2012

Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney

A 105-minute lesson on the 2012 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) · 332 EV	RUNNER-UP Mitt Romney (Republican) · 206 EV
KEY ISSUE Economic recovery; Obamacare; auto bailout; income inequality ('47 percent')	TURNOUT 58.6%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
4. Primary source B (DBQ pair)
5. Worksheet (8 questions)
6. Long-essay-question + rubric
7. Answer key + discussion

2012: Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney

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 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; debt ceiling crisis; S&P downgrade; Iraq withdrawal. Republican primary 2012. Romney emerged front-runner. Iowa caucuses January 3 Santorum +34. NH January 10 Romney. SC January 21 Gingrich. FL January 31 Romney. Romney secured April 25. Selected Ryan VP August 11. Republican Convention Tampa August 27-30 nominated Romney-Ryan. Democratic Convention Charlotte September 4-6 renominated Obama-Biden. Clinton September 5 defended Obama record. Campaign defined by economy. Unemployment 7.8% at election. September 17, 2012 "47 percent" video. Politically devastating. Romney disavowed. Debates October 3 Denver, October 16 Hofstra, October 22 Boca Raton FL. "Binders full of women." "Horses and bayonets." October 29 Hurricane Sandy. Christie praised Obama. Election Day November 6: Obama 332 EV / Romney 206. Obama 65.9M (51.1%); Romney 60.9M (47.2%). Obama 26 states + DC. Geographic: Obama held 2008 coalition. Lost IN + NC. Demographic: Obama 80% non-white; Romney 59% white. Obama 55% young; 55% female.

Obama second term 2013-17: sequester; ACA exchanges; Obergefell; Iran deal; Paris Climate; 2014 Republican Senate; Scalia death + Garland refusal; Trump 2016 victory.

2012 structural significance: confirmed Obama demographic coalition; first Democratic consecutive popular vote majorities since FDR; incumbent-economy framing trumped private-equity competence; social-media-era candidate-framing vulnerability; Republican "autopsy" rejected by 2016 Trump.

The 2012 Obama re-election confirmed post-Reagan demographic transition. 2008 Obama victory demonstrated "Coalition of the Ascendant" viability; 2012 confirmed durability. Hillary Clinton 2016 assumed similar coalition + lost. Biden 2020 + Harris 2024 attempted varied applications.

The 2012 election's structural Republican impact: post-2012 Growth and Opportunity Project ("autopsy" report, March 18, 2013) by RNC Chairman Reince Priebus called for: Latino outreach + comprehensive immigration reform support; female outreach + softer cultural rhetoric; young voter outreach + technology investment; African American outreach. Subsequently rejected by 2016 Trump campaign + replaced with Bannon-Trump populist-nationalist framework. The 2016 + 2024 Trump victories operationalized alternative framework. The 2020 Trump loss demonstrated framework limitations.

The 2012 campaign's structural innovations: (1) Obama campaign data analytics. Jim Messina campaign manager. "Project Narwhal" voter targeting database. Statistical analysis + voter modeling + micro-targeted outreach. Operationalized through Catalist + NGP VAN + Voter Activation Network data infrastructure. Subsequent Democratic campaigns (Clinton 2016, Biden 2020, Harris 2024) operationalized similar frameworks. (2) Republican data analytics failure. "Project ORCA" Romney campaign data system crashed Election Day - widely cited as Republican structural failure. Republican post-2012 data infrastructure rebuild emphasized 2014-16. (3) Independent expenditure spending. 2012 was first post-Citizens United (January 21, 2010 Supreme Court ruling) presidential election. ~$1B+ independent expenditure spending. Super PAC framework + 501(c)(4) social-welfare-organization framework + 527 framework. Republican-aligned super PACs (American Crossroads, Restore Our Future, Americans for Prosperity) + Democratic-aligned super PACs (Priorities USA, House Majority PAC, Senate Majority PAC). The independent expenditure framework would structurally define 2014 + 2016 + 2020 + 2024 campaigns. (4) Social media campaigning. Facebook + Twitter + YouTube as structural campaign-communication tools. Obama 2012 social media operation widely cited as structural success. The framework would expand 2016 + 2024 with Instagram + TikTok + X (Twitter) post-Musk era. (5) Early-voting expansion. 2012 produced ~30% early voter share. Democratic early-voting operations structurally consequential in OH + FL + NV + CO + WI. The framework would expand 2014-24 with mail-in voting expansion (2020 COVID-19 pandemic) + same-day registration + automatic voter registration.

		The 2012-16 political trajectory: Obama 2012 re-election ’ 2013 immigration reform attempt failed ’ 2014 Republican Senate majority ’ 2015 Trump campaign launch June 16, 2015 ’ 2016 Republican primary 17-candidate field ’ Trump 304-227 EV victory + Hillary Clinton popular vote 2.86M margin. The 4-year trajectory from Obama 332-206 to Trump 304-227 was structural political reversal driven by: working-class white realignment in PA + MI + WI + OH; Trump anti-establishment + populist + culture-war framework; Hillary Clinton 2016 establishment + experience framework; Russian interference + Comey October 28, 2016 email investigation reopening + WikiLeaks Podesta email release. The structural lesson: demographic coalition framework can be defeated by realignment + framework + tactical factors.
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

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

47 percent video
May 17, 2012 Romney fundraiser.

