2012

Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney

A 35-minute lesson on the 2012 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) · 332 EV	RUNNER-UP Mitt Romney (Republican) · 206 EV
KEY ISSUE Economic recovery; Obamacare; auto bailout; income inequality ('47 percent')	TURNOUT 58.6%

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

2012: Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When the first Black U.S. president seeks re-election with the economy recovering from a major crisis, what political conditions favor or disfavor his victory?
15 min	**Reading**	2012 election was 57th U.S. presidential election. Produced Obama re-election 332-206 EV over Mitt Romney. Obama 51.1% popular vote vs Romney 47.2%. Obama carried 26 states + DC; Romney 24 states. Obama had been president 4 years. First term defined by: (1) January 20, 2009 inauguration - first Black U.S. president. ~1.8 million attended ceremony. (2) February 17, 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act ($831B stimulus) - largest peacetime fiscal stimulus in U.S. history. (3) Auto-industry bailout March-June 2009. GM bankruptcy filed June 1, 2009; Chrysler April 30, 2009. $80B federal rescue. Both emerged restructured. Detroit auto industry preserved. (4) March 23, 2010 Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") signed. Insured ~20M+ additional Americans by 2016. Politically polarizing - structural Republican opposition + Tea Party 2010 wave. (5) May 2, 2011 (May 1 in U.S. time zones) Osama bin Laden killed in Pakistan by Navy SEAL Team Six raid (Operation Neptune Spear). Compound in Abbottabad. Bin Laden buried at sea. Politically masterful - first major Al-Qaeda leader killing since 9/11. (6) August 2, 2011 Budget Control Act (debt ceiling crisis resolution). (7) August 5, 2011 S&P downgrade of U.S. credit rating from AAA to AA+. (8) August 31, 2010 end of U.S. combat operations in Iraq + December 18, 2011 final U.S. troop withdrawal (~4,400 American military deaths in Iraq War 2003-2011). (9) Solyndra September 2011 bankruptcy + Republican attacks on green-energy investment. (10) "Fast and Furious" 2009-11 ATF gun-tracking scandal. 2010 midterm Republican wave November 2, 2010. Republicans gained 63 House seats (largest gain since 1948 by either party). Republican House majority 242-193. Senate Republicans gained 6 seats; Democratic majority narrowed to 53-47. Tea Party movement (anti-tax + anti-ACA + anti-Obama) operationalized 2010 wave. Republican primary 2012 had ~13 candidates. Mitt Romney emerged as front-runner. Romney was 65, Bain Capital co-founder (1984-99), Salt Lake City Olympics CEO 2002, MA Governor 2003-07, 2008 Republican presidential candidate (lost to McCain). Romney faced structural conservative resistance: (a) MA moderate profile + MA health care (which had been structural template for ACA); (b) Mormon faith concerns among evangelical Republican base; (c) elite/corporate biography (Harvard MBA + JD; Bain Capital private-equity wealth); (d) "Massachusetts moderate" who had supported abortion rights + gun control + climate science earlier in his political career.

Romney challengers: Rick Perry (TX Governor); Newt Gingrich (former House Speaker 1995-99); Rick Santorum (former PA Senator 1995-2007); Herman Cain (businessman + "9-9-9" tax plan); Michele Bachmann (MN Rep + Tea Party Caucus founder); Ron Paul (TX Rep + libertarian); Jon Huntsman (former UT Governor + Ambassador to China 2009-11); Tim Pawlenty (MN Governor); Gary Johnson (later Libertarian nominee); Buddy Roemer; Thaddeus McCotter; Fred Karger.

Iowa caucuses January 3, 2012 produced Santorum victory by 34 votes (announced January 19, 2012 after initial Romney announcement). NH January 10 Romney won 39%-22% Paul. SC January 21 Gingrich won 40%-28% Romney. FL January 31 Romney won 46%-32% Gingrich. Romney secured nomination by April 25, 2012 (Pennsylvania + Connecticut + Delaware + NY + Rhode Island primaries).

Romney selected Rep Paul Ryan (WI, 42, House Budget Committee chair, "Path to Prosperity" budget author) VP August 11, 2012. Ryan represented Tea Party + libertarian-leaning fiscal conservatism + structural counter to Romney moderate profile. Ryan's budget proposals (Medicare voucher-system reform + Medicaid block-grant reform + Bush-era tax cut extension) provided Democrats with structural attack material.

