AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

2008

Barack Obama vs John McCain

A 105-minute lesson on the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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

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3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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2008: Barack Obama vs John McCain

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two long-term demographic trends in the U.S. electorate between 1980 and 2008 that would have made an Obama-type coalition possible regardless of the specific candidate. For each, identify the specific 2008 cycle development most responsible for activating it.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 2008 election was the most demographically consequential since 1932. It produced the first Black American presidency, the first Democratic popular-majority since 1976, and a coalition - younger voters, college-educated whites, Hispanic voters, and Black voters at historic-high turnout - that would dominate Democratic electoral strategy for the next decade. It was also held during the largest external economic shock to a U.S. presidential campaign since the 1979 Iran hostage crisis. The two stories converged in late September 2008 in ways that reshaped both parties' coalitions. The context was a Republican Party in structural trouble. The Bush administration's job approval had collapsed to the high 20s by 2008. The Iraq War, launched in 2003 on faulty WMD intelligence, had become deeply unpopular as American casualties mounted and the cost passed $700 billion. Hurricane Katrina in August 2005 had exposed federal incompetence and racial-equity failures. The 2006 midterm elections had cost Republicans the House and Senate. The 2008 Republican primary was a contest among candidates who all tried to distance themselves from Bush while preserving the Republican coalition. The Democratic primary contest was the most competitive in modern history. Senator Hillary Clinton entered with overwhelming establishment support - elected officials, donors, consultants, and the major endorsement networks had largely committed early. Then Senator Barack Obama announced his candidacy in February 2007. Obama had served seven years in the Illinois state senate (1997-2004) and three years in the U.S. Senate. His 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address had made him a national figure. The campaign theme - change you can believe in - positioned Obama against the Clinton-era Democratic establishment and offered a generational appeal echoing John F. Kennedy in 1960. Obama upset Clinton in the Iowa caucuses on January 3, 2008. The Clinton-Obama

primary then ran across all fifty states. Obama's primary strategy targeted caucus states (where ground-game organizing mattered most) and Black voters in the South (where the Clinton brand had been weakened by Bill Clinton's 2008 primary remarks comparing Obama's South Carolina victory to Jesse Jackson's 1988 win). The Reverend Jeremiah Wright controversy in March 2008 - when video of Obama's pastor making anti-American sermons surfaced - threatened to derail the campaign. Obama's March 18 "A More Perfect Union" speech in Philadelphia, which directly addressed race in American history, is widely credited with saving the candidacy. He clinched the nomination on June 3 and selected Senator Joe Biden of Delaware as his running mate.

The Republican nominee was Senator John McCain of Arizona, 72 years old. McCain was a Navy fighter pilot who had been shot down over North Vietnam in 1967 and held as a POW for five and a half years. He had run unsuccessfully against George W. Bush in the 2000 Republican primary. McCain selected Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate on August 29. Palin's selection initially energized the conservative base but became controversial when subsequent interviews exposed substantial gaps in her policy knowledge. The Tina Fey Saturday Night Live parodies of Palin entered the cultural mainstream by mid-October.

The campaign's defining event was the September 2008 financial crisis. Investment bank Lehman Brothers collapsed on September 15. AIG 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 on October 3. McCain suspended his campaign on September 24 and demanded a White House emergency meeting; the meeting on September 26 produced no agreement and his suspension was viewed as theatrical. Obama declined to suspend and maintained his campaign schedule. Polling shifted decisively in Obama's favor in the days after the suspension; by October 1 he led every major poll outside the margin of error.

The Obama for America campaign was the first to use online tools at full scale. The campaign raised $750 million from 3 million donors. Most donations were small (under $100) and online. The Obama campaign also pioneered the use of social media (Facebook, MySpace, YouTube), email-list mobilization, the MyBO supporter platform that let local volunteers host their own events, and data-driven micro-targeting that segmented voters by combinations of demographic, behavioral, and political variables. Every subsequent presidential campaign has followed the Obama 2008 model.

