3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1812

James Madison vs DeWitt Clinton

A 35-minute lesson on the 1812 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA First Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 217 total
WINNER James Madison (Democratic-Republican) · 128 EV	RUNNER-UP DeWitt Clinton (Federalist) · 89 EV
KEY ISSUE War of 1812 against Britain; trade and maritime rights	TURNOUT 40.4%

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1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1812: James Madison vs DeWitt Clinton

Timing

5 min **Warm-up**

When a country is in the middle of a hard war, voters have a choice. They can keep the same leader who started the war, or they can pick someone new. What might make voters keep the same leader?

15 min **Reading**

The 1812 election was the sixth U.S. presidential election. It was held just five months after Congress declared war on Britain - the only U.S. presidential election held entirely during a major war.

President James Madison had asked Congress for a war declaration on June 1, 1812. Congress had approved it on June 18, by a 79-49 House vote and 19-13 Senate vote. The vote split strictly on partisan lines: Democratic-Republicans for war, Federalists against. The reasons for war included British impressment of American sailors (about 6,000 since 1803), British shipping interference under the Orders in Council, British support for Native American resistance on the western frontier (especially Tecumseh's confederation), and a long pattern of insults to American sovereignty.

The war did not begin well. American forces tried three invasions of Canada in 1812 - at Detroit, Niagara, and Lake Champlain - and lost all three. General William Hull surrendered Detroit without a fight in August 1812. British and Native American forces sacked the Niagara frontier. The U.S. Navy did well in single-ship duels but the British Royal Navy soon imposed a blockade on the American coast that crippled shipping. New England, which had opposed the war, refused to lend its state militias to the federal war effort.

The Federalist Party saw an opportunity. They had been a regional New England party since 1800. The 1812 cycle was their best chance for revival. The party did not formally nominate anyone but supported DeWitt Clinton of New York, the mayor of New York City and the nephew of Vice President George Clinton (who had died in office April 1812). DeWitt Clinton was actually a Democratic-Republican himself, but he had broken with Madison over the war and wanted the presidency. Federalists held a quiet New York City convention in September 1812 and agreed to support him without formally putting their party label on the ticket.

Madison's campaign emphasized national honor and the defense of American sovereignty against Britain. He selected Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts as his running mate (Vice President George Clinton having died). Clinton-Federalist campaigns emphasized peace, the failure of the war effort, and the economic damage to New England.

		Madison won 128 electoral votes to Clinton's 89 - a 39-vote margin. Clinton carried New England minus Vermont (Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island), New York, New Jersey, and Delaware - 89 EV total. Madison carried Pennsylvania, Virginia, the Carolinas, Georgia, and the Western states. The 1812 result was the closest U.S. presidential re-election in history to that point. The Federalist Party would briefly retake some ground in 1814 state elections but ultimately destroyed itself with the December 1814 Hartford Convention, where New England Federalists secretly considered secession.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1812 Election

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Key words

War of 1812	The 1812-1815 war between the United States and Britain. Causes included British impressment of American sailors, British shipping interference, and British support for Native American resistance.
Impressment	The British practice of forcibly recruiting American sailors into the Royal Navy. About 6,000 Americans were impressed between 1803 and 1812.
Royal Navy blockade	British warships preventing American ships from leaving U.S. ports during the War of 1812. The blockade crippled American shipping, especially in New England.
Hartford Convention	The December 1814-January 1815 secret New England Federalist meeting that considered secession over the War of 1812. The convention's timing (just as the war ended) destroyed the Federalist Party.

Tecumseh's confederation The Native American alliance Shawnee leader Tecumseh built in the Old Northwest before the War of 1812. Tecumseh sided with Britain in the war and died fighting at the Battle of the Thames in 1813.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did James Madison win in 1812?

( ) A. 98
( ) B. 113
( ) C. 128
( ) D. 142

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Who supported DeWitt Clinton against Madison in 1812, and why was the support unusual?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Royal Navy blockade affect the 1812 election's geography?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Federalists do better in 1812 than in 1808, but still lose decisively?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

128. Madison 128; Clinton 89. The closest U.S. presidential re-election to that point in history.

The 39-vote margin reflected the wartime sectional split. New England plus New York went Clinton; the South and West stayed Madison.

QUESTION 2

DeWitt Clinton was actually a Democratic-Republican (nephew of VP George Clinton). He had broken with Madison over the war. The Federalist Party supported him without formally putting their party label on the ticket. The support was unusual because it crossed party lines: the Federalists backed a Democratic-Republican candidate they could agree with on the single issue of opposing the war.

The 1812 fusion ticket is one of the most-cited examples of cross-party single-issue coalitions in U.S. history. The Federalists had no chance with their own nominee; supporting Clinton was strategic.

QUESTION 3

The Royal Navy blockade crippled American shipping. New England, where the shipping economy was largest, was hurt the most. Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island voted against Madison. The South and West, where economies depended less on Atlantic trade and where war fever was strongest, voted for Madison. Pennsylvania (large mixed economy) was the key swing state and went Madison.

The 1812 geographic pattern is one of the most striking in early American electoral history. The shipping-states-vs-non-shipping-states split tracks war damage almost perfectly.

QUESTION 4

The Federalists carried more states in 1812 (5 states + 2 more) than in 1808 (5 states). They got 89 EV vs. 47 in 1808. The war damage to New England commercial shipping had energized opposition. But they still lost decisively because the South and West were committed to the war and gave Madison large margins. The Federalist Party would never become competitive nationally. The Hartford Convention in December 1814 - in which Federalists secretly discussed secession - destroyed the party for good.

The 1812 Federalist recovery was the party's last meaningful electoral surge. The Hartford Convention's timing (December 1814, just as news of the Treaty of Ghent reached the U.S.) made the party look unpatriotic and disloyal to the federal Union.