1812

James Madison vs DeWitt Clinton

A 50-minute lesson on the 1812 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 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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3. Background: key terms + source
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1812: James Madison vs DeWitt Clinton

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 reasons a wartime president might still win re-election despite a difficult war record. For each, identify one specific 1811-1812 development that fits the pattern.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1812 election was the sixth U.S. presidential election. It was held just five months after the U.S. declaration of war on Britain - the only U.S. presidential election held entirely during a major war until the Civil War cycle of 1864. President James Madison had asked Congress for a war declaration on June 1, 1812. The five British acts justifying war were: (1) impressment of American sailors (about 6,000 since 1803); (2) British shipping interference under the 1807 Orders in Council; (3) British support for Native American resistance on the western frontier, especially Tecumseh's confederation; (4) British harassment of American ships off the U.S. coast; and (5) the long pattern of insults to American sovereignty. Congress approved the declaration June 18, by a strict partisan vote: 79-49 House, 19-13 Senate, with Democratic-Republicans for war and Federalists against. The war began badly. Three U.S. attempts to invade Canada in 1812 - at Detroit, Niagara, and Lake Champlain - all failed. General William Hull surrendered Detroit without firing a shot on August 16, 1812. British and Native American forces captured Mackinac in July and Fort Dearborn (Chicago) in August. The U.S. Navy won several single-ship duels (USS Constitution vs. HMS Guerriere in August; USS United States vs. HMS Macedonian in October) but the Royal Navy imposed an effective 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 or to lend its banks to federal war finance. The Federalist Party had been a regional New England party since 1800. The 1812 cycle was their best chance for revival in twelve years. The party did not formally hold a national nominating convention. Instead, anti-war coalitions in major Northern cities supported DeWitt Clinton of New York, the mayor of New York City and nephew of Vice President George Clinton (who had died in office in April 1812). DeWitt Clinton was a Democratic-Republican who had broken with Madison over the war. Federalist leaders met in a quiet September 1812 New York City conference and agreed to support Clinton without formally endorsing him. Clinton's running mate was Jared

Ingersoll of Pennsylvania, a Federalist.

Madison's campaign emphasized national honor, defense of American sovereignty, and the necessity of war to vindicate American independence. He selected Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts (then 68) as his running mate after Clinton's April death. The Madison-Gerry ticket won 128 electoral votes to Clinton-Ingersoll's 89. Clinton carried New England minus Vermont (Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island), plus New York, New Jersey, Delaware, and 5 of Maryland's 11 electors. Madison carried Pennsylvania (25 EV), Vermont (8), Virginia (25), the Carolinas, Georgia, the Western states, and 6 of Maryland's electors.

The 1812 result was the closest U.S. presidential re-election in history to that point - and would remain so until Woodrow Wilson's 1916 victory over Charles Evans Hughes. The Federalist Party briefly retook ground in 1814 state elections but ultimately destroyed itself with the December 15, 1814 - January 5, 1815 Hartford Convention. New England Federalists secretly considered secession over the War of 1812 just as the December 24, 1814 Treaty of Ghent (which ended the war) was crossing the Atlantic. The convention's timing - their secession demands arrived in Washington at the same time as news of Andrew Jackson's January 8, 1815 victory at New Orleans - made the Federalists look unpatriotic and disloyal. The party effectively died as a national force.

Madison's second term saw the war's difficult middle phase (the August 1814 British burning of Washington, the September 1814 defense of Baltimore that inspired The Star-Spangled Banner, Andrew Jackson's January 1815 New Orleans victory) and the postwar surge of nationalism (the Era of Good Feelings, the Second Bank of the United States, the Tariff of 1816). The Federalist Party's collapse opened a one-party period that would last until 1824.

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

War of 1812

The 1812-1815 war between the United States and Britain. Causes included British impressment, shipping interference, and support for Native American resistance. Ended with the December 24, 1814 Treaty of Ghent and Andrew Jackson's January 8, 1815 victory at New Orleans.

Hartford Convention

The December 15, 1814 - January 5, 1815 secret New England Federalist meeting in Hartford, Connecticut. Considered secession over the War of 1812; demanded constitutional amendments restricting federal war powers. Destroyed the Federalist Party as a national force.

Treaty of Ghent

The December 24, 1814 treaty ending the War of 1812. Negotiated by John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, and Albert Gallatin in Ghent, Belgium. Restored prewar boundaries; did not address impressment or shipping rights (both became moot after Napoleon's 1815 defeat).

