A Long Road to Historic Beginnings: Barack Obama as the Nation’s First Black President

A Primary Source Activity Grades 6 -12

Overview

In this lesson, students read a brief history of Black electoral engagement from Reconstruction, culminating in the election of Barack Obama as president in 2008. Next, students use writing and discussion questions to assess the importance of the civil rights movement in enabling Obama to win. Finally, students work in small groups (breakout sessions) to examine primary sources that illuminate challenges faced by historic Black Americans elected to the federal government, and how they used their political knowledge and skills to face those challenges. This lesson is a supplement to any lesson on Reconstruction, the civil rights movement in the 20th century, or 21st century U.S. history.

This lesson complies with California Assembly Bill 1912 to require instruction on the historical significance of President Obama as the first African American President. The bill was introduced by California Assemblymember Chris Holden and signed into law in 2014.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

• Summarize the history of historic Black American (African American) presidential and congressional campaigns.

• Reflect on primary sources that illuminate developments in the history of Black, federal elected leadership.

• Collaborate with other students to determine the meaning and impact of important historic moments in the elections of Black candidates.
Standards

California History-Social Science Framework (Adopted 2016), Chapter 16, page 419: Students should understand the significance of President Obama’s election as the first African-American president and be able to place it in the context of the fight, both historical and ongoing, for African-American civil rights.

California History-Social Science Standard 8.11: Students analyze the character and lasting consequences of Reconstruction. (1) List the original aims of Reconstruction and describe its effects on the political and social structures of different regions. (5) Understand the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the Constitution and analyze their connection to Reconstruction.

California History-Social Science Standard 12.6: Students evaluate issues regarding campaigns for national, state, and local elective offices. (2) Discuss the history of the nomination process for presidential candidates and the increasing importance of primaries in general elections.

California History-Social Science Standard 11.10: Students analyze the development of federal civil rights and voting rights. (6) Analyze the passage and effects of civil rights and voting rights legislation (e.g., 1964 Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act of 1965).

California Common Core State Standards RH 2 (6-8): Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions. RH 2 (11-12): Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas. RH 10 (6-8): By the end of grade 8, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 6–8 text complexity band independently and proficiently. RH 10 (11-12): By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend history/social studies texts in the grades 11-12 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

C3 Framework Indicators: D2.His.2.6-8: Classify series of historical events and developments as examples of change and/or continuity. D2.His.2.9-12: Analyze change and continuity in historical eras.

Materials

Handout A: A Long Road to Historic Beginnings: Barack Obama as the Nation’s First Black President – 1 per student
Handout B: Making History With Words (Activity Instructions)
Handouts C, D, E, F: Copies of one of the four handouts for each small group member

Procedure

I. Focus Discussion

A. Tell students that in March 2015, President Barack Obama spoke in Selma, Alabama, for the 50th anniversary of the day when civil rights activists, including future congressman John Lewis, were marching from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery in order to register Black people to vote. The marchers were stopped and violently beaten by state police. Soon after, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act to prevent anyone from being deprived the right to vote due to racial discrimination. Read aloud this excerpt from his speech:

We do a disservice to the cause of justice by intimating that bias and discrimination are immutable, that racial division is inherent to America. If you think nothing’s changed in the past 50 years, ask somebody who lived through the Selma or Chicago or Los Angeles of the 1950s. Ask the female CEO who once might have been assigned to the secretarial pool if nothing’s changed. Ask your gay friend if it’s easier to be out and proud in America now than it was thirty years ago. To deny this progress, this hard-won progress — our progress — would be to rob us of our own agency, our own capacity, our responsibility to do what we can to make America better.

Ask students:
• What does this passage from his speech tell you about Barack Obama?
• What does it tell you about how Obama saw himself in U.S. history?

B. Tell students that today they are going to read about the historic election of Barack Obama in 2008 as part of a long thread of history extending back to the 19th century.

II. Reading and Discussion

A. Have students read Handout A: A Long Road to Historic Beginnings: Barack Obama as the Nation’s First Black President. Encourage students to annotate the text and take notes on words or phrases they find significant, challenging, or that spur their own questioning.

B. Have students write their answers to the Writing & Discussion questions #1 and #2 or use those two questions for whole-class discussion to check for students’ understanding of the text.