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. The map represented a major coalition shift. Obama flipped Florida, Ohio, Virginia, North Carolina, Indiana, Iowa,

		New Mexico, Colorado, and Nevada from the 2004 Bush map. He was the first Democrat to carry Virginia since Lyndon Johnson in 1964; the first to carry North Carolina since Jimmy Carter in 1976. The Black voter turnout reached 65 percent - a historic high, and a critical share of the swing in Virginia and North Carolina. Hispanic voters supported Obama 67 to 31. Voters under 30 supported Obama 66 to 32. White voters with college degrees supported Obama 47 to 51; Bush had won them 53 to 46 in 2004. The college-degree-divide pattern that would dominate every subsequent cycle was visible in the 2008 results. Obama's 2009-2017 presidency delivered the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 ($787 billion stimulus), the Affordable Care Act of 2010 (covering about 20 million additional Americans), Dodd-Frank financial reform (2010), the May 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden, the end of major U.S. combat operations in Iraq (December 2011), and the Paris Climate Agreement (December 2015). His political coalition crystallized into what political scientists call the Obama coalition - the same demographic alignment that elected Joe Biden in 2020. The post-2008 backlash also produced the Tea Party movement (2009-2014), which reshaped the Republican Party in ways that led directly to the 2016 Trump nomination.
20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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.

Obama coalition

The demographic alignment that elected Obama in 2008 and 2012: younger voters, college-educated whites, Hispanic voters, and Black voters at historic-high turnout. The same coalition elected Biden in 2020.

Caucus state

A state that uses caucus meetings (rather than secret-ballot primaries) to select party delegates. Obama's 2008 primary strategy disproportionately targeted caucus states because they rewarded ground-game organizing over name recognition and TV advertising.

Microtargeting

The use of data analytics to segment voters into very small demographic, behavioral, and political groups for tailored political outreach. The 2008 Obama campaign was the first to use microtargeting at presidential-scale.

Affordable Care Act

The 2010 federal health-insurance law (informally called Obamacare). Extended insurance coverage to about 20 million additional Americans through Medicaid expansion, insurance-marketplace subsidies, and consumer protections. The largest expansion of American health insurance since Medicare in 1965.

Troubled Asset Relief Program

TARP. The October 3, 2008 federal law authorizing $700 billion to purchase troubled bank assets and recapitalize the U.S. financial system. Politically toxic at the time; credited with stabilizing banking but criticized for moral hazard and for not assisting underwater homeowners.

Tea Party

The 2009-2014 conservative political movement that emerged in opposition to the Obama administration, the 2009 stimulus, and the 2010 Affordable Care Act. Reshaped the Republican Party by demanding ideological purity and pushing it toward populist anti-establishment positions.

A More Perfect Union speech

Obama's March 18, 2008 speech in Philadelphia addressing the Jeremiah Wright controversy. Directly engaged the history of race in American politics in a way unprecedented in modern presidential campaigning. Widely credited with saving his candidacy.

College-degree divide

The polarization of American voting patterns by educational attainment. By 2008, college-educated white voters were shifting Democratic while non-college whites were shifting Republican. The divide has widened in every subsequent cycle.

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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Election Night Victory Speech

BARACK OBAMA, NOVEMBER 4, 2008

“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.

SOURCE B

A More Perfect Union (Philadelphia speech on race)

BARACK OBAMA, MARCH 18, 2008

“I have asserted a firm conviction - a conviction rooted in my faith in God and my faith in the American people - that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union. For the African-American community, that path means embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past. It means continuing to insist on a full measure of justice in every aspect of American life. But it also means binding our particular grievances - for better health care, and better schools, and better jobs - to the larger aspirations of all Americans.”

Obama, "A More Perfect Union" (Philadelphia, PA, March 18, 2008). Public domain.

The 2008 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Obama's victory speech) that credits voters with producing the historic result. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Philadelphia speech) that articulates Obama's framework for engaging the history of race in America. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources are Obama speeches but they perform different rhetorical work. Identify the specific work each source does.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B was delivered in March, Source A in November. What does the temporal ordering tell you about how the framing of race in the 2008 campaign evolved across the cycle?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B describes "embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past." Identify one specific aspect of the 2008 campaign's strategic positioning that reflected this framework, and explain the connection.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The September 15, 2008 collapse of which investment bank marked the beginning of the worst phase of the financial crisis?