Royal Navy blockade

British warships preventing American ships from foreign trade during the War of 1812. Crippled American shipping, especially in New England. American exports fell from $61M (1811) to $7M (1814).

Tecumseh's confederation

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

Battle of New Orleans

Andrew Jackson's January 8, 1815 victory over British forces near New Orleans. Fought after the Treaty of Ghent had technically ended the war (news had not yet crossed the Atlantic). The lopsided victory (71 American casualties vs. 2,037 British) made Jackson a national hero and reshaped the war's political legacy.

Second Inaugural Address

JAMES MADISON, MARCH 4, 1813

Madison took the oath in the chamber of the House of Representatives in Washington, DC. The Second Inaugural was delivered in the middle of the War of 1812. The address defended the war as just and necessary while acknowledging the difficulties of the first year. Madison framed the war as a vindication of American sovereignty against British insults dating back two decades.

> *"In assuming the responsibilities devolved by the trust which I am about for the second time to assume, I find no resource so consoling as that which presents itself in the safe results of our public councils and the experience of our country, which, like that of all republics, has its periods of severe trial. The war in which we are engaged was forced upon us by every consideration of duty to ourselves and to our country, after a long course of unrequited friendship and forbearance under wrongs which would have justified hostilities long before they were resorted to. To these wrongs the present war must be a vindication."*

Madison, "Second Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1813). Public domain.

The 1812 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did James Madison win in 1812?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who was the anti-war candidate Federalists supported in 1812?

( ) A. Rufus King
( ) B. DeWitt Clinton
( ) C. Thomas Pinckney
( ) D. John Marshall

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three of the five British actions Madison named as reasons for declaring war in June 1812.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Federalist Party support a Democratic-Republican (DeWitt Clinton) rather than running their own candidate in 1812?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Madison says in his Second Inaugural that the war "was forced upon us by every consideration of duty." Identify the phrase he uses to characterize American behavior before the war, and explain his framing.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1812 election map, identify the seven states (plus Maryland's split) Clinton carried. What economic feature do they share, and how does it relate to the British blockade?

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 would remain the closest re-election margin until Wilson's 1916 victory.

QUESTION 2

DeWitt Clinton. The mayor of New York City and nephew of Vice President George Clinton. A Democratic-Republican who had broken with Madison over the war.

Clinton ran as the de facto anti-war candidate without formally accepting a Federalist nomination. His running mate Jared Ingersoll was a Pennsylvania Federalist.

QUESTION 3

Accept any three of: (1) Impressment of American sailors (about 6,000 since 1803). (2) British shipping interference under the 1807 Orders in Council. (3) British support for Native American resistance, especially Tecumseh's confederation. (4) British harassment of American ships off the U.S. coast. (5) The long pattern of insults to American sovereignty.

Madison's June 1, 1812 war message catalogued these five British actions. AP-level students would need to recall multiple specific items.

QUESTION 4

The Federalist Party had been a regional New England party since 1800. They had no chance of winning the presidency with their own candidate. Supporting Clinton was strategic: he was a Democratic-Republican who had broken with Madison over the war, so he could attract anti-war Democratic-Republican voters that no Federalist candidate could reach. The fusion approach was the Federalists' only path to a 1812 victory. It nearly worked - Clinton came within 39 electoral votes of winning - but the South and West's wartime mobilization for Madison made the strategy ultimately unsuccessful.

The 1812 fusion ticket is one of the most-cited examples of cross-party single-issue coalitions in U.S. history.

QUESTION 5

Madison says American behavior before the war was "a long course of unrequited friendship and forbearance under wrongs which would have justified hostilities long before they were resorted to." The framing positions the U.S. as patient, just, and reluctant - and Britain as repeatedly aggressive. The political message is that the war is morally justified, not optional or chosen.

Madison's "long course of unrequited friendship" is one of the strongest just-war framings in American presidential rhetoric. AP students should recognize it as a deliberate rhetorical strategy to defend an unpopular ongoing war.

QUESTION 6

Clinton states: Connecticut (9 EV), Delaware (4), Massachusetts (22), New Hampshire (8), New Jersey (8), New York (29), Rhode Island (4), plus 5 of Maryland's 11 electors. Total 89 EV. Pattern: all are commercial-shipping or commercial-Northeast states. Connection to blockade: the Royal Navy blockade crippled their core economic activity (Atlantic trade). The blockade made New England commercial states permanently anti-war for the duration. The economic-political geography is almost perfectly correlated.

The 1812 Clinton coalition is geographically precise. AP students should be able to identify both the economic-state correlation and the structural significance.