C. Small Group Discussion: Making History With Words

Distribute Handout B: Making History with Words to each student.

Break students into small groups (or breakout rooms) of four to five students each. Assign one primary source (Handouts C, D, E, F) to each group, so that each group has a different primary source. Distribute the handouts accordingly. If more than one group uses the same source, that is okay.

Tell students their task is to read their one source and discuss the source using the questions on Handout B. Each group should choose a spokesperson to share their group’s answers with the rest of the class.

Note: The speeches on Handouts C-F are excerpts that have been condensed. Ellipses have been removed for readability, but the links to the full speeches are included on the handouts if students would like further study.

Assessment

Have students write their answer to Writing & Discussion question #3. Look for students’ understanding of the contributions of Black politicians from Sen. Hiram Revels to Barack Obama.
On January 20, 2009, a bitterly cold but sunny day, President-elect Barack Obama raised his right hand and took his Oath of Office. Obama was officially the nation’s 44th president. But there was something unprecedented happening that day. In all U.S. history, with 43 presidents before Obama, none had been African American. In 2009, that changed.

After taking his oath, President Obama acknowledged this historic moment in his inaugural speech:

This is the meaning of our liberty and our creed — why men and women and children of every race and every faith can join in celebration across this magnificent mall, and why a man whose father less than sixty years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath.

Obama was aware of a long road behind him of other Black Americans who had run for public office. With every major step forward toward full racial equality, Black people not only exercised their right to vote but also entered politics. Candidates broke new ground in our history, even when they lost elections. But sometimes, they would win, too.

Reconstruction
The end of the U.S. Civil War saw the Union defeat the Southern Confederacy. The government had to decide how to readmit Southern states into the Union. The government also had the vital task of integrating formerly enslaved people into free society during this period, known as Reconstruction.

Prior to the Civil War, free Black men were elected — though rarely — to local and state offices in the North. During Reconstruction, as Southern states re-entered the Union, federal government protection enabled Black men to run for the U.S. Congress.

In February 1870, the Fifteenth Amendment was ratified, guaranteeing voting rights to all people regardless of race or color. In that same month, the Mississippi state legislature elected Christian minister Hiram Revels as U.S. senator. Revels was the first Black person ever elected to Congress.
(Senators were not elected by popular vote until 1913.) The first Black person elected to the U.S. House of Representatives was the prosperous barber Joseph Rainey of South Carolina in December 1870.

In the 20th century, Black presidential candidates would step into the public spotlight and run for president.

**The 20th Century**

George Edwin Taylor was born in Arkansas in 1857 to an enslaved father and free Black mother. He became a journalist and newspaper publisher, and eventually entered politics as a Republican. Taylor criticized the Republican Party’s pro-big business policies, however, and ultimately left the party.

In 1904, Taylor ran for president of the United States as a member of the National Liberty Party. He was the first African American to officially run for president, calling for federal protection of all citizens’ rights, federal anti-lynching laws, and reparations for former slaves. Taylor received fewer than 2,000 votes and returned to newspaper publishing after the election.

The civil rights movement of the mid-20th century renewed Black electoral engagement. The U.S. Supreme Court declared racial segregation in schools to be unconstitutional in 1954. After years of strenuous organizing by civil rights activists, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. That law ended discrimination in public accommodations (like restaurants) and in the workplace. The following year, Congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 to ensure voting rights for Black people who had been suppressed under Jim Crow discrimination laws.

In 1968, New York preschool teacher and childcare director Shirley Chisholm, a Democrat, became the first Black woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. She won re-election in 1970. In 1972, Chisholm ran for president. She was the first Black person to seek a major party’s nomination in a presidential election.

The Rev. Jesse Jackson had been a significant figure in the civil rights movement, and in 1984, came in third at the Democratic Party’s nominating convention. Jackson ran again in 1988 and came in second at the Democratic convention.

By the time the 21st century arrived, Jesse Jackson had come closest to the presidency of any Black candidate in the nation’s history. Because of the long legacies of slavery and legalized white supremacy that followed Reconstruction, pollsters still asked the question: Is the country ready for a Black president? Barack Obama’s victory provided the answer.

