1812

James Madison vs DeWitt Clinton

A 75-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%

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

1812: James Madison vs DeWitt Clinton

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 1812 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1812 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1812 that would shape an incumbent president's strategy during a wartime re-election campaign. For each, identify the specific 1809-1812 development most responsible.
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 1864 cycle. The election simultaneously confirmed the Democratic-Republican coalition's structural advantages and exposed the political costs of wartime governance. President James Madison had asked Congress for a war declaration on June 1, 1812. The war message catalogued five British actions justifying war: (1) impressment of American sailors (approximately 6,000 Americans had been forcibly recruited into the Royal Navy since 1803, with at least 30 percent of those impressed never returned to the U.S.); (2) British shipping interference under the 1807 Orders in Council, which authorized seizure of any neutral ship trading with Napoleonic France; (3) British support for Native American resistance on the western frontier, especially Tecumseh's confederation in the Old Northwest; (4) British harassment of American ships off the U.S. coast; and (5) the long pattern of insults to American sovereignty since 1803. Congress declared war June 18, 1812, by a strict partisan vote: 79-49 House, 19-13 Senate, with Democratic-Republicans for war and Federalists against. The vote was the most partisan congressional war declaration in U.S. history. The war began badly. Three U.S. attempts to invade Canada in 1812 - at Detroit (August, General William Hull), Niagara (October, General Stephen Van Rensselaer), and Lake Champlain (November, General Henry Dearborn) - all failed. Hull surrendered Detroit without firing a shot on August 16. The U.S. Navy won several single-ship duels (Constitution vs. Guerriere in August; United States vs. Macedonian in October; Constitution vs. Java in December) but the Royal Navy imposed an effective blockade on the American coast. New England, which had opposed

the war, refused to lend its state militias to the federal war effort. Massachusetts and Connecticut governors refused to comply with federal militia requisitions. The Massachusetts and Connecticut Federalist legislatures also refused to lend state funds to federal war loans.

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 Democratic-Republicans in New York combined with New England Federalists to support DeWitt Clinton of New York, the mayor of New York City and nephew of Vice President George Clinton (who had died in office April 20, 1812). DeWitt Clinton was a Democratic-Republican who had broken with Madison over the war. The Federalists held a quiet September 1812 New York City conference (the "Federalist Council") and agreed to support Clinton without formally endorsing him under their party label. Clinton's running mate was Jared Ingersoll of Pennsylvania, a Federalist. The fusion strategy was structurally innovative: it allowed the Federalist Party to back a candidate who could attract anti-war Democratic-Republican voters that no Federalist could reach.

Madison's campaign emphasized national honor, defense of American sovereignty, and the necessity of war to vindicate American independence. He selected 68-year-old Elbridge Gerry of Massachusetts as his running mate after Clinton's April death. Gerry was famous for the 1812 Massachusetts gerrymander (he had signed a partisan redistricting bill that produced the eponymous term).

The electoral count was 128 Madison to 89 Clinton - a 39-vote margin. Clinton carried New England minus Vermont (Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island - 43 EV), plus New York (29), New Jersey (8), Delaware (4), and 5 of Maryland's 11 electors. Madison carried Pennsylvania (25), Vermont (8), Virginia (25), the Carolinas, Georgia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, and Louisiana (newly admitted), plus 6 of Maryland's electors. The 1812 result was the closest U.S. presidential re-election to that point in history; it would not be surpassed until Wilson-Hughes 1916 (277-254).

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 and demanded constitutional amendments restricting federal war powers (including amendments requiring two-thirds congressional majorities for declarations of war, restricting embargoes, and limiting any single state from holding the presidency for more than two consecutive cycles - aimed directly at the Virginia Dynasty). The convention's timing was catastrophic: news of the December 24, 1814 Treaty of Ghent (ending the war) and Andrew Jackson's January 8, 1815 victory at New Orleans reached Washington just before the Hartford Convention's commissioners did. The Federalist demands arrived simultaneously with celebrations of the war's victorious end. The party was politically destroyed as a national force. 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 1812 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

Impressment

The British Royal Navy practice of forcibly recruiting American sailors into British warships during the Napoleonic Wars. Approximately 6,000 Americans were impressed between 1803 and 1812. The most concrete U.S. grievance leading to war.

