CLASSROOM EDITION · GRADES 9 — 12

1808

James Madison vs Charles C. Pinckney

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

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

1808: James Madison vs Charles C. Pinckney

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 1808 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1808 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1808 that would have constrained both candidates' campaign options. For each, identify the specific 1804-1808 development most responsible.
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 after his second term. The election was simultaneously the first test of the Twelfth Amendment's separate-ballot procedure in a non-incumbent race and the first major test of whether the Democratic-Republican coalition could survive Jefferson's departure. The Democratic-Republican congressional caucus had nominated Secretary of State James Madison of Virginia in January 1808. Madison was 57 years old, 5'4", and widely regarded as the most accomplished political thinker of his generation. His credentials were unmatched: principal architect of the U.S. Constitution at the 1787 Philadelphia Convention; author of 29 of the 85 Federalist Papers (1787-88); drafter of the Bill of Rights (1789); four terms in the House of Representatives (1789-97); eight years as Jefferson's Secretary of State (1801-09). Madison had organized the constitutional defense of strict construction during the 1790s and had drafted the Virginia Resolutions of 1798 declaring the Alien and Sedition Acts unconstitutional. He was the senior Democratic-Republican intellectual figure after Jefferson himself. The caucus selection of Madison was not unanimous within the party. Vice President George Clinton of New York wanted the nomination but was 69 years old and lacked Madison's national reach. James Monroe, then U.S. minister to Britain, was the candidate of the Quids - a faction of strict-construction Virginia Republicans who thought Madison and Jefferson had drifted toward Hamiltonian loose-construction. The Quids included John Randolph of Roanoke, who would later become Madison's most persistent congressional critic. The caucus nominated Madison decisively, but Monroe ran a quiet challenge in Virginia and the Quid critique would resurface during

the War of 1812.

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 Essex Junto secession plot had embarrassed the party. The Federalists had no organized national machinery and no coherent constitutional doctrine beyond opposition to whatever Jefferson and Madison proposed.

The campaign's dominant issue was the December 1807 Embargo Act. The Act had been 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 June 22, 1807 Chesapeake-Leopard incident, in which the British warship HMS Leopard fired on the U.S. frigate USS Chesapeake off Virginia and forcibly removed four sailors (one of whom was hanged), had brought the U.S. to the brink of war. Jefferson chose the Embargo as a peaceful alternative.

The Embargo crippled the U.S. shipping industry. American exports fell from $108 million in 1807 to $22 million in 1808 - the largest single-year economic contraction in U.S. history to that point. New England merchant fleets rotted at anchor. Sailors went unemployed. Smuggling along the Canadian border exploded; the Treasury Department deployed federal troops to enforce the Embargo in Vermont and northern New York. Town governments throughout New England openly defied federal customs officers. Massachusetts and Connecticut Federalists organized petitions, public meetings, and ultimately the threat of secession.

The Federalists ran their 1808 campaign almost entirely against the Embargo. Pinckney carried Connecticut (9 EV), Delaware (3), Massachusetts (19), New Hampshire (7), Rhode Island (4), and three of Maryland's 11 electors - 47 EV total. Madison carried the other 12 states for 122 EV. The Federalist popular vote share rose from about 27 percent (1804) to about 33 percent (1808). The Federalist recovery was real but regional. The party gained 27 House seats but remained in the minority.

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. The Non-Intercourse Act also failed. In May 1810, Macon's Bill No. 2 reopened trade with both Britain and France while threatening to reimpose restrictions on whichever country continued to interfere with American shipping. France's Napoleon exploited the bill cleverly by appearing to comply while continuing seizures; Madison reimposed the embargo on Britain alone in November 1810. The diplomatic spiral led directly to the June 1, 1812 war declaration against Britain. 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 1808 election tells you about the First Party System 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

Embargo Act

The December 1807 federal law banning U.S. ships from all foreign trade. Intended as peaceful coercion to force Britain and France to respect American shipping. Crippled the U.S. shipping industry; American exports fell 80 percent in one year. Repealed March 1, 1809.

Chesapeake-Leopard incident

The June 22, 1807 incident in which HMS Leopard fired on USS Chesapeake off Virginia, killing three Americans and forcibly removing four sailors (one of whom, Jenkin Ratford, was hanged). 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 produce British or French concessions either.

Quids

The 1805-1812 faction of strict-construction Virginia Republicans (including John Randolph) who opposed Madison and Jefferson's drift toward Hamiltonian loose-construction. Ran James Monroe quietly against Madison in 1808.

Impressment

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

Orders in Council

The 1807 British government decrees authorizing seizure of any neutral ship trading with Napoleonic France. The British counterpart to France's 1806 Berlin Decree. Both interfered with American shipping.

