3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1836

Martin Van Buren vs William Henry Harrison

A 35-minute lesson on the 1836 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Second Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 294 total
WINNER Martin Van Buren (Democratic) · 170 EV	RUNNER-UP William Henry Harrison (Whig) · 73 EV
KEY ISSUE Jackson's legacy; Bank policy; slavery in Texas and the territories	TURNOUT 56.5%

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1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1836: Martin Van Buren vs William Henry Harrison

Timing

5 min	Warm-up	Sometimes a new political party tries a clever trick to win an election. What can be the good and bad sides of trying something unusual?
15 min	Reading	The 1836 election was the 13th U.S. presidential election. It produced Martin Van Buren's victory over the new Whig Party's unusual multi-candidate strategy. The election also brought the first major financial crisis to a U.S. president's opening months in office. Andrew Jackson had decided to retire after two terms. He wanted his vice president Martin Van Buren to be the next president. Van Buren was 53 years old, a New York lawyer and political organizer. He had been governor of New York, U.S. senator, Jackson's Secretary of State, and Jackson's Vice President. He was the principal architect of the Democratic Party as a national organization. The Democratic National Convention in May 1835 nominated Van Buren without opposition. Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky was selected as the vice presidential candidate. Johnson was an unusual choice - he was famous as the supposed killer of Tecumseh at the 1813 Battle of the Thames and had openly lived with an enslaved African American woman, Julia Chinn, with whom he had two daughters. The Whig Party - formed in 1834 - had no national agreement on a candidate. The party included former National Republicans (Clay supporters), former Anti-Masonics, anti-Jackson Southern states-righters, and Daniel Webster's New England Federalist tradition. Rather than choose one candidate, Whigs decided to run multiple regional candidates and try to force a House contingent election. The strategy: if no candidate won an Electoral College majority, the House would choose from the top three, and the Whigs could combine their regional supporters into a single House majority. The Whig candidates were: General William Henry Harrison of Ohio (Northern and Western Whigs); Senator Hugh L. White of Tennessee (Southern Jackson defectors); Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts (New England Whigs); Senator Willie P. Mangum of North Carolina (Deep South states-rights Whigs). The campaign was less personally vicious than 1828 but ideologically sharp. Van Buren defended Jackson's Bank Veto, the Specie Circular, and the Democratic Party's economic platform. Whigs attacked the spoils system, the abuse of executive power,

		and the financial instability the Bank War had produced. The growing antislavery movement also became a political factor: Whigs in the North started accepting antislavery petitions while Democrats opposed them. Van Buren won 170 electoral votes - a clear majority. Harrison won 73, White 26, Webster 14, Mangum 11. The combined Whig vote was 124. Van Buren carried 15 states; the Whigs combined carried 11. The Whig multi-candidate strategy failed because Van Buren ran a strong enough national campaign to win a majority outright. Van Buren was inaugurated March 4, 1837. Two months later, on May 10, 1837, the Panic of 1837 began. New York banks suspended specie payments. Banks across the country followed. The economic collapse was the worst since the Panic of 1819. Unemployment reached 25 percent in major cities. Western land prices collapsed. The Panic lasted into 1843. Van Buren's response - the 1840 Independent Treasury Act, separating federal funds from any bank - was politically unpopular. Van Buren would lose decisively to William Henry Harrison in 1840.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1836 Election

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Key words

Martin Van Buren	The eighth U.S. president. New York lawyer and political organizer. Architect of the Democratic Party. First U.S. president born after the Declaration of Independence.
Whig Party	The political party formed in 1834 to oppose Andrew Jackson. Combined former National Republicans, Anti-Masonics, anti-Jackson Southern states-righters, and Webster supporters. The 1836 election was their first presidential campaign.

Multi-candidate strategy	The 1836 Whig plan to run four regional candidates (Harrison, White, Webster, Mangum) to deny Van Buren an Electoral College majority and force a House contingent election. Failed because Van Buren won a majority outright.
Panic of 1837	The major financial crisis that began May 10, 1837 with the suspension of specie payments by New York banks. The worst U.S. financial crisis since 1819. Caused by complex factors including the Specie Circular, British credit contraction, and over-leveraged Western land speculation.
Specie Circular	Jackson's July 1836 executive order requiring gold or silver for federal land purchases. Designed to slow Western speculation; helped trigger the 1837 Panic.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Martin Van Buren win in 1836?

( ) A. 141
( ) B. 163
( ) C. 170
( ) D. 195

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Name the four Whig candidates who ran against Van Buren in 1836 and the region each represented.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Whig multi-candidate strategy fail in 1836?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the Panic of 1837, and how did it affect Van Buren's presidency?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

170. Van Buren 170; Harrison 73; White 26; Webster 14; Mangum 11. Van Buren won a clear majority; the combined Whig vote was 124.

Van Buren's majority meant no House contingent election was triggered. The Whig multi-candidate strategy failed.

QUESTION 2

(1) General William Henry Harrison of Ohio (Northern and Western Whigs). (2) Senator Hugh L. White of Tennessee (Southern Jackson defectors). (3) Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts (New England Whigs). (4) Senator Willie P. Mangum of North Carolina (Deep South states-rights Whigs).

The four Whig candidates each represented a regional faction of the new Whig coalition. The strategy required denying Van Buren a majority - it failed because Van Buren won a majority outright.

QUESTION 3

The Whigs hoped no single candidate would win an Electoral College majority, forcing a House contingent election (where the Whigs could combine their regional supporters into a single House majority). The strategy failed because Van Buren ran a strong enough national campaign to win 170 electoral votes - a clear majority. The Whig combined total (124) was not enough to deny Van Buren the presidency outright. The multi-candidate experiment would not be repeated.

The 1836 Whig strategy is a unique experiment in U.S. political history. The Whigs would unify around Harrison in 1840 and win.

QUESTION 4

The Panic of 1837 was the major U.S. financial crisis that began May 10, 1837 - just two months after Van Buren's inauguration. New York banks suspended specie payments; banks across the country followed. Unemployment reached 25 percent in major cities. Western land prices collapsed. The crisis lasted into 1843. Van Buren was politically devastated because voters blamed him for the crisis even though it had causes that started under Jackson (the 1836 Specie Circular, the end of the Second Bank). His response - the 1840 Independent Treasury Act separating federal funds from banks - was politically unpopular. Van Buren lost the 1840 election to William Henry Harrison.

The 1837 Panic is one of the worst-timed inheritances in U.S. presidential history. Van Buren's political career was essentially destroyed by a crisis he did not create.