War Hawks

The faction of young Democratic-Republican congressmen (Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, Felix Grundy) who pushed for war with Britain in 1811-12. Their leadership of the Twelfth Congress made the war declaration politically possible despite divisions in the broader Democratic-Republican coalition.

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. The convention's timing (just as the war ended victoriously) destroyed the Federalist Party.

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 crossed the Atlantic). The lopsided U.S. victory (71 American casualties vs. 2,037 British) made Jackson a national hero and reshaped the war's political legacy.

Royal Navy blockade

British warships preventing American ships from foreign trade during the War of 1812. Crippled American shipping; American exports fell from $61M (1811) to $7M (1814). Concentrated economic damage in New England commercial states.

Tecumseh's confederation

The Native American military alliance Shawnee leader Tecumseh built in the Old Northwest before the War of 1812. The November 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe (between Tecumseh's brother Tenskwatawa and William Henry Harrison) provided one of Madison's casus belli arguments.

Treaty of Ghent

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

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, after the disastrous 1812 campaigns and before the more successful 1813 campaigns. 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 (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 1812?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who was the anti-war fusion 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? What does the strategy tell you about the Federalist coalition by 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 the strategic political function of the framing.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

The Federalist Party briefly recovered in 1808 (Embargo Act) and again in 1812 (war damage), then collapsed permanently after 1815. Identify the specific 1814-1815 event that produced the final collapse.

QUESTION 7 · 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 this map track the Royal Navy blockade's political effects?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

128. Madison 128; Clinton 89. The 39-vote margin made it the closest U.S. presidential re-election to that point - a record that would stand until Wilson 1916.

The 1812 result demonstrated the Democratic-Republican coalition's structural strength even in wartime adversity.

QUESTION 2

DeWitt Clinton. The mayor of New York City and nephew of Vice President George Clinton. A Democratic-Republican who broke 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 should recall multiple specific items.

QUESTION 4

The Federalist Party had been reduced to a regional New England party by 1812 and 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 no Federalist could reach. The strategy tells you the Federalist coalition by 1812 was structurally incapable of national victory; the party survived only by piggybacking on Democratic-Republican intra-party divisions.

The 1812 fusion ticket is the textbook case of a minor party leveraging the major party's intra-party divisions. AP students should recognize the structural significance.

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 strategic function is to defend an unpopular ongoing war as morally justified and externally forced rather than as a chosen U.S. policy. By framing the war as defensive vindication of long-suffering U.S. virtue rather than as offensive territorial expansion, Madison made it harder for Federalist opposition to position him as the aggressor.

AP students should be able to engage Madison's "unrequited friendship" framing analytically. The strategic political function (defending an unpopular war by framing it as forced) is central to wartime presidential rhetoric.

QUESTION 6

The Hartford Convention (December 15, 1814 - January 5, 1815). New England Federalists secretly considered secession over the War of 1812 and demanded constitutional amendments restricting federal war powers. The convention's timing was catastrophic: news of the December 24, 1814 Treaty of Ghent (ending the war) and Andrew Jackson's January 8, 1815 New Orleans victory reached Washington just before the Hartford commissioners arrived with their demands. The Federalist demands arrived simultaneously with celebrations of the war's victorious end. The party was politically destroyed as a national force; it would never win another presidential election.

The Hartford Convention is one of the clearest examples of a minor party's timing destroying its own political viability. AP students should know the structural significance.

QUESTION 7

Clinton states: Connecticut (9), 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. Economic feature: all are commercial-shipping or commercial-Northeast states. Blockade tracking: the Royal Navy blockade crippled their core economic activity (Atlantic trade). American exports fell from $61M (1811) to $7M (1814) - the worst contraction concentrated in these states. The map is almost perfectly correlated with blockade damage. The political-geography correlation tells you wartime policy can produce regional political backlash with extreme precision.

The 1812 map is one of the cleanest examples of trade-damage politics in U.S. history. AP students should be able to read the map as a precise economic-political indicator.

Discussion prompts

1 The 1812 election was the only U.S. presidential cycle held entirely during a major war until 1864. Identify two specific structural ways a wartime cycle differs from a peacetime one, and one specific 1812 example of each.

2 Madison's framing of the War of 1812 as defensive vindication of American sovereignty was widely accepted at the time but is now contested by historians who point to U.S. territorial ambitions toward Canada. Identify two pieces of evidence supporting each view.