**Obama's Election**

Long before becoming the first Black president, Barack Obama achieved another “first.” Born in Hawaii in 1961, Obama is the son of a Kenyan father and a white mother who, during her second marriage, raised the young Barack for a few years in Indonesia. He returned to Hawaii to finish high school and later graduated from Columbia University. At Harvard Law School, he became the first ever African American president of the prestigious Harvard Law Review.

Obama’s law career began in the early 1990s, mainly as a constitutional law scholar at the University of Chicago in Illinois. Obama made the state his home, and in Chicago he met Michelle Robinson, whom he would marry in 1991. His political career also began in Chicago. He was a state senator for seven years before being elected U.S. senator in 2004.
Obama entered the Senate in the same year as the re-election of Republican President George W. Bush. During Bush’s presidency, the nation had experienced 9/11 in 2001. National sentiment then was in Bush’s favor. But by the end of his two terms, the nation was deep in a controversial war in Iraq. Hurricane Katrina had devastated New Orleans in 2005. And in 2008, nationwide economic meltdown struck. Bush’s approval ratings dropped to historic lows.

When Obama ran in the 2008 primary election, he responded directly to the apparent disapproval of Bush. On a now-iconic campaign poster, the word “Hope” was emblazoned under Obama’s face with his eyes looking off into the distance. Obama beat his Democratic opponents, including Senators Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden, and captured the party’s nomination. Biden would eventually become Obama’s vice president and was later elected president himself in 2020.

Obama’s campaign slogan was “Yes, We Can.” This was more than a mere message of positive thinking. It was an implied answer to the pollsters’ question whether the U.S. was ready to elect a Black person. In a clear victory against his Republican opponent, Senator John McCain, Obama won with 365 electoral votes to McCain’s 173. The election had the highest rate of voter turnout in 40 years.

A World Leader

Upon Obama’s win, many Americans expressed excitement — and pleasant surprise. In a CNN poll, 71 percent of African Americans said they never thought a Black person would be elected president in their lifetime. An estimated 1.8 million people attended the inauguration in Washington, D.C.

In a private message, Obama wrote to Rep. John Lewis. Lewis had been a great civil rights movement leader who had successfully turned to electoral politics himself after the 1960s. “Because of you, John,” Obama wrote.

World leaders customarily congratulate newly elected U.S. presidents. Many of the congratulations to Obama acknowledged his inauguration’s special historic impact. The president of Nigeria said that the election “finally broken the greatest barrier of prejudice in human history,” and Britain’s prime minister called it “a new chapter in both American history and the world’s history.” Within the first year of Obama’s presidency, his status as a world leader was elevated further when he won the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize.

A few months later, Congress passed Obama’s signature legislation, the Affordable Care Act (ACA). By 2016 — the end of Obama’s second term — the ACA cut the number of Americans lacking health insurance by half. Most Republicans in Congress strongly opposed the ACA as government-controlled health care. But the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the ACA in 2012, the same year as Obama’s re-election.

The achievement of the White House for Black American candidates only happened after two and a half centuries of doubt, war, and struggle. The pollsters would never again have to ask if it was possible.

Writing & Discussion

1. What challenges did Barack Obama face when he became president in 2008?
2. What do you think President Obama meant when he wrote to Rep. John Lewis, “Because of you, John”?
3. Summarize the road to the White House for Black Americans throughout U.S. history in one short paragraph.
4. What is the significance to you of the U.S. electing its first African American president?
Activity: Making History with Words

Form small groups of four or five students each. Each group receives one of the following speech excerpts of an African American mentioned in the article who was elected to public office. Each group will discuss the following questions and be prepared to share their answers with the rest of the class:

1. At what point in the nation’s history was this person speaking?

2. Who was the speaker’s audience?

3. What challenge or challenges does the speaker describe? How does the speaker propose overcoming the challenge or challenges?