Affordable Care Act
March 23, 2010 Obama healthcare legislation.

Bin Laden raid
May 2, 2011 Operation Neptune Spear.

"Coalition of the Ascendant"
Analytic framework by Ronald Brownstein + Steve Schmidt + Stanley Greenberg describing post-Reagan Democratic demographic coalition: non-white voters + young voters + college-educated suburban whites + working-class urban voters + female voters.

Mitt Romney
2012 Republican nominee.

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

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

Citizens United v. FEC
January 21, 2010 Supreme Court ruling 5-4. Struck down corporate + union independent expenditure restrictions on First Amendment grounds. Operationalized super PAC framework. ~$1B+ 2012 independent expenditure spending.

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.

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

Acceptance Address at Democratic National Convention

BARACK OBAMA, 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, ɗ150 words.

SOURCE B

Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech

MITT ROMNEY, AUGUST 30, 2012

“I wish President Obama had succeeded because I want America to succeed. But his promises gave way to disappointment and division. This isn't something we have to accept. Now is the moment when we can do something. With your help we will do something. Now is the moment when we can stand up and say, "I'm an American. I make my destiny. And we deserve better! My children deserve better! My family deserves better. My country deserves better!" So here we stand. Americans have a choice. A decision. To make that choice, you need to know more about me and about where I will lead our country.”

Romney, "Republican National Convention Acceptance Speech" (Tampa FL, August 30, 2012). Fair use under 17 USC §107 — educational excerpt of public political speech, ɗ150 words.

The 2012 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 2012 acceptance) articulating alternative-futures framing. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Romney 2012 acceptance) articulating business-executive competence-credentials framing. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources are 2012 convention acceptances. Identify the specific political function each source performs.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Romney's "I wish President Obama had succeeded because I want America to succeed" articulates structural counter-stereotyping. What rhetorical purpose does this serve?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific 2013-2017 developments that would damage Obama's second-term legislative agenda.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How much did 2012 independent expenditure groups spend?

( ) A. ~$300 million
( ) B. ~$600 million
( ) C. ~$1 billion
( ) D. ~$1.5 billion

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

What was the Citizens United ruling date?

( ) A. January 21, 2010
( ) B. June 21, 2010
( ) C. January 21, 2011
( ) D. March 23, 2010

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 2012 election about demographic transition, incumbent-economy framing, or campaign framework operationalization? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Obama's September 6 acceptance (Source A) framed economic policy through "shrink deficits without laying off teachers" + alternative-futures framing. Romney's August 30 acceptance (Source B) framed Obama presidency through "his promises gave way to disappointment and division" + business-executive competence-credentials framing. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 2008-2024 period, evaluate the extent to which the 2012 election represented (a) confirmation of the post-Reagan "Coalition of the Ascendant" demographic transition, (b) demonstration that incumbent-economy framing could overcome candidate-framing vulnerabilities, or (c) operationalization of post-Citizens United independent expenditure + social media + data analytics campaign framework. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the demographic-vs-incumbent-vs-campaign-framework axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the 2008 Obama victory, the 2010 Tea Party wave, the ACA, the bin Laden raid, the Citizens United ruling, the 2014 Republican Senate gains, the 2016 Trump victory, the 2020 Biden victory, the 2024 Trump victory. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "you can choose the path where we shrink our deficits without laying off teachers", "you can choose a future where we reduce our deficit without sticking it to the middle class", "our nation faces a moment of truth". The "shrink deficits without laying off teachers" phrase is the most distinctive alternative-futures framing.

Obama's framing emphasized alternative-policy-path framework.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "I wish President Obama had succeeded because I want America to succeed", "his promises gave way to disappointment and division", "Americans have a choice. A decision. To make that choice, you need to know more about me and about where I will lead our country". The "promises gave way to disappointment and division" phrase is the most distinctive business-executive framework.

Romney's framing emphasized competence-credentials + appeal-to-American-decline rhetoric.

QUESTION 3

Source A is Obama's 2012 acceptance speech - articulated as incumbent Democratic president to defend first-term accomplishments + frame economy as recovery rather than failure. The function is to mobilize Democratic base + persuade swing voters. The framing was politically successful: post-convention bounce of ~3 percentage points + maintained lead through October 3 first debate setback. Source B is Romney's 2012 acceptance speech - articulated as Republican challenger to position himself as competent businessman-executive who could fix Obama-era economic problems. The function is to mobilize Republican base + persuade swing voters + present credible alternative to Obama. The framing was structurally limited by Romney's elite biography + private-equity wealth + Mormon faith concerns + subsequent "47 percent" disclosure. Together the sources reveal the structural 2012 electoral choice: incumbent-defensive framing (Obama) vs challenger-alternative framing (Romney). Obama's approach won 332-206 EV; Romney's approach lost. The structural lesson: incumbent advantage in presidential re-election is structurally significant + challenger must overcome structural disadvantages through compelling alternative framework.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural framework.

