CLASSROOM EDITION · GRADES 9 — 12

1836

Martin Van Buren vs William Henry Harrison

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1836: Martin Van Buren vs William Henry Harrison

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1836 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1836 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 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 the Panic of 1837 - which began two months after his inauguration - would define his presidency and produce his 1840 defeat. Andrew Jackson had decided to retire after two terms, following the Washington-Jefferson precedent. He selected Vice President Martin Van Buren as his successor. Van Buren was 53, a New York lawyer and the country's most accomplished political organizer. He had been state attorney general (1815-19), governor of New York (1829), U.S. senator (1821-28), Jackson's Secretary of State (1829-31), U.S. minister to Britain (1831-32, recalled by Senate), and Jackson's Vice President (1833-37). He was the principal architect of the Democratic Party as a national mass organization. Van Buren was the first U.S. president born after the Declaration of Independence (December 5, 1782) and the first of non-British ancestry (Dutch ancestry in upstate New York). The Democratic National Convention met in Baltimore on May 20, 1835 - the earliest national convention in U.S. history (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 was politically controversial: he claimed credit for killing Tecumseh at the 1813 Battle of the Thames; he had openly lived with an enslaved African American woman, Julia Chinn, with whom he had two daughters; and he was associated with the increasingly populist Western Democratic faction. 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 had been formed in 1834. Its founding coalition included former National Republicans (Clay supporters), Anti-Masonics, anti-Jackson Southern states-righters (including former Vice President Calhoun briefly), Webster's New England Federalist tradition, and Hugh White's Tennessee anti-Jackson Democrats. The party was named for the British anti-monarchist tradition and framed Jackson as "King Andrew I." But the Whig coalition had no agreement on candidate or platform. The 1836 election would be the structural test of whether the new party could organize around a single nominee.

Whig leaders concluded they could not. Rather than risk a contested national convention that might collapse the new coalition, Whigs chose to run multiple regional candidates and try to force a House contingent election. The strategy paralleled the 1824 four-way result. The Whig candidates: General William Henry Harrison of Ohio (Northern and Western Whigs; the 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe commander; 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, particularly the South Carolina Calhoun faction that had broken with Jackson over nullification).

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, executive expansion, 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 1836-37 House Gag Rule (passed by Democrats to block reading of antislavery petitions) would intensify the partisan division.

Van Buren won 170 electoral votes - a clear majority (148 was needed). 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 - similar to 1832.

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; the federal government deposits in "pet banks" were frozen; commodity prices fell 33 percent over the next 18 months. By summer, unemployment reached 25 percent in major cities. The depression lasted into 1843

		- the longest U.S. economic contraction prior to the Great Depression. Van Buren's response was the 1840 Independent Treasury Act, separating federal funds from any bank by requiring the government to hold its own deposits in subtreasury offices. The Act was politically unpopular: it appeared to confirm that the federal government had no plan for restoring economic stability. The Whigs would unify around Harrison in 1840, run the famous "Log Cabin and Hard Cider" campaign (positioning Harrison as a common-man Westerner against Van Buren's elite New York image), and defeat Van Buren 234-60 in the Electoral College. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.
15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1836 election tells you about the Second Party System era that the textbook didn't?"

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 and 1848; collapsed over slavery extension in the 1850s.

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 Whigs in 1841; restored under Polk in 1846. The system lasted until 1921 when the Federal Reserve absorbed the function.

Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign

The 1840 Whig campaign positioning William Henry Harrison as a common-man Westerner against Van Buren's elite New York image. The campaign's populist symbols and rallies represented the Whigs' adoption of the Jacksonian campaigning style they had previously criticized.

Multi-candidate strategy

The 1836 Whig plan to run four regional candidates to deny Van Buren an Electoral College majority. Paralleled the 1824 four-way fragmentation but failed because Van Buren ran a stronger national campaign than any 1824 candidate.

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 longest U.S. economic contraction prior to the Great Depression. Caused by the 1836 Specie Circular, British credit contraction, the end of the Second Bank, and over-leveraged Western land speculation.

Doughface

A Northern Democrat (or Northern Whig) sympathetic to Southern slavery interests. The 1836 election produced the doughface Democratic coalition that would dominate Northern Democratic politics through the 1850s.