Republican Convention Tampa August 27-30, 2012 nominated Romney-Ryan. Hurricane Isaac delayed convention start. Clint Eastwood August 30 "empty chair" speech (imagined dialogue with empty chair representing Obama) widely criticized as politically odd.

Democratic Convention Charlotte September 4-6, 2012 renominated Obama-Biden. Bill Clinton September 5 speech defended Obama economic record. Michelle Obama opening speech. Joe Biden September 6 acceptance. Obama September 6 acceptance.

Campaign defined by economy. Unemployment 7.8% at election (down from 10.0% peak October 2009). GDP growth 2.3% Q3 2012. Romney framed economy as Obama failure: 23M unemployed/underemployed + $5T national debt increase + $716B Medicare cuts to fund ACA. Obama framed as recovery from Bush-era 2008 financial crisis + auto-industry rescue + ACA expansion + bin Laden killing.

September 17, 2012 Mother Jones magazine published "47 percent" video - Romney May 17, 2012 fundraiser at Marc Leder Boca Raton FL home. Romney to donors: "There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what... who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them... I will never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives." Politically devastating - confirmed Democratic framing of Romney as elitist disconnected from ordinary Americans. The video came at structural campaign turning point. Romney

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First debate October 3, 2012 Denver University of Denver. Domestic policy focus. Romney exceeded expectations + Obama appeared disengaged. Politically damaging for Obama. Romney bounce: ~3 percentage points in national polling.

Second debate October 16, 2012 Hofstra University NY town-hall format. Obama recovered. Question about women workplace equity prompted Romney response: "I went to a number of women's groups and said, can you help us find folks? And they brought us whole binders full of women." The phrase "binders full of women" became cultural mockery + Internet meme. Politically damaging on female-voter demographic.

Third debate October 22, 2012 Lynn University Boca Raton FL. Foreign policy focus. Romney softened tone + accepted much of Obama foreign policy. Obama "horses and bayonets" zinger: Romney had said U.S. Navy had fewer ships than 1917; Obama responded "Well, Governor, we also have fewer horses and bayonets, because the nature of our military's changed."

October 29, 2012 Hurricane Sandy hit NJ + NY. Obama presidential response benefited politically. NJ Republican Governor Chris Christie publicly praised Obama Sandy response in viral moment. Politically devastating for Romney: 5 days before election, Republican governor structurally endorsed Obama presidential competence.

Election Day November 6, 2012: Obama 332 EV vs Romney 206. Obama 65,915,795 popular votes (51.1%) vs Romney 60,933,504 (47.2%). Margin 4,982,291 votes. Obama carried 26 states + DC; Romney 24 states.

Geographic pattern: Obama held 2008 coalition. Lost Indiana (back to Republican). Lost North Carolina (back to Republican). Obama states (26 + DC): Northeast (CT, DE, ME, MD, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT, DC); Industrial Midwest (IL, IA, MI, MN, OH, WI); West (CA, CO, HI, NM, NV, OR, WA); Florida; Virginia. Romney states (24): South (most), Plains, Mountain West, AK.

Demographic pattern: Obama won 80% non-white vote (Latino 71%, Black 93%, Asian 73%). Romney won 59% white vote (largest white vote share for losing candidate in modern era). Obama won 55% young voter vote (18-29). Obama won 55% female vote; Romney won 52% male vote. Gender gap structurally significant.

Obama second term 2013-17: (1) March 1, 2013 sequester (Budget Control Act automatic cuts). (2) October 1-16, 2013 government shutdown over ACA defunding fight. (3) October 1, 2013 ACA exchanges launched - HealthCare.gov website crashed extensively. Politically devastating temporarily; site recovered by December. (4) June 26, 2013 U.S. v. Windsor Supreme Court ruling - federal recognition of

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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 2012 Election

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Key words

Barack Obama 44th U.S. president (2009-17). First Black U.S. president.

