2012

Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney

A 75-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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2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
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5. Answer key + discussion prompts

2012: Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney

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 2012 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-2012 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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: January 2009 inauguration; February 2009 stimulus; auto bailout; March 2010 ACA; May 2011 bin Laden; 2010 Republican wave; August 2011 debt ceiling crisis; August 2011 S&P downgrade; December 2011 Iraq withdrawal. Republican primary 2012. Romney 65, Bain Capital, MA Governor 2003-07, 2008 candidate. Faced conservative resistance: MA moderate + MA health care + Mormon faith + elite biography. Challengers: Perry, Gingrich, Santorum, Cain, Bachmann, Paul, Huntsman, Pawlenty. Iowa caucuses January 3, 2012 Santorum +34 votes. NH January 10 Romney 39%. SC January 21 Gingrich 40%. FL January 31 Romney 46%. Romney secured April 25, 2012. Selected Rep Paul Ryan (WI, House Budget Chair) VP August 11, 2012. Republican Convention Tampa August 27-30, 2012 nominated Romney-Ryan. Hurricane Isaac delayed. Clint Eastwood "empty chair" speech. Democratic Convention Charlotte September 4-6, 2012 renominated Obama-Biden. Bill Clinton September 5 defended Obama record. Michelle Obama opening. Campaign defined by economy. Unemployment 7.8% (peak 10.0% October 2009). September 17, 2012 Mother Jones published "47 percent" video - May 17, 2012 Boca Raton FL fundraiser. Politically devastating. Romney disavowed.

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

October 29 Hurricane Sandy. Chris Christie praised Obama Sandy response - politically devastating for Romney.

Election Day November 6, 2012: Obama 332 EV / Romney 206. Obama 65.9M (51.1%); Romney 60.9M (47.2%). Margin 4,982,291. Obama 26 states + DC; Romney 24 states.

Geographic: Obama held 2008 coalition. Lost IN + NC. Demographic: Obama 80% non-white; Romney 59% white (largest white share for losing candidate in modern era). Obama 55% young; 55% female. Gender gap structurally significant.

Obama second term 2013-17: sequester; October 2013 shutdown + ACA exchanges; U.S. v. Windsor; Obergefell; Iran deal; Paris Climate; Cuba; 2014 Republican Senate majority; Scalia death + Garland refusal; Trump 2016 victory.

2012 election structural significance: (1) Confirmed 2008 Obama demographic coalition as structural Democratic majority. (2) First Democratic consecutive popular vote majorities since FDR. (3) Incumbent-economy framing trumped private-equity competence framing. (4) "47 percent" + "binders full of women" demonstrated social-media-era candidate-framing vulnerability. (5) Republican "autopsy" called for Latino + female + youth outreach - rejected by 2016 Trump.

The 2012 Obama re-election can be analyzed retrospectively as confirmation of post-Reagan demographic transition. The 2008 Obama victory demonstrated viability of "Coalition of the Ascendant" (analytic framework by Ronald Brownstein + Steve Schmidt + Stanley Greenberg): non-white voters + young voters + college-educated suburban whites + working-class urban voters + female voters. The 2012 re-election confirmed coalition durability. The structural Democratic majority would persist through 2014 + 2016 demographic-coalition framework. Hillary Clinton 2016 campaign assumed similar coalition framework + lost. Subsequent Democratic candidates (Biden 2020, Harris 2024) attempted varied applications.

The 2012 election's structural impact on Republican Party: post-2012 Growth and Opportunity Project ("autopsy" report) by RNC Chairman Reince Priebus called for: (1) Latino voter outreach + comprehensive immigration reform support; (2) Female voter outreach + softer cultural rhetoric; (3) Young voter outreach + technology investment; (4) African American voter outreach. The autopsy was published March 18, 2013. The autopsy framework was subsequently rejected by 2016 Trump campaign + replaced with Bannon-Trump populist-nationalist framework. The structural Republican direction: working-class white mobilization + non-college white turnout + anti-immigration framing + cultural-issue mobilization. The 2016 + 2024 Trump

		victories operationalized the alternative framework. The 2020 Trump loss demonstrated framework limitations. 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 2012 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

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

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

Affordable Care Act
March 23, 2010 Obama healthcare legislation.

