2008

Barack Obama vs John McCain

A 75-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%

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

2008: Barack Obama vs John McCain

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 2008 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-2008 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: list two ways a major financial crisis during a presidential campaign could shift voter preferences. Identify which party you think generally benefits when the economy collapses on an incumbent's watch, and why.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2008 election sent Barack Obama, a first-term U.S. senator from Illinois, to the White House as the first African American president. Obama defeated Republican Senator John McCain of Arizona 365 electoral votes to 173. The race transformed in mid-September when the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers triggered a global financial panic; McCain briefly suspended his campaign to attend Washington negotiations over the bank bailout, a move widely judged as politically damaging. Obama assembled a new coalition that included a record share of young voters, African American turnout that exceeded white turnout for the first time in U.S. history, and a wave of suburban Republican defectors. He flipped Indiana, North Carolina, and Virginia — three states no Democrat had carried in decades — along with Florida and Ohio. His campaign also pioneered grassroots online fundraising and field organization, raising over $750 million from millions of small donors. 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 2008 election tells you about the Modern Polarization 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

Financial crisis
The September 2008 collapse of major U.S. and global financial institutions triggered by the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and a wave of subprime mortgage defaults.

TARP
The Troubled Asset Relief Program -- a $700 billion federal authorization passed in October 2008 to stabilize the banking system by purchasing distressed assets.

Coalition realignment
A durable shift in which demographic groups support which party. The 2008 Obama coalition included young, non-white, and college-educated suburban voters at unprecedented combined share.

Get-out-the-vote
Campaign operations focused on turning out identified supporters on Election Day. The 2008 Obama field organization was the largest and most data-driven in U.S. history at that point.

Microtargeting
Campaign messaging that uses voter-file data to tailor outreach to individual households based on predicted preferences. Pioneered at scale by the 2004 Bush and 2008 Obama campaigns.

Subprime mortgage
A home loan extended to borrowers with poor credit. Mass defaults on subprime mortgages in 2007-2008 cascaded through securitized assets and triggered the financial crisis.

Inaugural Address (excerpt)

BARACK OBAMA, JANUARY 20, 2009

Obama took office four months after the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy and amid the worst financial crisis since the 1930s. His inaugural was unusual in directly cataloging the crisis rather than projecting confidence first.

> *"That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred. Our economy is badly weakened, a consequence of greed and irresponsibility on the part of some, but also our collective failure to make hard choices and prepare the nation for a new age. Homes have been lost, jobs shed, businesses shuttered. Our health care is too costly, our schools fail too many -- and each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet."*

Obama, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, January 20, 2009). Public domain.

The 2008 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 Barack Obama win in 2008?

( ) A. 303
( ) B. 332
( ) C. 365
( ) D. 413

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify two states Obama flipped from Republican to Democratic in 2008 that had not voted Democratic for at least three previous presidential cycles.

QUESTION 3 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which event in mid-September 2008 fundamentally changed the trajectory of the campaign?

( ) A. The first presidential debate
( ) B. The bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and ensuing financial panic
( ) C. A natural disaster
( ) D. A change in polling methodology

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

List two specific ways the Obama campaign used the internet differently than prior presidential campaigns.

QUESTION 5 · MAP-READ

On the 2008 state map, identify three Southern or border-state Obama wins. What does the geographic distribution of those wins reveal about the limits of the new Democratic coalition?

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify two specific elements of the crisis that Obama names in the excerpt. Quote each verbatim.

QUESTION 7 · SHORT-ANSWER

Roosevelt in his 1933 inaugural described the Depression in abstract terms ("fear itself") to enable bold federal action. Obama in this 2009 excerpt itemizes specific failures (jobs, housing, schools, energy). Explain in two sentences why a campaign built on grassroots online organizing might have benefited from the itemized approach over the abstract one. Cite a phrase from the Obama excerpt.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

365

Obama won 365 electoral votes to McCain's 173. He carried the popular vote 52.9 to 45.7 percent — the largest popular-vote majority for any Democrat since Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

QUESTION 2

Accept two of: Indiana (last Dem 1964), North Carolina (last Dem 1976), Virginia (last Dem 1964), Florida (last Dem 1996), Ohio (last Dem 1996). Indiana, Virginia, and North Carolina are the longest-streak flips.

Indiana would revert in 2012; Virginia stayed Democratic; North Carolina has oscillated. Only Virginia represents a durable realignment from the 2008 map.

QUESTION 3

The bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and ensuing financial panic

Lehman filed Chapter 11 on September 15, 2008. The next two weeks saw the largest stock market falls since 1987, a federal bailout of AIG, and TARP negotiations that dominated the news for months.

QUESTION 4

Accept two of: small-donor online fundraising (over $750 million raised, much of it in sub-$200 donations); supporter-driven social media organizing on a brand-new platform (MyBO); microtargeted online ads; data-driven canvassing and turnout modeling at unprecedented precision; in-house custom donation and volunteer software; rapid response via email lists to millions of supporters.

The Obama 2008 operation set the technical template for every campaign that followed — including the Trump 2016 operation that used many of the same tactics with very different content.

QUESTION 5

Obama carried Florida, North Carolina, Virginia (the Southern flips) plus Indiana (a border-Midwest flip). He lost every other Southern state and lost Kentucky, Tennessee, and Arkansas by larger margins than John Kerry had in 2004 — actually moving in the opposite direction in Appalachia.

The 2008 Obama coalition was strongest in the New South — diverse, college-educated, suburban — and weaker in Appalachian whites than the Kerry coalition. This split previewed the 2010s realignment.

QUESTION 6

Accept any two verbatim phrases from the catalog of crises in the excerpt -- examples: "jobs shed," "businesses shuttered," "Homes have been lost," "Our health care is too costly," "our schools fail too many," "the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet." Award credit for any pair of exact quotations that identify distinct elements of the catalogued crisis.

The catalog structure is itself the rhetorical choice; students should be quoting from it directly.

QUESTION 7

Accept any of: (1) by naming specific elements, Obama spoke to specific constituencies and allowed each to recognize their own situation in the address -- useful for a campaign that microtargeted by issue; (2) the catalog created multiple entry points for follow-up speeches in his first 100 days, each of which could anchor on a specific item; (3) it modeled the campaign's "your stories" frame at the inaugural level -- individual voters connecting concrete struggles to a political project. Any quoted excerpt phrase the student can anchor to a specific constituency or follow-up policy is acceptable.

The 2008 Obama operation's microtargeting infrastructure shaped the speechwriting; the text addresses subgroups in turn rather than offering one unified abstraction.

Discussion prompts

1. Obama’s coalition was younger, more diverse, and more college-educated than any prior Democratic coalition. Identify one structural reason that coalition formed when it did, and one risk to maintaining it over multiple cycles.

2. The financial crisis broke in September 2008 and almost certainly shifted the race. Identify one piece of evidence that the crisis was decisive and one piece of evidence that Obama was likely to win even without it.

3. McCain selected Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate — a high-risk pick designed to energize the conservative base. Identify one benefit and one cost of that selection, and assess whether the overall calculus paid off.