Mitt Romney	2012 Republican presidential nominee. Bain Capital co-founder. MA Governor 2003-07. Subsequently U.S. Senator from Utah 2019-25.
47 percent video	May 17, 2012 Romney Boca Raton FL fundraiser. Mother Jones published September 17, 2012.
Binders full of women	Romney October 16, 2012 debate response. Cultural mockery.
Affordable Care Act	March 23, 2010 Obama healthcare legislation. ~20M+ insured by 2016.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Obama win in 2012?

( ) A. 271
( ) B. 303
( ) C. 332
( ) D. 365

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

What was Romney's VP pick?

( ) A. Sarah Palin
( ) B. Paul Ryan
( ) C. Marco Rubio
( ) D. Chris Christie

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the "47 percent" video and why was it politically devastating?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the 2010 midterm Republican wave affect Obama's political position?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

332. Obama 332; Romney 206. Obama 51.1% popular vote vs Romney 47.2%. Margin 4,982,291 votes. Obama carried 26 states + DC; Romney 24 states. First Democratic president to win consecutive popular vote majorities since FDR.

AP students should know the 332-206 split.

QUESTION 2

Paul Ryan. WI Representative (1999-2013 + 2015-19). House Budget Committee chair. "Path to Prosperity" budget author. Tea Party + libertarian-leaning fiscal conservative. Subsequently House Speaker (2015-19). Selected August 11, 2012.

AP students should know Ryan.

QUESTION 3

The "47 percent" video was secretly-recorded May 17, 2012 Marc Leder Boca Raton FL fundraiser. Mother Jones magazine published September 17, 2012 (~5 months after recording). Romney to wealthy donors: "There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what... who are dependent upon government, who believe that they are victims, who believe that government has a responsibility to care for them, who believe that they are entitled to health care, to food, to housing... I will never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives." Politically devastating for five reasons: (1) Confirmed Democratic framing of Romney as elitist disconnected from ordinary Americans. (2) The 47% framing referenced 2011 households paying no federal income tax (~46% in 2011) but many paid payroll taxes + state/local taxes; many were elderly retired or disabled or low-income working families with children. The framing was statistically misleading. (3) Romney's tone suggested moral judgment of low-income Americans as personal-responsibility failures. The structural Republican coalition included many low-income elderly + disabled voters who relied on Social Security + Medicare. (4) The video came at structural campaign turning point. Romney had been gaining ground after Romney-Ryan ticket launch + Republican Convention. The September 17 disclosure froze Romney's recovery. (5) The video confirmed pre-existing "out of touch wealthy" framing - Romney's $250M+ net worth + Cayman Islands tax-haven accounts + 14% effective tax rate + Bain Capital private-equity wealth + Romney "I like being able to fire people" Iowa caucus comment. Romney subsequently disavowed comments but political damage was done. "47 percent" became cultural shorthand for Romney 2012 + 2012 candidate-framing politics generally.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

The 2010 midterm Republican wave November 2, 2010 affected Obama's political position in five structural ways: (1) Republicans gained 63 House seats - largest gain since 1948 by either party. Republican House majority 242-193 (gained 63 + held 179 = 242; Democrats lost 63 + held 193 = 193). (2) Senate Republicans gained 6 seats. Democratic majority narrowed from 59-41 to 53-47. (3) Tea Party movement (anti-tax + anti-ACA + anti-Obama) operationalized 2010 wave. Tea Party caucuses + grassroots organization. Republican primary candidates pushed rightward. (4) Speaker John Boehner (R-OH, 1990-2015 House service) became Speaker January 5, 2011. Boehner faced structural Tea Party resistance throughout 2011-15. (5) Obama legislative agenda 2011-17 structurally constrained. Major Obama priorities (cap-and-trade climate legislation, comprehensive immigration reform, gun control reform) failed in 2011-17 House Republican majority. The 2011 debt ceiling crisis + 2013 government shutdown + 2014 government funding fights demonstrated Republican obstructionism. The 2010 wave produced structural legislative paralysis that defined Obama second-term presidency. Obama responded with executive-action emphasis (DACA 2012, executive orders on environmental policy + immigration + LGBT rights). The structural legislative-executive imbalance would persist through 2014 + 2016 midterms + Trump 2017-21 administration. The 2010 wave's structural significance: demonstrated mid-term incumbent-party losses + Tea Party-style grassroots mobilization + ideological-base-driven Republican primary politics. The pattern would persist 2012-24.

AP students should be able to articulate.