2008

Barack Obama vs John McCain

A 50-minute lesson on the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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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2008: Barack Obama vs John McCain

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 structural conditions that you think would make Americans willing to elect a candidate who breaks a long-standing demographic barrier. For each, suggest one specific 2007-2008 development that fits the pattern.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2008 election was the largest Democratic victory since 1996 and the moment Barack Obama became the first Black American elected to the presidency. It was also the election held in the depths of the worst U.S. financial crisis since the Great Depression. The two stories - the historic candidacy and the financial collapse - converged in ways that reshaped American electoral politics for the next decade. The Democratic primary contest in 2007-2008 was the most competitive in modern history. Senator Hillary Clinton entered as the prohibitive favorite. She had served eight years as First Lady (1993-2001) and was completing her second term as senator from New York. Most Democratic establishment figures - elected officials, donors, and consultants - had endorsed Clinton early. Then a first-term senator from Illinois announced his candidacy in February 2007. Barack Obama was 47 years old, the son of a Kenyan father and Kansan mother, raised in Hawaii and Indonesia. His 2004 keynote address at the Democratic National Convention ("There is not a liberal America and a conservative America - there is the United States of America") had made him a national figure. His campaign's explicit theme - change you can believe in - positioned him against the Clinton-era Democratic establishment. Obama upset Clinton in the Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008. The Clinton-Obama primary then ran for five more months across all fifty states. Obama narrowly won the delegate count by mobilizing caucus states and Black voters in the South. The Democratic National Convention in Denver in August nominated Obama; he selected Senator Joe Biden of Delaware as his running mate to address a perceived experience gap on foreign policy. The Republican nominee was Senator John McCain of Arizona, 72 years old. McCain was a former Navy fighter pilot who had been shot down over North Vietnam in 1967 and held as a prisoner of war for five and a half years. He had run unsuccessfully against George W. Bush in 2000. McCain selected Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate on August 29 - the first woman on a Republican national ticket. The

selection initially energized the conservative base but became controversial when Palin's interviews exposed gaps in her policy knowledge.

The campaign's defining event was the September 2008 financial crisis. Investment bank Lehman Brothers collapsed on September 15. American International Group (AIG), the world's largest insurance company, required a federal rescue on September 16. Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke and Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson briefed congressional leaders on September 18 that the entire U.S. financial system was about to fail. Congress passed the $700 billion Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) on October 3. McCain suspended his campaign on September 24 and demanded a White House emergency meeting; the meeting produced no agreement and his suspension was viewed as theatrical rather than substantive. Obama declined to suspend and said the country needed both candidates to remain visible.

The campaign's other defining feature was Obama's online infrastructure. The Obama for America campaign was the first to use online tools at full scale: email lists, social media (Facebook, MySpace, YouTube), online fundraising, and online volunteer recruitment. The campaign raised $750 million from 3 million donors, with most donations small (under $100) and online. The model bypassed traditional party fundraising channels and reshaped how every subsequent campaign would operate.

On November 4, 2008, Obama won 365 electoral votes to McCain's 173. He won 52.9 percent of the popular vote to McCain's 45.7 percent - the largest Democratic share since Lyndon Johnson's 61.1 percent in 1964. Obama flipped Florida, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, Indiana, Iowa, New Mexico, Colorado, and Nevada from the 2004 map. He was the first Democrat since Jimmy Carter in 1976 to win Virginia, North Carolina, and Indiana. The Black voter turnout reached 65 percent - a historic high. White voter share fell to 74 percent of the electorate, down from 77 percent in 2004 and 81 percent in 2000, a long-term demographic trend favoring the Democratic coalition.

Obama's 2009 inaugural address acknowledged the multiple crises he inherited. His first term delivered the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (the $787 billion stimulus), the 2010 Affordable Care Act extending health insurance to about 20 million additional Americans, the 2010 Dodd-Frank financial reform, the 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden, and the formal end of major U.S. combat operations in Iraq in December 2011. He was re-elected in 2012.

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

Financial crisis

A severe disruption in banking and credit markets. The 2008 crisis began with the September collapse of Lehman Brothers and required a $700 billion federal rescue plan. The worst U.S. financial crisis since the Great Depression.

Primary election

An election within a political party to choose its nominee for the general election. The 2008 Obama-Clinton Democratic primary was one of the most competitive primary contests in U.S. history, running for five months across all fifty states.

Online fundraising

Raising campaign money through donations made on the Internet. The 2008 Obama campaign raised $750 million from 3 million donors - the first campaign to use online tools at full scale.

TARP

The Troubled Asset Relief Program, passed October 3, 2008. Authorized $700 billion in federal funds to purchase troubled assets from banks and recapitalize the U.S. financial system. Highly unpopular at the time but is credited with stabilizing the banking system.

