3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

2008

Barack Obama vs John McCain

A 35-minute lesson on the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Modern Polarization	ELECTORAL VOTES 538 total
WINNER Barack Obama (Democratic) · 365 EV	RUNNER-UP John McCain (Republican) · 173 EV
KEY ISSUE 2008 financial crisis; Iraq War; healthcare reform; historic racial barrier	TURNOUT 61.6%

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

2008: Barack Obama vs John McCain

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a country has a really big problem, many people start to ask: who is the right person to fix this? What kind of qualities would you want a leader to have during a crisis?
15 min	**Reading**	The 2008 election was held during the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression. It was also the election that made Barack Obama the first Black president in American history. The Democratic primary contest in 2007-2008 was one of the most competitive ever. Senator Hillary Clinton of New York entered as the heavy favorite. She had been First Lady from 1993 to 2001 and was widely seen as the next Democratic president. But a first-term senator from Illinois named Barack Obama announced his candidacy in February 2007. He was 47 years old. His father was from Kenya and his mother was from Kansas. He had served in the Illinois state senate and then in the U.S. Senate. His 2004 keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention had made him a national figure. Obama won the Iowa caucuses in January 2008 - the first Democratic contest. The Clinton-Obama primary fight then continued for six more months. Obama eventually won the nomination after the Democratic National Convention in August. He picked Senator Joe Biden of Delaware as his running mate. The Republican nominee was Senator John McCain of Arizona. McCain was 72 years old, a former Navy fighter pilot who had been shot down over Vietnam and held as a prisoner of war for five and a half years. He had run unsuccessfully against George W. Bush in 2000. He chose Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. The campaign was dominated by two events. The first was the September 2008 financial crisis. Investment bank Lehman Brothers collapsed on September 15. Stock markets plunged. Banks froze lending. The Bush administration and Congress passed a $700 billion bank-rescue plan called TARP. The Obama campaign blamed Republican deregulation for the crisis; the McCain campaign's mixed response (he suspended his campaign and demanded a White House emergency meeting that produced no agreement) hurt him. The second event was Obama's use of the Internet. The Obama for America campaign was the first to use online tools (email lists, social media, online fundraising) at full scale. Three million donors gave $750 million - more than any campaign in

		history at the time. Most donations were small (under $100) and online. On election night - November 4, 2008 - Obama won 365 electoral votes to McCain's 173. He carried 28 states including Florida, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, and Indiana - states that had voted Republican in most recent cycles. He won 52.9 percent of the popular vote to McCain's 45.7 percent. Obama's acceptance speech in Chicago's Grant Park drew a crowd of about 250,000 and was televised live around the world. Obama's presidency dealt with the financial crisis (the 2009 stimulus package), passed the 2010 Affordable Care Act (which extended health insurance to about 20 million more Americans), ordered the 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden, and ended major U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. He was re-elected in 2012.
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 2008 Election

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Key words

Financial crisis A time when banks have severe trouble and many people lose jobs, homes, and savings. The 2008 financial crisis began with the September collapse of Lehman Brothers and was the worst since the Great Depression.

Bank bailout When the government uses public money to rescue banks in trouble. The 2008 Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) authorized $700 billion to rescue banks.

Primary election	An election within a political party to choose its nominee for the general election. The 2008 Obama-Clinton Democratic primary contest lasted six months and was one of the most competitive in history.
Caucus	A meeting where party members gather to choose delegates to the national convention. Iowa's Democratic caucuses, held in January 2008, were Obama's first major victory.
Online fundraising	Raising campaign money through donations made on the Internet. The 2008 Obama campaign was the first to use online fundraising at massive scale, raising $750 million from 3 million donors.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Barack Obama win in 2008?

( ) A. 256
( ) B. 286
( ) C. 365
( ) D. 395

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the 2008 financial crisis, and how did it affect the campaign?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the 2008 Obama campaign use the Internet differently than earlier campaigns?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Obama's 2008 victory historically important?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

365. Obama won 365 electoral votes; McCain won 173. The popular vote was 52.9 percent to 45.7 percent.

Obama's 365-vote total was the largest Democratic electoral count since Bill Clinton's 379 in 1996. He flipped Florida, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, Indiana, Iowa, New Mexico, Colorado, and Nevada from the 2004 Bush map.

QUESTION 2

The 2008 financial crisis was the worst banking and economic crisis since the Great Depression. Investment bank Lehman Brothers collapsed on September 15, 2008. Stock markets plunged and banks froze lending. The Bush administration passed a $700 billion bank-rescue plan (TARP). The crisis hurt McCain because he was the Republican candidate and Republicans had controlled the White House during the crisis; the Obama campaign blamed Republican deregulation. McCain's mixed response - he suspended his campaign and demanded a White House emergency meeting that produced no agreement - made him look uncertain.

The 2008 financial crisis was the largest external shock to a presidential campaign since the 1979 hostage crisis. It moved the polls decisively in Obama's favor in late September.

QUESTION 3

The 2008 Obama campaign was the first to use online tools at full scale - email lists, social media, online fundraising, and online volunteer mobilization. Three million donors gave $750 million, with most donations small (under $100) and online. This was a brand new model: the campaign did not have to rely heavily on a small number of wealthy donors. Every subsequent campaign has followed Obama's 2008 playbook.

The Obama for America campaign reshaped American politics by demonstrating that online tools could be the primary fundraising and organizing infrastructure. The model has dominated every cycle since.

QUESTION 4

Barack Obama was the first Black American ever elected president. The history of American slavery and segregation had blocked Black Americans from holding the highest office for almost 200 years. Obama's election - 143 years after the end of slavery and 43 years after the 1965 Voting Rights Act - was a milestone that many people had not expected to see in their lifetime.

The historical weight of Obama's 2008 victory is best understood as the culmination of a long arc that includes Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the civil rights movement, and the post-1965 Voting Rights Act era.