trading with Napoleonic France. The British equivalent of the French Berlin Decree of 1806. Both decrees interfered with American shipping during the Napoleonic Wars.

Congressional caucus

A meeting of a party's congressional members to choose the party's presidential nominee. The 1808 Democratic-Republican caucus nominated Madison. The caucus system would be the main nomination mechanism through the 1820s.

First Inaugural Address

JAMES MADISON, MARCH 4, 1809

Madison took the oath in the chamber of the House of Representatives in Washington, DC. The address was carefully balanced between continuing Jefferson's policies and acknowledging the country's difficult situation. The Embargo Act had been repealed three days earlier, but the underlying U.S.-British tensions remained.

> *"The present situation of the world is indeed without a parallel, and that of our own country full of difficulties. The pressure of these, too, is the more severely felt because they have fallen upon us at a moment when the national prosperity being at a height not before attained, the contrast resulting from the change has been rendered the more striking. Under the benign influence of our republican institutions, and the maintenance of peace with all nations whilst so many of them were engaged in bloody and wasteful wars, the fruits of a just policy were enjoyed in an unrivaled growth of our faculties and resources."*

Madison, "First Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1809). Public domain.

The 1808 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did James Madison win in 1808?

( ) A. 89
( ) B. 113
( ) C. 122
( ) D. 147

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The June 1807 incident in which a British warship fired on a U.S. frigate and forcibly removed four sailors was the:

( ) A. Boston Massacre
( ) B. Chesapeake-Leopard incident
( ) C. Tripoli affair
( ) D. XYZ Affair

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was James Madison especially well-prepared to be the fourth U.S. president? Identify three specific credentials.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the Embargo Act, and why did it fail as a tool of peaceful coercion?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Federalist Party take advantage of the Embargo Act controversy in 1808?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1808 election map, identify the five states (plus Maryland's split) Pinckney carried. What pattern do they share, and why did the pattern emerge in 1808 but not in 1804?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

122. Madison 122; Pinckney 47. Madison carried 12 states; Pinckney carried 5 plus 3 of Maryland's 11 electors.

The 1808 margin was much smaller than Jefferson's 162-14 landslide in 1804. The Embargo Act caused the Federalist mini-recovery in New England.

QUESTION 2

Chesapeake-Leopard incident. On June 22, 1807, the British warship HMS Leopard fired on the U.S. frigate USS Chesapeake off Virginia, killing three Americans and forcibly removing four sailors. The incident nearly triggered war and directly preceded the Embargo Act.

The Chesapeake-Leopard incident was the closest the U.S. came to war with Britain before the actual June 1812 declaration.

QUESTION 3

Accept any three of: (1) One of the principal architects of the U.S. Constitution at the 1787 Philadelphia Convention. (2) Author of 29 of the 85 Federalist Papers defending ratification. (3) Drafter of the Bill of Rights (1789). (4) Four terms in the House of Representatives (1789-97). (5) Eight years as Jefferson's Secretary of State (1801-09). (6) Negotiator behind the Louisiana Purchase. (7) Co-founder of the Democratic-Republican Party with Jefferson.

Madison's resume is one of the most accomplished in U.S. presidential history. AP students should be able to identify multiple specific credentials.

QUESTION 4

The Embargo Act was a December 1807 federal law banning U.S. ships from foreign trade entirely. The theory was peaceful coercion: Britain and France would respect American shipping rights when their economies began to suffer. It failed because (1) Britain had alternative suppliers (Canada, India, Latin America) and could replace American trade more easily than American merchants could replace foreign trade; (2) the Embargo crippled the U.S. shipping industry far more than it hurt Britain - American exports fell from $108M (1807) to $22M (1808); (3) widespread smuggling along the Canadian border undercut the policy's coercive effect.

The Embargo Act is the textbook case of a failed peaceful-coercion strategy. The lesson - that sanctions hurt the imposing country as much or more than the target - has been relearned repeatedly in U.S. foreign policy.

QUESTION 5

New England Federalists ran their 1808 campaign almost entirely against the Embargo Act. The Act had crippled New England's shipping economy, leaving sailors unemployed and merchants bankrupt. Federalist newspapers framed Madison as Jefferson's heir who would continue the policy. Pinckney carried five New England states (Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island) plus three of Maryland's electors - 47 EV total. The Federalist popular vote rose from 27% (1804) to 33% (1808). But the recovery was regional, not national.

The Embargo Act produced one of the only Federalist Party gains in the post-1800 decline. The pattern would repeat in 1812 (when the War of 1812 produced another temporary Federalist surge), but the party never recovered its national footprint.

QUESTION 6

Pinckney states: Connecticut (9 EV), Delaware (3), Massachusetts (19), New Hampshire (7), Rhode Island (4), plus 2 of Maryland's 11 electors. Pattern: all five plus the Maryland split are New England commercial shipping states (or, for Delaware, federalist commercial seaboard). The pattern emerged in 1808 because the Embargo Act had crippled the New England shipping economy in 1807-08, generating regional Federalist mobilization. The same states had voted Democratic-Republican in 1804 (except Connecticut) when the Embargo did not exist.

The 1808 New England Federalist recovery is geographically precise. AP students should be able to identify the embargo-shipping-states correlation.