2012

Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney

A 50-minute lesson on the 2012 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) · 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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2012: Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney

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 in 2009-12 America that would produce an Obama re-election. For each identify the specific 2009-12 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	2012 election was 57th U.S. presidential election. Obama 332 EV / Romney 206. Obama 51.1% popular vote. First Democratic president to win consecutive popular vote majorities since FDR. Obama first term defined by: (1) January 20, 2009 inauguration. (2) February 17, 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act ($831B stimulus). (3) Auto-industry bailout March-June 2009 ($80B). (4) March 23, 2010 Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare"). (5) May 2, 2011 Osama bin Laden killed. (6) 2010 midterm Republican wave (63 House gains). (7) August 2, 2011 Budget Control Act. (8) August 5, 2011 S&P credit downgrade. (9) August 31, 2010 end Iraq combat ops + December 18, 2011 final withdrawal. (10) Solyndra September 2011 bankruptcy. Republican primary 2012 had ~13 candidates. Mitt Romney emerged front-runner. Romney 65, Bain Capital co-founder, Salt Lake City Olympics CEO 2002, MA Governor 2003-07, 2008 presidential candidate. Faced structural conservative resistance: MA moderate profile + MA health care + Mormon faith concerns + elite biography. Romney challengers: Rick Perry; Newt Gingrich; Rick Santorum; Herman Cain; Michele Bachmann; Ron Paul; Jon Huntsman; Tim Pawlenty. Iowa caucuses January 3, 2012 Santorum won by 34 votes. NH January 10 Romney 39%. SC January 21 Gingrich 40%. FL January 31 Romney 46%. Romney secured April 25, 2012. Romney selected Rep Paul Ryan (WI, 42, House Budget Committee chair) VP August 11, 2012. Tea Party + libertarian-leaning fiscal conservative. Republican Convention Tampa August 27-30, 2012 nominated Romney-Ryan. Hurricane Isaac delayed. Clint Eastwood "empty chair" speech politically odd. Democratic Convention Charlotte September 4-6, 2012 renominated Obama-Biden.

Bill Clinton September 5 speech defended Obama record. Michelle Obama opening. Obama September 6 acceptance.

Campaign defined by economy. Unemployment 7.8% at election (peak 10.0% October 2009). Romney framed economy as Obama failure; Obama framed as recovery from Bush-era 2008 crisis.

September 17, 2012 Mother Jones published "47 percent" video - Romney May 17, 2012 Marc Leder Boca Raton FL fundraiser. Politically devastating - confirmed Democratic framing of Romney as elitist. Romney subsequently disavowed.

First debate October 3, 2012 Denver - Romney exceeded expectations. Second debate October 16 Hofstra - Obama recovered. "Binders full of women" became cultural mockery. Third debate October 22 Boca Raton FL foreign policy. Obama "horses and bayonets" zinger.

October 29, 2012 Hurricane Sandy hit NJ + NY. Obama presidential response benefited politically. NJ Republican Governor Chris Christie publicly praised Obama Sandy response - politically devastating for Romney 5 days before election.

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

Geographic: Obama held 2008 coalition. Lost Indiana + NC (back to Republican). Obama states: Northeast + Industrial Midwest + West + FL + VA + DC. Romney states: South + Plains + Mountain West + AK.

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

Obama second term 2013-17: March 2013 sequester; October 2013 shutdown + ACA exchanges launched (HealthCare.gov crashes); June 26, 2013 U.S. v. Windsor; June 26, 2015 Obergefell v. Hodges; July 14, 2015 Iran deal; December 12, 2015 Paris Climate Agreement; March 2015 Cuba relations restored; 2014 Republican Senate majority; February 13, 2016 Scalia death + Republican refusal of Garland nomination; November 8, 2016 Trump 304-227 victory.

2012 election structural significance: (1) Confirmed 2008 Obama demographic coalition (non-white + young + female + educated suburban + working-class urban) as structural Democratic majority. (2) First Democratic consecutive popular vote majorities since FDR. (3) Incumbent-economy framing trumped Romney private-equity competence framing. (4) "47 percent" + "binders full of women" demonstrated candidate-framing vulnerability in independent expenditure + social media era. (5)

		Republican post-2012 "autopsy" report (Growth and Opportunity Project) called for Latino + female + youth outreach - subsequently rejected by 2016 Trump campaign.
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

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

47 percent video
May 17, 2012 Romney fundraiser. Mother Jones published September 17, 2012.

Affordable Care Act
March 23, 2010 Obama healthcare legislation.

Bin Laden raid
May 2, 2011 Operation Neptune Spear. Navy SEAL Team Six raid on Abbottabad Pakistan compound. Bin Laden killed; buried at sea. Politically masterful.

Mitt Romney
2012 Republican nominee. Bain Capital co-founder.

Binders full of women
Romney October 16, 2012 debate response.

Tea Party movement
2009-12 anti-tax + anti-ACA + anti-Obama grassroots Republican movement. Operationalized 2010 midterm wave. Pushed Republican primary politics rightward.

Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention

BARACK OBAMA, SEPTEMBER 6, 2012

Obama delivered this acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention at Time Warner Cable Arena in Charlotte NC on September 6, 2012. The acceptance was second of Obama's convention acceptances (the first was August 28, 2008 at Invesco Field Denver with ~80,000 attendees + Mile High Stadium framing). The 2012 acceptance had structural defensive framing: defending Obama first-term accomplishments + framing economy as recovery rather than failure. The acceptance was politically successful: Obama received post-convention bounce of ~3 percentage points + maintained lead through October 3 first debate setback. The speech's structural emphasis on "forward" framing + "you didn't build that" middle-class focus + ACA + bin Laden + auto bailout + Iraq withdrawal anchored Obama's 2012 victory framework.

> *"And here, in this election, you can choose that future. You can choose the path where we shrink our deficits without laying off teachers, or kicking students off financial aid, or eliminating health care for millions on Medicare who happen to be poor or elderly or disabled, all so that those with the most can pay less. Or you can choose a future where we reduce our deficit without sticking it to the middle class. So now, even though I personally disagreed with all but two members of Congress about how we should have done this, our nation faces a moment of truth. The path we offer may be harder, but it leads to a better place."*

Obama, "Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention" (Charlotte NC, September 6, 2012). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ɖ50 words.

The 2012 Election

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

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

Obama says "you can choose the path where we shrink our deficits without laying off teachers, or kicking students off financial aid." What is the rhetorical purpose?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 2012 election map, identify Obama's 26 states + DC and Romney's 24 states. What does the geographic pattern reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

332.

AP students should know the 332-206 split.

QUESTION 2

Paul Ryan. WI Rep. House Budget Committee chair. Selected August 11, 2012.

AP students should know Ryan.

QUESTION 3

"47 percent" video: May 17, 2012 secretly-recorded Marc Leder Boca Raton FL fundraiser. Mother Jones published September 17, 2012. Romney to donors: "47 percent... dependent upon government... believe they are victims." Politically devastating: confirmed Democratic elitist framing; statistically misleading (many paid payroll/state taxes); moral judgment tone alienated low-income Republican voters; structural campaign turning point froze Romney recovery; confirmed pre-existing wealth framing (Cayman Islands accounts, 14% tax rate, Bain wealth). Romney disavowed but damage was done.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

Obama's "shrink deficits without laying off teachers" articulates structural progressive framing through five rhetorical strategies: (1) Alternative-futures framing - "you can choose" positions Obama as offering distinct policy path. (2) Specific human-cost framing - teachers + students + Medicare beneficiaries + poor + elderly + disabled - concrete categories of Americans affected by deficit-reduction choices. (3) Anti-trickle-down framing - "those with the most can pay less" critiques tax-cuts-for-wealthy structural Republican framework. (4) Middle-class focus framing - "without sticking it to the middle class" positions Democratic framework as middle-class-protective. (5) Honest-cost framing - "may be harder, but it leads to a better place" admits the path requires difficult choices. The rhetorical purpose: positioning Obama as offering structural alternative to Romney-Ryan budget framework (Medicare voucher-system reform + Medicaid block-grant reform + Bush-era tax cut extension). The framing operationalized Democratic 2012 attack strategy on Romney-Ryan budget. The structural lesson: incumbent-rhetoric framing must offer specific alternative-future framing rather than abstract policy framing. Obama's "you didn't build that" + "binders full of women" + "47 percent" framings became 2012 campaign memorable moments. Subsequent Democratic candidates (Clinton 2016, Biden 2020, Harris 2024) attempted varied applications of Obama 2012 framing with mixed results.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 5

The 2010 midterm Republican wave November 2, 2010 affected Obama's political position: (1) Republicans gained 63 House seats - largest gain since 1948. House Republican majority 242-193. (2) Senate Republicans gained 6 seats; Democratic majority narrowed 59-41 ' 53-47. (3) Tea Party movement operationalized wave. (4) Speaker Boehner became Speaker January 5, 2011. Faced structural Tea Party resistance 2011-15. (5) Obama legislative agenda 2011-17 structurally constrained. Major priorities (cap-and-trade, comprehensive immigration reform, gun control) failed. 2011 debt ceiling crisis + 2013 government shutdown demonstrated obstructionism. Obama responded with executive-action emphasis.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

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); FL; VA. Romney states (24): South (most), Plains, Mountain West, AK. Geographic pattern reveals 2012 Democratic coalition: (1) Northeast solidly Democratic. (2) West Coast + Mountain West progressive states (CO, NM, NV). (3) Industrial Midwest Democratic-leaning swing states. (4) FL + VA Democratic (shifted from Bush 43 era). (5) Republican coalition consolidated in South + Plains + Mountain West interior. The 2012 map confirmed post-2008 Democratic coastal-Midwest-coalition vs Republican Southern-Plains-Mountain coalition. Industrial Midwest swing states (OH, MI, WI, PA, IA) would be structurally decisive in 2016 + 2020 + 2024.

AP students should be able to articulate.