2012

Barack Obama vs Mitt Romney

A 20-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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2012

Obama had been president 4 years. First term defined by: (1) January 20, 2009 inauguration - first Black U.S. president. (2) February 17, 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act ($831B stimulus). (3) Auto-industry bailout - GM bankruptcy June 2009 + Chrysler bankruptcy April-June 2009 + $80B federal rescue. (4) March 23, 2010 Affordable Care Act ("Obamacare") signed. Insured ~20M+ additional Americans by 2016. Politically polarizing - structural Republican opposition. (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). Politically masterful. (6) 2010 midterm Republican wave - 63 House gains + Republican House majority. (7) August 5, 2011 S&P downgrade of U.S. credit rating from AAA to AA+ amid debt ceiling crisis. (8) August 31, 2010 end of U.S. combat operations in Iraq + December 18, 2011 final U.S. troop withdrawal. (9) Solyndra September 2011 bankruptcy + Republican attacks on green-energy investment. (10) "Fast and Furious" 2009-11 ATF gun-tracking scandal.

Republican primary 2012 had ~13 candidates. Mitt Romney (former MA Governor 2003-07; 2008 presidential candidate; Bain Capital co-founder) emerged as front-runner but faced structural conservative resistance to his Bay State moderate profile +

Massachusetts health care (the structural template for ACA). Challengers Rick Perry (TX Governor), Newt Gingrich (former House Speaker), Rick Santorum (former PA Senator), Herman Cain (businessman), Michele Bachmann (MN Rep), Ron Paul (TX Rep), Jon Huntsman (former UT Governor + Ambassador to China), Tim Pawlenty (MN Governor). Iowa caucuses January 3, 2012 produced Santorum victory by 34 votes (announced January 19, 2012 after initial Romney announcement). NH January 10 Romney won. SC January 21 Gingrich won. FL January 31 Romney won decisively. Romney secured nomination April 25, 2012.

Romney selected Rep Paul Ryan (WI, 42, House Budget Committee chair) VP August 11, 2012. Ryan represented Tea Party + libertarian-leaning fiscal conservatism + structural counter to Romney moderate profile.

Look at picture. That Barack Obama - 44th U.S. president + won 2012 re-election.

Republican Convention Tampa August 27-30, 2012 nominated Romney-Ryan. Hurricane Isaac delayed convention. Clint Eastwood "empty chair" August 30 speech 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.

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; Obama framed as recovery from Bush-era 2008 crisis.

May 17, 2012 Mother Jones magazine published "47 percent" video - Romney May 17, 2012 (or earlier) 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... 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 47% framing referenced households paying no federal income tax (many paid payroll taxes; many were elderly retired or disabled).

First debate October 3, 2012 Denver - Romney exceeded expectations + Obama appeared disengaged. Second debate October 16 Hofstra University NY town-hall format - Obama recovered.



Barack Obama, the 44th U.S. president. He won re-election in 2012 over Mitt Romney.
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Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the 44th U.S. president in 2009?

2.

What was the "47 percent" video?

3.

What was the Affordable Care Act?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 2012 Barack Obama won re-election over Mitt Romney. Obama 332-206 EV. First Black U.S. president re-elected. Campaign defined by Affordable Care Act + 2008 financial crisis recovery + auto-industry bailout + bin Laden raid + "47 percent" video + binders full of women.

Answer key

1.

Barack Obama. 44th U.S. president (2009-17). First Black U.S. president. IL state senator (1997-2004); U.S. Senator (2005-08). July 27, 2004 Democratic Convention keynote launched structural rise. Won 2008 365-173 EV over McCain. Won 2012 332-206 EV over Romney. First Democratic president to win consecutive majorities since FDR.

AP students should know Obama as 44th president.

2.

The "47 percent" video was secretly-recorded May 17, 2012 Marc Leder fundraiser at Boca Raton FL home. Mother Jones magazine published September 17, 2012 (~5 months after the recording). Romney to wealthy donors: "There are 47 percent of the people who will vote for the president no matter what. All right, there are 47 percent who are with him, 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, to you-name-it. That that's an entitlement. And the government should give it to them. And they will vote for this president no matter what. I will never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives." Politically devastating for four reasons: (1) Confirmed Democratic framing of Romney as elitist disconnected from ordinary Americans. (2) The 47% framing technically referenced 2011 households paying no federal income tax (~46% in 2011) but many of those paid payroll taxes + state/local taxes; many were elderly retired or disabled or low-income working families with children. (3) Romney's tone suggested moral judgment of low-income Americans as personal-responsibility failures. (4) The video came at structural campaign turning point. Romney had been gaining ground after first debate. The "47 percent" disclosure froze Romney's recovery. Romney subsequently disavowed the comments. The video became cultural shorthand for Romney 2012 campaign + 2012 candidate-framing politics generally.

AP students should know the 47 percent video.

3.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA, "Obamacare") was March 23, 2010 federal legislation signed by President Obama. Key provisions: (1) Required most Americans to purchase health insurance (individual mandate; later weakened by 2017 tax law). (2) Expanded Medicaid eligibility (made optional by 2012 NFIB v. Sebelius Supreme Court ruling - 19 Republican states refused expansion through 2015+). (3) Established federal + state insurance exchanges (HealthCare.gov + state versions) for individual policy purchases. (4) Provided premium subsidies for households earning 100-400% federal poverty line. (5) Prohibited insurance discrimination based on pre-existing conditions. (6) Allowed adult children to remain on parent insurance until age 26. (7) Required insurance plans to cover essential health benefits + preventive care without copays. The ACA insured ~20M+ additional Americans by 2016. Politically polarizing: structural Republican opposition + 70+ House repeal votes 2011-2017 + 2017 Republican repeal attempts failed. Trump 2017-21 administration weakened key provisions; Biden 2021-25 administration expanded subsidies. As of 2026 the ACA remained structural healthcare framework for ~40M+ Americans. The ACA was Obama's structural domestic policy legacy + the most consequential U.S. healthcare legislation since Medicare (1965).

AP students should know the ACA.