

2008-2016

President Barack Obama

[Barack Obama](#), the 44th president of the United States and the first African American president, was elected over Senator John McCain of Arizona on November 4, 2008. Obama, a former senator from Illinois whose campaign's slogan was "Change we can believe in" and "Yes we can," was subsequently elected to a second term over Massachusetts governor Mitt Romney. A winner of the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize, Obama's presidency was marked by the passage of the Affordable Care Act, or "Obamacare"; the killing of Osama bin Laden by Seal Team Six; the Iran Nuclear Deal and the legalization of gay marriage by the Supreme Court.



Barack Obama's Early Life

Obama's father, also named Barack Hussein Obama, grew up in a small village in Nyanza Province, Kenya, as a member of the Luo ethnicity. He won a scholarship to study economics at the University of [Hawaii](#), where he met and married Ann Dunham, a white woman from Wichita, [Kansas](#), whose father had worked on oil rigs during the [Great Depression](#) and fought with the U.S. Army in [World War II](#) before moving his family to Hawaii in 1959. Barack and Ann's son, Barack Hussein Obama Jr., was born in Honolulu on August 4, 1961.

Obama's parents later separated, and Barack Sr. went back to Kenya. He would see his son only once more before dying in a car accident in 1982. Ann remarried in 1965. She and her new husband, an Indonesian man named Lolo Soetoro, moved with her young son to Jakarta in the late 1960s, where Ann worked at the U.S. embassy. Obama's half-sister, Maya Soetoro Ng, was born in Jakarta in 1970.

Barack Obama's Education

At age 10, Obama returned to Hawaii to live with his maternal grandparents. He attended the Punahou School, an elite private school where, as he wrote in his 1995 memoir, [Dreams from My Father](#), he first began to understand the tensions inherent in his mixed racial background. After two years at Occidental College in Los Angeles, he transferred to Columbia University in [New York](#) City, from which he graduated in 1983 with a degree in political science.

He graduated magna cum laude from Harvard Law School in 1991. While at Harvard, he became the first black editor of the prestigious *Harvard Law Review*.

Barack Obama, Community Organizer and Attorney

After a two-year stint working in corporate research and at the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG) in New York City, Obama moved to [Chicago](#), where he took a job as a community organizer with a church-based group, the Developing Communities Project. For the next several years, he worked with low-income residents in Chicago's Roseland community and the Altgeld Gardens public housing development on the city's largely black South Side. Obama would later call the experience "the best education I ever got, better than anything I got at Harvard Law School," the prestigious institution he entered in 1988.

Obama met his future wife—Michelle LaVaughn Robinson, a fellow Harvard Law School grad—while working as a summer associate at the Chicago law firm Sidley Austin. He married [Michelle Obama](#) at the Trinity United Church of Christ on October 3, 1992.

Obama went on to teach at the University of Chicago Law School from 1992 to 2003.

Senator Barack Obama

In 1996, Obama officially launched his own political career, winning election to the [Illinois](#) State Senate as a Democrat from the South Side neighborhood of Hyde Park. Despite tight Republican control during his years in the state senate, Obama was able to build support among both Democrats and Republicans in drafting legislation on ethics and health care reform. He helped create a state earned-income tax credit that benefited the working poor, promoted subsidies for early childhood education programs and worked with law enforcement officials to require the videotaping of interrogations and confessions in all capital cases.

Re-elected in 1998 and again in 2002, Obama also ran unsuccessfully in the 2000 Democratic primary for the U. S. [House of Representatives](#) seat held by the popular four-term incumbent Bobby Rush. As a state senator, Obama notably went on record as an early opponent of President George W. Bush's push to [war with Iraq](#). During a rally at Chicago's Federal Plaza in October 2002, he spoke against a resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq: "I am not opposed to all wars. I'm opposed to dumb wars...I know that even a successful war against Iraq will require a U. S. occupation of undetermined length, at undetermined cost, with undetermined consequences."

Barack Obama's Speech At the 2004 Democratic National Convention

When Republican Peter Fitzgerald announced that he would vacate his [U.S. Senate](#) seat in 2004 after only one term, Obama decided to run. He won 52 percent of the vote in the Democratic primary, defeating both multimillionaire businessman Blair Hull and Illinois Comptroller Daniel Hynes. After his original Republican opponent in the general election, Jack Ryan, withdrew from the race, the former presidential candidate Alan Keyes stepped in. That July, Obama gave the keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention in Boston, shooting to national prominence with his eloquent call for unity among "red" (Republican) and "blue" (Democratic) states. It put the relatively unknown, young senator in the national spotlight.

In November 2004, Illinois delivered 70 percent of its votes to Obama (versus Keyes' 27 percent), sending him to [Washington](#) as only the third African American elected to the U.S. Senate since [Reconstruction](#).

During his tenure, Obama notably focused on issues of nuclear non-proliferation and the health threat posed by avian flu. With Republican Senator Tom Coburn of [Oklahoma](#), he created a website that tracks all federal spending, aimed at rebuilding citizens' trust in government. He partnered with another Republican, Senator Richard Lugar of [Indiana](#), on a bill that expanded efforts to destroy weapons of mass destruction in Eastern Europe and Russia. In August 2006, Obama traveled to Kenya, where thousands of people lined the streets to welcome him. He published his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, in October 2006.