4. What words in the speech reveal to you the goals of the speaker?

5. What questions do you have about the speech or the speaker? What more would you like to know?
Sen. Hiram Revels’s First Speech in the U.S. Senate (March 16, 1870)

Born a free man in North Carolina in 1827, Hiram Revels was elected to the U.S. Senate from the state of Mississippi in February 1870. Later that year, the state of Georgia’s legislature convened on July 4, 1870. A former Confederate state during the Civil War, Georgia sought readmission into the Union. The U.S. House of Representatives, however, amended the bill for Georgia’s readmission so that judges in Georgia could prohibit Black men from holding public office in the state. Before the Senate voted on the bill, Senator Revels spoke out against the House amendment.

Mr. President, I rise in the discussion of the Georgia bill with feelings which perhaps never before entered into the experience of any member of this body. I rise, too, with misgivings as to the propriety of lifting my voice at this early period after my admission into the Senate. Perhaps it were wiser for me, so inexperienced in the details of senatorial duties, to have remained a passive listener . . . but when I remember that my term is short, and that the issues with which this bill is fraught are momentous in their present and future influence upon the well-being of my race, I would seem indifferent to the importance of the hour.

Mr. President, I maintain that the past record of my race is a true index of the feelings which today animate them. They bear toward their former masters no revengeful thoughts, no hatreds, no animosities. They aim not to elevate themselves by sacrificing one single interest of their white fellow-citizens. They ask but the rights which are theirs by God’s universal law, and which are the natural outgrowth, the logical sequence of the condition in which the legislative enactments of this nation have placed them.

[Soon after the newly elected Georgia legislature convened in July 1868] . . . the legislature which was elected under the constitution framed and supported by colored men declared that a man having more than an eighth of African blood in his veins was ineligible to office or a seat in the legislature of the state of Georgia. In the month of September 1868, twenty-eight members of the legislature were expelled from that body. The courts of law, at least so far as colored men were regarded, were a shameless mockery of justice.

And now, sir, I protest in the name of truth and human rights against any and every attempt to fetter the hands of one hundred thousand white and colored citizens of the state of Georgia.

[Note: The Senate passed the House version of the bill over Sen. Revels’s objections. He served out the remaining year of his term before becoming president of Alcorn State University, the first of the public historically Black colleges and universities founded during Reconstruction.]

Joseph Rainey had been born into slavery in 1832, but his father purchased the family’s freedom when Joseph was a child. Elected to the House of Representatives in 1870, Rainey was a Republican like Hiram Revels. Unlike Revels, however, Rep. Rainey was re-elected four times until 1879, setting a record as the longest serving Black member of Congress (a record not broken until the 1950s). In this speech on the House floor, Rainey spoke in support of the Civil Rights Act (passed in 1875), a law that would guarantee equal access to public transportation, public accommodations, and jury service regardless of race. Rainey addressed criticism from Southern Democrats who opposed the law.

Mr. Speaker . . . I know, sir, that gentlemen on the other side have professed a great deal of friendship for the race to which I belong; and in the last presidential election they pledged themselves that they would accord to the Negroes of this country all the rights that were given to other citizens. I am somewhat surprised to perceive that on this occasion, when the demand is made upon Congress by the people to guarantee those rights to a race heretofore oppressed, we should find gentlemen on the other side taking another view of the case. I am not a lawyer, and consequently I cannot take a legal view of this matter. I view it in the light of the Constitution — in the light of the amendments that have been made to that Constitution; I view it in the light of humanity; I view it in the light of the progress and civilization which are now rapidly marching over this country.

The gentleman from Kentucky says that the Constitution has prescribed what rights we ought to have and to enjoy. I ask the gentleman, in the light of the Constitution, if he can say to the House today conscientiously, if he can say to the country conscientiously, that the rights which are guaranteed by the Constitution are given to the Negroes in the State of Kentucky?

I say to you, gentlemen, that you are making a mistake. Public opinion is aroused on this question. I tell you that the Negro will never rest until he gets his rights. We ask them because we know it is proper, not because we want to deprive any other class of the rights and immunities they enjoy, because they are granted to us by the law of the land. Why this discrimination against us when we enter public conveyances or places of public amusement? Why is a discrimination made against us in the churches; and why in the cemeteries when we go to pay that last debt of nature that brings us all upon a level?

Gentlemen, I say to you this discrimination must cease. We are determined to fight this question; we believe the Constitution gives us this right.