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

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The post-2008 conservative political movement that reshaped the Republican Party in 2009-2014 was the:

( ) A. Moral Majority
( ) B. Christian Coalition
( ) C. Tea Party
( ) D. Freedom Caucus

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 2008 result structural, contingent, or continuation? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Obama's Philadelphia speech (Source B, March 2008) directly engages the long history of American race as a precondition for his candidacy. His Election Night speech (Source A, November 2008) frames the result as the resolution of that history through ordinary democratic participation. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 2007-2009 period, evaluate the extent to which the 2008 result represented a structural shift in American racial politics, a contingent political moment enabled by the financial crisis, or a continuation of the demographic realignment already underway since the 1990s. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the structural-vs-contingent-vs-continuation axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Lehman collapse, the TARP vote, the Wright controversy, the Iowa caucus, the McCain suspension. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent - structural vs. contingent vs. continuation - rather than treating them as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "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", "their voice could be that difference". The first phrase is the most resonant.

Obama's framing systematically credits voters rather than candidates. The "stretched around schools and churches" image is one of the most quoted passages from the speech.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "embracing the burdens of our past without becoming victims of our past", "binding our particular grievances ... to the larger aspirations of all Americans", "we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice". The first phrase is the cleanest articulation of Obama's framework.

The "embracing burdens without becoming victims" framework is Obama's most-quoted statement on the philosophy of American racial reconciliation. AP students should be able to identify it as a deliberately constructed political concept.

QUESTION 3

Source B engages the history of race in American politics directly, defending Obama's legitimacy as a candidate in the face of the Wright controversy. Source A frames the November result as a vindication of democratic participation - the work of ordinary voters rather than the work of historical reckoning. The two sources together show how Obama's campaign moved from a defensive engagement with race to a celebratory framing of voter agency without ever fully resolving the tension between them.

The two sources represent two distinct rhetorical strategies for handling race in a high-stakes campaign. AP students should recognize them as complementary rather than redundant.

QUESTION 4

In March the campaign was on defense, fighting to preserve viability against the Wright controversy. By November the campaign was on offense, framing the result as historic without dwelling on the racial-history question that had defined the spring. The temporal ordering tells you that the 2008 campaign deliberately did not lead with race - it engaged race only when forced to, and then quickly returned to its primary frame of voter agency. The strategic choice was politically successful in 2008 but left unresolved questions that would resurface in subsequent cycles.

The strategic choice to engage race minimally is one of the most-discussed features of the Obama 2008 campaign. AP students should be able to identify it as a deliberate choice with costs as well as benefits.

QUESTION 5

Accept any of: (1) Obama's deliberate choice not to lead with race in his campaign rhetoric. (2) The Obama for America campaign's message framework of generic American renewal rather than Black political mobilization. (3) Obama's economic populism (focused on the middle class generally rather than on race-specific economic grievances). (4) Obama's coalitional strategy that combined Black voters with college-educated whites and Hispanic voters rather than running an explicitly Black-coalition campaign.

The "embracing without becoming victims" framework directly maps onto the campaign's strategic positioning. AP students should be able to identify the connection between rhetoric and strategy.

QUESTION 6

Lehman Brothers.

The September 15, 2008 Lehman bankruptcy was the largest in U.S. history at the time. It triggered a global liquidity freeze and the AIG rescue on September 16, the TARP debate, and the eight-week financial-crisis dominance of the campaign.

QUESTION 7

Tea Party.

The Tea Party emerged in February 2009 in opposition to the Obama administration's stimulus and TARP-continuation policies. It reshaped the Republican Party by demanding ideological purity and contributed to the 2010 Republican House majority. Its political DNA fed directly into the 2016 Trump nomination.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the structural-vs-contingent-vs-continuation axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric on the next page evaluates the full essay.