Bin Laden raid
May 2, 2011 Operation Neptune Spear.

Mitt Romney
2012 Republican nominee.

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

Tea Party movement
2009-12 anti-tax + anti-ACA grassroots Republican movement.

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.

> *"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, ~150 words.

The 2012 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 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." What is the rhetorical purpose?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain how the 2012 Obama re-election confirmed the post-Reagan demographic transition.

QUESTION 7 · 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.

AP students should know Ryan.

QUESTION 3

"47 percent" video: May 17, 2012 fundraiser. Mother Jones September 17, 2012. Politically devastating: confirmed elitist framing; statistically misleading; moral judgment tone; campaign turning point.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 4

Obama's "shrink deficits without laying off teachers" rhetorical purpose: alternative-futures framing; specific human-cost framing; anti-trickle-down framing; middle-class focus framing; honest-cost framing. Positioned Obama as offering structural alternative to Romney-Ryan budget. Operationalized Democratic 2012 attack strategy.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 5

2010 wave: 63 House seats gained; Senate +6; Tea Party operationalized; Speaker Boehner January 2011; Obama legislative agenda 2011-17 structurally constrained; major priorities failed; Obama executive-action emphasis.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 6

The 2012 Obama re-election confirmed post-Reagan demographic transition in five structural ways: (1) "Coalition of the Ascendant" framework. Analytic framework by Ronald Brownstein + Steve Schmidt + Stanley Greenberg: non-white voters + young voters + college-educated suburban whites + working-class urban voters + female voters. 2008 Obama victory demonstrated viability; 2012 confirmed durability. (2) Non-white demographic share. Obama 80% non-white vote in 2012 (Latino 71%, Black 93%, Asian 73%). Non-white share of electorate grew from 11% 1988 ’ 28% 2012. The growing non-white electorate structurally favored Democrats. (3) Gender gap structurally widened. Obama 55% female vote vs Romney 44%; Romney 52% male vs Obama 45%. The structural gender gap favored Democrats through 2024 (with variations). (4) Educational realignment. Obama won college-educated suburban whites + working-class urban voters; Romney won non-college whites + rural voters. The realignment continued 2016 + 2020 + 2024. (5) Geographic shifts. Florida + Virginia + North Carolina (won by Obama 2008, won by Obama in FL/VA but lost in NC 2012) demonstrated changing Sunbelt politics. The structural Democratic majority would persist through 2014 + 2016 demographic-coalition framework. Hillary Clinton 2016 campaign assumed similar framework + lost when working-class white turnout shifted to Trump in PA + MI + WI + OH. Subsequent Democratic candidates (Biden 2020, Harris 2024) attempted varied applications. The 2024 Harris loss (227-312 EV; 1.5% popular vote deficit) demonstrated coalition limitations.

AP students should be able to articulate.

QUESTION 7

Obama states (26 + DC): Northeast + Industrial Midwest + West + FL + VA + DC. Romney states (24): South + Plains + Mountain West + AK. Pattern: Northeast Democratic; West Coast + Mountain West progressive states; Industrial Midwest swing states; FL + VA Democratic; Republican consolidation in interior. Industrial Midwest would be structurally decisive in 2016 + 2020 + 2024.

AP students should be able to articulate.

Discussion prompts

1. Obama 2012 was first Democratic president to win consecutive popular vote majorities since FDR. Identify three structural reasons Democrats had difficulty winning consecutive popular vote majorities 1944-2012.

2. "47 percent" video and "binders full of women" both became cultural mockery damaging Romney 2012. Identify three structural reasons social-media-era candidate-framing vulnerabilities differ from pre-2008 vulnerabilities.