1836

Martin Van Buren vs William Henry Harrison

A 50-minute lesson on the 1836 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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 (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1836: Martin Van Buren vs William Henry Harrison

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two political conditions in 1836 that would let an incumbent vice president win the presidency. For each, identify the specific 1832-1836 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1836 election was the 13th U.S. presidential election. It was the first Whig Party presidential campaign and the structural test of whether the post-1832 Democratic coalition could survive Jackson's retirement. Martin Van Buren's victory consolidated the Democratic Party as a durable national organization but left him to face an economic crisis that would destroy his presidency. Andrew Jackson had decided to retire after two terms, following the Washington-Jefferson precedent. He wanted Vice President Martin Van Buren to be his successor. Van Buren was 53 years old, a New York lawyer and the country's most accomplished political organizer. He had been state attorney general, governor of New York, U.S. senator, Jackson's Secretary of State, U.S. minister to Britain, and Jackson's Vice President (1833-37). He was the principal architect of the Democratic Party as a national mass organization. The Democratic National Convention met in Baltimore on May 20, 1835 - more than 18 months before the election. The convention nominated Van Buren without opposition. Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky was selected as the vice presidential candidate by a narrow margin (Johnson supposedly killed Tecumseh at the 1813 Battle of the Thames). Johnson was politically controversial because he had openly lived with an enslaved African American woman, Julia Chinn, with whom he had two daughters - an arrangement Southern Democrats found objectionable. Virginia's 23 electors refused to cast their vice presidential ballots for Johnson, forcing the only vice presidential contingent election in U.S. history (the Senate elected Johnson in February 1837 by 33-16). The Whig Party - formed in 1834 from National Republicans, Anti-Masonics, anti-Jackson Southern states-righters, and Webster supporters - had no national agreement on a candidate. Rather than risk a contested national convention that might collapse the new coalition, Whig leaders chose 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 plan paralleled the 1824 four-way result that had elevated John Quincy Adams.

The Whig candidates: General William Henry Harrison of Ohio (Northern and Western Whigs - Harrison was the 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe commander and former U.S. minister to Colombia); Senator Hugh L. White of Tennessee (Southern Jackson defectors who had broken with Jackson over the Specie Circular and the Indian Removal Act's implementation); Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts (New England Whigs and the residual Federalist tradition); 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 1836 Specie Circular, and the Democratic Party's economic platform. Whigs attacked the spoils system, the abuse of executive power, the financial instability the Bank War had produced, and the Specie Circular as anti-business. The growing antislavery movement also became a political factor: Whigs in the North started accepting antislavery petitions while Democrats opposed them. The South Carolina Calhoun faction supported White as the most acceptable anti-Van Buren Southerner.

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. Van Buren won 50.8 percent of the popular vote to the Whigs' combined 49.1 percent. Turnout was 57.8 percent of eligible voters.

Van Buren was inaugurated March 4, 1837. The Panic of 1837 began May 10, when New York banks suspended specie payments. Banks across the country followed within weeks. Cotton prices collapsed; British credit dried up; over-leveraged Western land speculators went bankrupt. By summer, unemployment reached 25 percent in major cities. The depression lasted into 1843. Van Buren's response - separating federal funds from any bank through the 1840 Independent Treasury Act - was politically unpopular. The Whigs would unify around Harrison in 1840 and defeat Van Buren decisively.

10 min	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

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

Whig Party

The political party formed in 1834 from former National Republicans, Anti-Masonics, anti-Jackson Southern states-righters, and Webster supporters. Named for the British anti-monarchist tradition; framed Jackson as "King Andrew I." Won the presidency in 1840 (Harrison) and 1848 (Taylor); collapsed over slavery extension in the 1850s.

Martin Van Buren

The eighth U.S. president. New York lawyer and political organizer. Architect of the Democratic Party as a national mass organization. First U.S. president born after the Declaration of Independence (1782). Lost re-election in 1840.

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 170 EV outright.

Panic of 1837

The major U.S. financial crisis that began May 10, 1837 with the suspension of specie payments by New York banks. The worst since 1819. Caused by complex factors including the 1836 Specie Circular, British credit contraction, the end of the Second Bank, and over-leveraged Western land speculation. Lasted into 1843.

Specie Circular

Jackson's July 11, 1836 executive order requiring gold or silver for federal land purchases rather than paper currency. Designed to slow Western land speculation; widely credited as a contributing cause of the 1837 Panic. Repealed by Congress in 1838.