Macon's Bill No. 2

The May 1810 federal law reopening trade with both Britain and France while threatening to reimpose restrictions on whichever country continued to interfere with American shipping. Napoleon exploited the bill by appearing to comply while continuing French seizures; Madison reimposed embargo on Britain alone in November 1810.

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: it had to acknowledge the economic damage the Embargo had caused while defending the Jefferson administration's broader record. The Embargo Act had been repealed three days earlier; the Non-Intercourse Act had just replaced it.

> *"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 (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 James Madison win in 1808?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The June 1807 incident that nearly triggered war between the U.S. and Britain was the:

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

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific Madison credentials from before 1808 that made him uniquely qualified to be president.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Embargo Act work, and why did it fail to coerce Britain and France?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Federalist Party do better in 1808 than in 1804, despite still losing decisively?

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Madison says in his inaugural that "the present situation of the world is indeed without a parallel." Identify two specific 1803-1809 international developments that justified this framing.

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1808 election map, identify the five states (plus Maryland's split) Pinckney carried. What economic feature do they share, and what does it tell you about the Embargo Act's political geography?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

122. Madison 122; Pinckney 47. Madison carried 12 states; Pinckney carried 5 plus 3 of Maryland's 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, HMS Leopard fired on USS Chesapeake off Virginia, killing three Americans and forcibly removing four sailors. One sailor (Jenkin Ratford) was later hanged.

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) Principal architect 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 (1789-91). (4) Four terms in the House of Representatives (1789-97). (5) Eight years as Jefferson's Secretary of State (1801-09). (6) Co-founder of the Democratic-Republican Party with Jefferson. (7) Drafter of the 1798 Virginia Resolutions declaring the Alien and Sedition Acts unconstitutional.

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 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 from losing American trade. The policy failed because (1) Britain had alternative suppliers (Canada, Caribbean, India, Latin America) and could replace American imports 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 80 percent (1807-1808) while British exports recovered. (3) Widespread smuggling along the Canadian border undercut the policy's coercive effect. (4) France's Napoleon was less affected because France was already operating under the Continental System, which Britain's naval blockade enforced involuntarily.

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 through Trump-era tariff disputes.

QUESTION 5

The Embargo Act of 1807 had crippled the American shipping industry, especially in New England. American exports fell from $108M (1807) to $22M (1808). New England voters who had largely abandoned the Federalist Party after 1800 came back in protest. Pinckney carried Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and 3 of Maryland's electors - 47 EV versus 14 in 1804. The Federalist popular vote rose from 27% to 33%. The Federalists also gained 27 House seats. But the recovery was regional - they did not become competitive nationally and never won another presidential election.

The 1808 Federalist recovery is a useful case study in regional protest politics. Voters punished the incumbent party for a specific failed policy without abandoning the broader Democratic-Republican coalition.

QUESTION 6

Accept any two of: (1) The Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815) - the largest European war since the Seven Years' War. (2) The 1806 French Berlin Decree authorizing seizure of any neutral ship trading with Britain. (3) The 1807 British Orders in Council authorizing seizure of any neutral ship trading with France. (4) The June 1807 Chesapeake-Leopard incident bringing the U.S. to the brink of war. (5) The 1807-1809 collapse of American trade with both Britain and France. (6) The 1807-08 Spanish revolution and Bourbon restoration. The Napoleonic Wars as the umbrella framework is the most directly relevant.

Madison's "without a parallel" framing was accurate - the 1803-1815 Napoleonic Wars were the largest international conflict between the Seven Years' War (1756-63) and the World Wars. AP students should be able to identify multiple specific international events.

QUESTION 7

Pinckney states: Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, plus 3 of Maryland's electors. Pattern: all five are commercial-shipping states - their economies depended on Atlantic trade. The Embargo Act had crippled their core economic activity. The political geography tells you the Embargo's damage was geographically concentrated on the commercial seaboard, which is also where Federalism had its institutional roots. The pattern reveals that the Federalist Party's remaining strength in 1808 was almost entirely a function of trade-disruption politics rather than residual ideological support.

The 1808 map is a structural snapshot of how a specific policy failure can produce geographically concentrated political backlash. AP students should be able to read the map analytically.

Discussion prompts

1. The Embargo Act was a peaceful-coercion experiment that failed catastrophically. Identify two specific reasons the policy failed in practice, and explain one lesson future U.S. policymakers could draw about the limits of trade-based diplomacy.

2. Madison's 1808 victory was smaller than Jefferson's 1804 landslide. Identify two structural reasons for the narrower margin, and one structural reason Madison nevertheless won decisively.