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 - the doughface framing 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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

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

The vice presidential contingent election in February 1837 elected:

( ) A. Daniel Webster
( ) B. Richard M. Johnson
( ) C. Francis Granger
( ) D. John Tyler

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What policy decisions of the Jackson administration contributed to the 1837 Panic? Identify two specific causes.

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. Explain his framing and identify the political faction he was addressing.

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Van Buren was a transitional figure between two political generations. Identify two specific ways the 1836 election marked structural transitions in U.S. political life.

QUESTION 7 · 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's structural composition?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

170. Van Buren 170; Harrison 73; White 26; Webster 14; Mangum 11. Combined Whig vote: 124. Majority needed: 148.

Van Buren's 170 was a clear majority.

QUESTION 2

Richard M. Johnson. He won 147 electoral votes - one short of the 148 majority needed. Virginia's 23 electors refused to cast their VP ballots for Johnson because of his relationship with the enslaved Julia Chinn. The Senate elected Johnson by 33-16 in February 1837 - the only vice presidential contingent election in U.S. history.

AP students should know the unique 1836 VP contingent election.

QUESTION 3

The Whig Party had been formed only two years earlier (1834) and had no national agreement on a candidate or platform. The party combined four ideologically distinct factions: former National Republicans, Anti-Masonics, anti-Jackson Southern states-righters, and Webster's New England Federalist 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 paralleled the 1824 four-way result that had elevated John Quincy Adams. The strategy failed because Van Buren ran a strong enough national campaign to win 170 electoral votes - a clear majority.

AP students should be able to identify both the strategic logic and the structural reasons for the failure.

QUESTION 4

Accept any two of: (1) The 1836 Specie Circular - Jackson's July 11, 1836 executive order requiring gold or silver for federal land purchases, which crippled Western land speculation. (2) The end of the Second Bank of the United States in 1836 - removing the central regulatory mechanism for state-bank credit. (3) The 1833 Removal of Deposits to "pet banks" - which had then issued credit on the federal deposits with inadequate reserves. (4) The 1836 Distribution Act - redistributing federal surplus to states, which the states then deposited in over-leveraged state banks. The Specie Circular and the end of the Second Bank are the strongest single causes.

AP students should be able to identify multiple specific Jackson-era policies that contributed to the 1837 Panic.

QUESTION 5

Van Buren was signaling to Southern Democrats that his administration would actively oppose congressional efforts to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia (a growing antislavery movement target) and would not interfere with slavery where it existed. The faction he was addressing was the Southern wing of the Democratic Party - particularly the cotton-economy states that had supported Jackson on banking but were nervous about Northern Democratic alignment with antislavery sentiment. The framing was structurally important: Van Buren was a New York Democrat who needed to reassure Southern Democrats that his administration would not become an antislavery vehicle. The doughface framing would dominate Northern Democratic politics through the 1850s. Stephen Douglas and Franklin Pierce would inherit and extend it.

AP students should be able to identify the doughface framework as a structural feature of pre-Civil War Northern Democratic politics.

QUESTION 6

Accept any two of: (1) First U.S. president born after the Declaration of Independence (Van Buren born December 5, 1782). (2) First U.S. president not of British ancestry (Van Buren had Dutch ancestry). (3) First U.S. presidential election in which the dominant party's nomination was uncontested at the convention. (4) First and only vice presidential contingent election in U.S. history. (5) First election in which the Whig Party formally competed for the presidency. (6) Last U.S. presidential election in which an incumbent vice president would directly succeed his president via election until George H.W. Bush in 1988.

The 1836 election was structurally transitional in multiple ways. AP students should be able to identify several.

QUESTION 7

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 only (Deep South states-rights protest). Pattern: each candidate represented a distinct regional faction of the new Whig coalition. The coalition was a sum of regional anti-Jackson factions rather than a unified national coalition. The structural lesson: the Whigs could not yet win a presidential election because they had not yet built a national candidate. They 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 structural snapshot of the regional pre-unification Whig coalition.

Discussion prompts

1 The 1836 Whig multi-candidate strategy attempted to force a House contingent election by denying Van Buren an Electoral College majority. Identify two structural reasons the strategy failed in 1836 but the 1824 four-way fragmentation had succeeded.

2 The 1837 Panic struck two months after Van Buren's inauguration. Identify two specific 1832-1836 policy decisions that contributed to the Panic, and evaluate whether Van Buren could fairly be blamed for them politically.