Independent Treasury Act

Van Buren's 1840 federal law separating federal funds from any bank, requiring the government to hold its own deposits in subtreasury offices. Politically unpopular; repealed by the Whigs in 1841; restored under Polk in 1846. The system lasted until 1921.

Inaugural Address

MARTIN VAN BUREN, MARCH 4, 1837

Van Buren took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1837 - two months before the Panic of 1837 began. The address was carefully positioned as a continuation of Jackson's policies while emphasizing Van Buren's own political identity. The passage on slavery acknowledged the growing antislavery movement but defended slavery where it already existed - a balancing act that would define Northern Democratic politics for the next 25 years.

> *"I must go into the Presidential chair the inflexible and uncompromising opponent of every attempt on the part of Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia against the wishes of the slaveholding States, and also with a determination equally decided to resist the slightest interference with it in the States where it exists. I submit to my fellow-citizens, with the fullest confidence, an exposition of opinions and principles believed to be substantially in accordance with those of the patriot whose useful, profound, and impressive counsel marked the close of his life."*

Van Buren, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1837). Public domain.

The 1836 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

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 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which Whig candidate represented the Northern and Western Whig faction in 1836?

( ) A. Daniel Webster
( ) B. William Henry Harrison
( ) C. Hugh L. White
( ) D. Willie P. Mangum

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Whig Party run four candidates instead of one in 1836?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Virginia's electors refuse to vote for Van Buren's vice presidential running mate Richard M. Johnson?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Van Buren says in his inaugural that he will be "the inflexible and uncompromising opponent" of congressional abolition of slavery in DC. What political message was he sending, and to whom?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1836 election map, identify the regional bases of each Whig candidate. What does the pattern tell you about the new Whig coalition?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

170. Van Buren 170; Harrison 73; White 26; Webster 14; Mangum 11. The combined Whig vote was 124.

Van Buren's 170 was a clear majority - 148 was needed to win. No House contingent election was triggered.

QUESTION 2

William Henry Harrison. The 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe commander and former U.S. minister to Colombia. Harrison was the strongest national Whig candidate and would unify the party in 1840.

Harrison ran in the Northern and Western states. The Whigs would consolidate around him in 1840 and win decisively.

QUESTION 3

The Whig Party had no national agreement on a candidate. The party included former National Republicans (Clay supporters), Anti-Masonics, anti-Jackson Southern states-righters, and Webster's New England tradition. Rather than risk a contested national convention that might collapse the new coalition, Whig leaders chose 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 Whigs could combine their regional supporters into a single House majority.

The 1836 Whig multi-candidate strategy is a unique experiment in U.S. political history. AP students should recognize it as both creative and structurally risky.

QUESTION 4

Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky had openly lived with an enslaved African American woman, Julia Chinn, with whom he had two daughters. Southern Democrats - especially Virginia's electors - considered the arrangement objectionable enough to refuse their vice presidential ballots. Johnson finished with 147 electoral votes, one short of the 148 majority needed to win the vice presidency outright. The Senate then elected Johnson by 33-16 in February 1837 - the only vice presidential contingent election in U.S. history.

The Johnson controversy is a unique episode in U.S. political history. AP students should know it as the only Senate contingent VP election.

QUESTION 5

Van Buren was signaling to Southern Democrats that his administration would not interfere with slavery where it existed and would actively oppose congressional efforts to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia (a growing antislavery movement target). The message was structurally important: Van Buren was a Northern Democrat who needed to reassure the Southern wing of his coalition that he would defend their core institution. The framing would define Northern Democratic politics for the next 25 years - until the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act broke the Northern Democratic coalition.

AP students should be able to identify the doughface framing (Northern men with Southern principles) that would dominate Democratic politics through the 1850s.

QUESTION 6

Harrison: Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Indiana, Vermont, Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland (Northern and Western states). White: Tennessee, Georgia (Southern Jackson defectors). Webster: Massachusetts only (New England). Mangum: South Carolina (Deep South states-rights Whigs, though SC chose Mangum specifically as a protest against Van Buren). Pattern: each candidate had a distinct regional base. The Whig coalition in 1836 was a sum of regional anti-Jackson factions rather than a unified national coalition. The Whigs would consolidate around Harrison in 1840 by adopting his common-man image and the Jacksonian campaigning style they had been criticizing.

AP students should be able to read the 1836 map as a snapshot of the regional pre-unification Whig coalition.