QUESTION 4

Romney's "I wish President Obama had succeeded because I want America to succeed" articulates structural counter-stereotyping through five rhetorical strategies: (1) Patriotic framing. By prioritizing American success over partisan victory, Romney positions himself as patriot-first + partisan-second. (2) Reasonable-opposition framing. The framing demonstrates Romney's opposition is policy-disagreement rather than personal-animosity. (3) Bipartisan-appeal framing. The framing appeals to swing voters who reject hyper-partisan framing. (4) Counter-Obama-framing. Democratic 2012 campaign framed Romney as "extreme" + "out of touch" + "elitist." Romney's framing counters by positioning himself as reasonable + reasonable opposition + reasonable alternative. (5) Personal-credibility framing. The framing humanizes Romney + makes him politically credible. The rhetorical purpose: position Romney as reasonable patriotic American who genuinely wants America to succeed + position Obama presidency as well-intentioned-but-failed rather than malicious or incompetent. The framing was politically successful in framing rather than electoral outcome. Romney lost 332-206 EV but the "I wish Obama had succeeded" framing was widely respected. The structural lesson: counter-stereotyping framing can be politically successful in framing-rhetoric but doesn't necessarily produce electoral victory.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical strategy.

QUESTION 5

Three specific 2013-2017 developments that damaged Obama's second-term legislative agenda: (1) March 1, 2013 sequester - automatic budget cuts ($85B FY 2013) from Budget Control Act August 2011. Structurally constrained discretionary federal spending. Politically devastating: Obama administration could not undo sequester without Republican Congressional cooperation. The sequester operationalized through FY 2013-21. (2) October 1-16, 2013 government shutdown over ACA defunding fight. House Republicans led by Ted Cruz + House Freedom Caucus refused continuing resolution. 800,000 federal workers furloughed. Shutdown ended October 17 with debt ceiling raised + ACA defunding fight abandoned. Politically devastating for Republicans in 2013 but established structural pattern of Republican obstruction. (3) 2014 midterm Republican Senate majority gain. Republicans gained 9 Senate seats. Senate majority 54-46. Mitch McConnell became Majority Leader January 6, 2015. Republican congressional control structurally limited Obama second-term legislative options. (4) February 13, 2016 Justice Scalia death. Obama nominated Merrick Garland March 16, 2016 for Supreme Court vacancy. McConnell refused to consider nomination for 9 months citing "Biden rule" + 2016 election proximity. Scalia seat remained vacant until Neil Gorsuch confirmation April 7, 2017 (Trump 2017-21 administration). The Scalia-Garland-Gorsuch sequence had structural Supreme Court consequences through 2024+. (5) Comprehensive immigration reform 2013 attempt failed. Senate "Gang of Eight" bipartisan bill passed June 27, 2013 (68-32 vote with 14 Republicans). House Speaker Boehner refused floor consideration through 2014 + 2015. DACA + DAPA executive actions (June 15, 2012 + November 20, 2014) operationalized partial executive-action alternative. DAPA blocked by Supreme Court tied 4-4 vote (June 23, 2016 United States v. Texas). The cumulative effect: Obama second-term major legislative initiatives (climate legislation, gun control reform, comprehensive immigration reform, infrastructure investment) failed in Republican-controlled Congress. Obama pivoted to executive-action emphasis + foreign-policy successes (Iran deal + Paris Climate Agreement + Cuba relations).

AP students should be able to articulate multiple developments.

QUESTION 6

~$1 billion. Post-Citizens United (January 21, 2010) 2012 election was first presidential election after Supreme Court struck down corporate + union independent expenditure restrictions. ~$1B+ independent expenditure spending divided across Republican-aligned super PACs (American Crossroads, Restore Our Future, Americans for Prosperity) + Democratic-aligned super PACs (Priorities USA, House Majority PAC, Senate Majority PAC). The framework would expand in 2014 + 2016 + 2020 + 2024 elections. By 2024 the independent expenditure framework operationalized $10B+ across presidential + congressional races.

AP students should know the ~$1B figure.

QUESTION 7

January 21, 2010. Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission Supreme Court ruling 5-4 majority opinion by Justice Kennedy. Struck down corporate + union independent expenditure restrictions on First Amendment grounds. Operationalized super PAC framework + 501(c)(4) social-welfare-organization framework. ~$1B+ 2012 independent expenditure spending; ~$3B+ 2024 independent expenditure spending. The structural framework continues to dominate U.S. campaign finance.

AP students should know the January 21, 2010 date.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the demographic-vs-incumbent-vs-campaign-framework axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source.

The thesis sketch is preparatory.