[Note: Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1875, but the U.S. Supreme Court struck it down as unconstitutional in 1883. Almost 80 years later, Congress passed the Civil Rights of 1964, which is still the law of the land today.]
Shirley Chisholm Presidential Candidacy Announcement (January 25, 1972)

Rep. Shirley Chisholm’s presidential campaign was entirely grassroots-funded. In this speech, delivered in Brooklyn, New York, Chisholm outlined why she thought a grassroots campaign funded by small donations was important for democracy. She came to the Democratic Party’s nominating convention that year with enough delegates to put her in fourth place among 13 candidates. She came out way ahead of well-known Democrats like Ted Kennedy and former vice president Hubert Humphrey.

I stand before you today as a candidate for the Democratic nomination for the Presidency of the United States of America. I am not the candidate of black America, although I am black and proud. I am not the candidate of the women’s movement of this country, although I am a woman, and I am equally proud of that.

I am not the candidate of any political bosses or fat cats or special interests.

I stand here now without endorsements from many big-name politicians or celebrities or any other kind of prop. I do not intend to offer to you the tired and glib clichés, which for too long have been an accepted part of our political life. I am the candidate of the people of America. And my presence before you now symbolizes a new era in American political history.

I have always earnestly believed in the great potential of America. Our constitutional democracy will soon celebrate its 200th anniversary, effective testimony, to the longevity to our cherished Constitution and its unique Bill of Rights, which continues to give to the world an inspirational message of freedom and liberty.

I have faith in the American people. I believe that we are smart enough to correct our mistakes. I believe that we are intelligent enough to recognize the talent, energy, and dedication, which all American[s] including women and minorities have to offer. I know from my travels to the cities and small towns of America that we have a vast potential, which can and must be put to constructive use in getting this great nation together. I know that millions of Americans, from all walks of life agree with me that leadership does not mean putting the ear to the ground, to follow public opinion, but to have the vision of what is necessary and the courage to make it possible.

Americans all over are demanding a new sensibility, a new philosophy of government from Washington. ... Instead of blocking efforts to control huge amounts of money given political candidates by the rich and the powerful, I would provide certain limits on such amounts and encourage all the people of this nation to contribute small sums to the candidates of their choice. Instead of calculating the political cost of this or that policy, and of weighing favors of this or that group, depending on whether that group voted for me in 1968, I would remind all Americans at this hour of the words of Abraham Lincoln, “A house divided, cannot stand.”

President Barack Obama’s
Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech (December 10, 2009)

Every year, the Nobel Prize Committee in Norway awards a peace prize to those who are exceptional in promoting peace among nations and reducing the likelihood of war. The Nobel Committee awarded Barack Obama in 2009 for “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples . . . [and for] Obama’s vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons.” Martin Luther King received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 for his leadership in the civil rights movement and his opposition to war and violence.

I receive this honor with deep gratitude and great humility. It is an award that speaks to our highest aspirations — that for all the cruelty and hardship of our world, we are not mere prisoners of fate. Our actions matter and can bend history in the direction of justice.

And yet I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the considerable controversy that your generous decision has generated. In part, this is because I am at the beginning, and not the end, of my labors on the world stage. Compared to some of the giants of history who’ve received this prize — Schweitzer and King; Marshall and Mandela — my accomplishments are slight. And then there are the men and women around the world who have been jailed and beaten in the pursuit of justice; those who toil in humanitarian organizations to relieve suffering; the unrecognized millions whose quiet acts of courage and compassion inspire even the most hardened cynics. I cannot argue with those who find these men and women — some known, some obscure to all but those they help — to be far more deserving of this honor than I.

But perhaps the most profound issue surrounding my receipt of this prize is the fact that I am the Commander-in-Chief of the military of a nation in the midst of two wars. One of these wars is winding down. The other is a conflict that America did not seek; one in which we are joined by 42 other countries — including Norway — in an effort to defend ourselves and all nations from further attacks.

As Dr. King said at this occasion so many years ago, “I refuse to accept despair as the final response to the ambiguities of history. I refuse to accept the idea that the ‘isness of man’s’ present condition makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the eternal ‘oughtness’ that forever confronts him.”

Let us reach for the world that ought to be — that spark of the divine that still stirs within each of our souls.