Caucus

A party meeting where members gather to choose delegates. Caucus states (Iowa, Nevada, Kansas, Maine, etc.) were structurally important to Obama's 2008 primary victory because they rewarded ground-game organizing rather than name recognition.

Demographic realignment

A durable shift in voting patterns by race, age, or education. The 2008 Obama coalition (younger voters, college-educated whites, Hispanic voters, Black voters at historic-high turnout) was a partial realignment that consolidated by 2012.

Election Night Victory Speech

BARACK OBAMA, NOVEMBER 4, 2008

Obama delivered this speech at Chicago's Grant Park before a crowd of approximately 250,000. The address was televised live around the world. The "ours can be" passage is widely cited as one of the speech's most resonant moments.

> *"If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible, who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer. It's the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches in numbers this nation has never seen, by people who waited three hours and four hours, many for the first time in their lives, because they believed that this time must be different, that their voice could be that difference."*

Obama, "Election Night Victory Speech" (Chicago, IL, November 4, 2008). Public domain.

The 2008 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Barack Obama win in 2008?

( ) A. 286
( ) B. 332
( ) C. 365
( ) D. 391

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which investment bank's September 15, 2008 collapse triggered the worst phase of the financial crisis?

( ) A. Goldman Sachs
( ) B. Lehman Brothers
( ) C. Bear Stearns
( ) D. Morgan Stanley

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific online tools the 2008 Obama campaign used at large scale and what each accomplished.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did McCain's September 24, 2008 decision to suspend his campaign and demand a White House emergency meeting backfire politically?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Obama says in the excerpt that the result is "the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches." What political message was he sending about who had created the victory?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 2008 election map, identify five states Obama carried that George W. Bush had won in 2004. What pattern do they share, and what does it tell you about the Obama coalition?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

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

Obama's 365-vote total was the largest Democratic electoral count since Bill Clinton's 379 in 1996. He flipped 9 states from the 2004 map.

QUESTION 2

Lehman Brothers. The investment bank filed for bankruptcy on September 15, 2008 - the largest bankruptcy in U.S. history at the time.

The Lehman collapse triggered a global liquidity freeze. AIG's rescue came the next day. The week of September 15-22 is now treated as the inflection point of the entire 2008 crisis.

QUESTION 3

Accept any three of: (1) Email lists - mobilized millions of supporters with personalized messages. (2) Online fundraising - raised $750 million from 3 million donors, mostly small. (3) Social media (Facebook, MySpace) - built communities around the campaign. (4) YouTube - distributed campaign speeches and ads outside paid TV. (5) Online volunteer recruitment - signed up local volunteers in every state. (6) MyBO platform - allowed supporters to host their own campaign events.

The Obama 2008 online infrastructure was the first to bring all these tools together at scale. Each tool has since become standard in every campaign.

QUESTION 4

McCain announced he was suspending his campaign on September 24, 2008 and demanded a White House emergency meeting on the financial crisis. He flew to Washington on September 25. The meeting on September 26 produced no agreement. McCain's suspension was viewed by many voters as theatrical and uncertain rather than presidential. By contrast, Obama maintained his campaign schedule and said the country needed both candidates to remain visible. Polling shifted decisively in Obama's favor in the days after the suspension.

The McCain suspension is a textbook case of how an attempt to demonstrate decisiveness can backfire when the underlying action looks improvised. It is one of the most-criticized strategic decisions of the 2008 cycle.

QUESTION 5

Obama was crediting his voters - especially first-time voters - rather than the campaign organization or himself for the victory. The framing emphasized democratic participation and individual civic action as the source of political change. The audience was both his own supporters (validating their effort) and skeptics (showing that the result was made by ordinary citizens, not Washington insiders).

Obama's 2008 rhetoric consistently emphasized voter agency. The framing was central to the change-you-can-believe-in theme and to the Obama for America organizing model.

QUESTION 6

Accept any five of: Florida (27 EV), Ohio (20), Virginia (13), North Carolina (15), Indiana (11), Iowa (7), New Mexico (5), Colorado (9), Nevada (5). Pattern: a mix of Sun Belt growth states (Florida, Virginia, North Carolina, Nevada, Colorado), Rust Belt manufacturing states (Ohio, Indiana, Iowa), and a Mountain West/Southwest state (New Mexico). The Obama coalition combined younger voters, college-educated suburbanites, Hispanic voters, and Black voters at historic-high turnout in ways that crossed the old red-state / blue-state divide.

The 2008 coalition was structurally different from the New Deal Democratic coalition. AP students should recognize the demographic shift toward younger, more educated, and more diverse voters.