2008 Presidential Campaign

On February 10, 2007, Obama formally announced his candidacy for president of the United States. A victory in the [Iowa](#) primary made him a viable challenger to the early frontrunner, the former first lady and current New York Senator [Hillary Clinton](#), whom he outlasted in a grueling primary campaign to claim the Democratic nomination in early June 2008. Obama chose [Joseph R. Biden Jr.](#) as his running mate. Biden had been a U.S. senator from [Delaware](#) since 1972, was a one-time Democratic candidate for president and served as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Obama's opponent was long-time [Arizona](#) Senator [John S. McCain](#), a Vietnam veteran and former prisoner of war who chose [Alaska](#) Governor Sarah Palin as his running mate. If elected, Palin would have been the nation's first-ever female vice-president.

As in the primaries, Obama's campaign worked to build support at the grassroots level and used what supporters saw as the candidate's natural charisma, unusual life story and inspiring message of hope and change to draw impressive crowds to Obama's public appearances, both in the U.S. and on a campaign trip abroad. They worked to bring new voters—many of them young or black, both demographics they believed favored Obama—to become involved in the election.

A crushing financial crisis in the months leading up to the election shifted the nation's focus to economic issues, and both Obama and McCain worked to show they had the best plan for economic improvement. With several weeks remaining, most polls showed Obama as the frontrunner. Sadly, Obama's maternal grandmother, Madelyn Dunham, died after a battle with cancer on November 3, the day before voters went to the polls. She had been a tremendously influential force in her grandson's life and had diligently followed his historic run for office from her home in Honolulu.

On November 4, lines at polling stations around the nation heralded a historic turnout and resulted in a Democratic victory, with Obama capturing some Republican strongholds ([Virginia](#), [Indiana](#)) and key battleground states ([Florida](#), [Ohio](#)) that had been won by Republicans in recent elections. Taking the stage in Chicago's Grant Park with his wife, Michelle, and their two young daughters, Malia Obama and Sasha Obama, he acknowledged the historic nature of his win while reflecting on the serious challenges that lay ahead. "The road ahead will be long, our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but America, I have

never been more hopeful than I am tonight that we will get there. I promise you, we as a people will get there.”

Barack Obama’s First Term as President

Barack Obama was sworn in as the first black president of the United States on January 20, 2009. [Obama’s inauguration](#) set an attendance record, with 1.8 million people gathering in the cold to witness it. Obama was sworn in by Chief Justice John Roberts Jr. with the same Bible President [Abraham Lincoln](#) used at his first inaugural.

One of Obama’s first acts in office was the signing of The Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act of 2009, which he signed just nine days into office, giving legal protection in the fight for equal pay for women. To address the financial crisis he inherited, he passed a stimulus bill, bailed out the struggling auto industry and Wall Street, and gave working families a tax cut.

In the foreign policy arena, Obama opened up talks with Cuba, Iran, and Venezuela and set a withdrawal date for American troops in Iraq. He was recognized with a [2009 Nobel Peace Prize](#) “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples,” and for his “vision of and work for a world without nuclear weapons.”

On March 23, 2010, Obama signed the Affordable Care Act, popularly known as universal healthcare or “[Obamacare](#).” Its goal was to give every American access to affordable healthcare by requiring everyone to have health insurance, but then providing coverage for people with pre-existing conditions (a group that was previously often denied coverage) and requiring health insurance companies to spend at least 80 percent of premiums on providing actual medical services. It remains one of the Obama administration’s most controversial legacies.

Barack Obama’s Second Term as President

Barack Obama was reelected for a second term in 2012, beating out Republican Mitt Romney and his running mate Paul Ryan. The 2014 midterm elections proved challenging, as Republicans gained a majority in both houses of Congress.

His second term was marked by several international events, including the [killing of Osama bin Laden](#), the mastermind of the [September 11 Attacks](#), by Seal Team Six on May 2, 2011. No Americans were lost in the operation, which gathered evidence about [Al-Qaeda](#). In 2013, Obama came out strongly against the use of chemical weapons on civilians by Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, avoiding a direct strike on Syria when al-Assad agreed to accept a Russian proposal that it relinquish its chemical weapons.

Perhaps the defining moment of his international diplomacy was his work on the [Iran Nuclear Deal](#), which allowed inspectors into Iran to ensure it was under the pledged limit of enriched uranium in return for lifting economic sanctions. (Obama’s successor, [President Donald Trump](#), would withdraw from the deal in 2018).

Another defining moment of Obama’s presidency came when the Supreme Court legalized [gay marriage](#) on June 26, 2015. Obama remarked on that day: “We are big and vast and diverse; a

nation of people with different backgrounds and beliefs, different experiences and stories, but bound by our shared ideal that no matter who you are or what you look like, how you started off, or how and who you love, America is a place where you can write your own destiny.”

Article Title

Barack Obama

Author

[History.com Editors](#)

Website Name

HISTORY

URL

<https://www.history.com/topics/us-presidents/barack-obama>

Access Date

August 31, 2020

Publisher

A&E Television Networks

Last Updated

January 31, 2020

Original Published Date

November 9, 2009