AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1836

Martin Van Buren vs William Henry Harrison

A 105-minute lesson on the 1836 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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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3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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7. Answer key + discussion

1836: Martin Van Buren vs William Henry Harrison

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural features of the U.S. political system by 1836 that would allow an incumbent vice president to 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 structural test of two questions simultaneously: whether the Democratic Party that Van Buren and Jackson had built could survive Jackson's retirement, and whether the new Whig Party that had emerged in 1834 could organize itself for national presidential competition. Van Buren's victory answered the first question affirmatively; the Whig multi-candidate strategy's failure answered the second negatively. The 1837 Panic that began two months after Van Buren's inauguration would then transform the political situation entirely. 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 served as 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; the Senate recalled him by tied vote with Calhoun breaking the tie against him), and Jackson's Vice President (1833-37). Van Buren was the principal architect of the Democratic Party as a national mass organization - the inventor of the modern political party. 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). Jackson's personal endorsement made Van Buren's nomination uncontested. Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky was selected as the vice presidential candidate by a narrow 178-87 margin over William C. Rives of Virginia. 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 (Adaline and Imogene); and he was associated with the populist Western Democratic faction. Southern Democrats found the Chinn relationship objectionable. Virginia's 23 electors refused to cast their vice presidential ballots for Johnson, leaving him with 147 electoral votes - one short of the 148 majority needed.

The Senate elected Johnson in February 1837 by 33-16, the only vice presidential contingent election in U.S. history under the Twelfth Amendment.

The Whig Party had been formed in 1834 from National Republicans (Clay supporters), Anti-Masonics, anti-Jackson Southern states-righters (including briefly former Vice President Calhoun), 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." The party's constitutional theory was articulated in Webster's July 1832 Senate speech opposing the Bank Veto. But the Whig coalition had no agreement on candidate or platform. The 1836 election would test whether the new party could organize around a single national nominee.

Whig leaders concluded they could not - and chose instead 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 strategic theory: deny Van Buren an Electoral College majority; force the House to choose from the top three; let the combined Whig delegations vote together for one of their own. The Whig candidates: 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, particularly the South Carolina Calhoun faction).

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 December 1836 House Gag Rule (passed by Democrats to block reading of antislavery petitions) would intensify the partisan division. Van Buren's inaugural address would explicitly position him as the "uncompromising opponent" of congressional abolition - the doughface framing that would dominate Northern Democratic politics through the 1850s.

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; "pet banks" holding federal deposits froze; commodity prices fell 33 percent over the next 18 months. By summer, unemployment reached 25 percent in major cities. The Panic's causes were structural: the July 1836 Specie Circular had crippled Western land speculation by requiring specie for federal land purchases; the May 1836 expiration of the Second Bank of the United States had removed the central regulatory mechanism for state-bank credit; the 1836 Distribution Act had redistributed federal surplus to states (which had then deposited it in over-leveraged state banks); British credit contraction in 1836-37 had pulled foreign capital out of U.S. markets. Van Buren inherited the structural causes; he could not undo them.

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 - adopting the Jacksonian campaigning style they had previously criticized), and defeat Van Buren 234-60 in the Electoral College. The Whig Party would finally hold the presidency - briefly, since Harrison would die one month into his term.

Historians treat 1836 as the structural inflection point between the Jackson era and the Second Party System's competitive phase. The Whig multi-candidate strategy was a unique experiment that demonstrated the new party's organizational immaturity. The 1840 Whig consolidation around Harrison would prove that a unified party could compete effectively. The Second Party System (Democrats vs. Whigs) would dominate American politics until the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act broke both parties along sectional lines over slavery extension.

20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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.

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.

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 (1837-1843). Caused by the Specie Circular, the end of the Second Bank, the Distribution Act, British credit contraction, and over-leveraged state-bank credit.

Doughface

A Northern Democrat (or Northern Whig) sympathetic to Southern slavery interests. The 1836 Van Buren coalition was the founding doughface political alignment. The framework dominated Northern Democratic politics through the 1850s.

House Gag Rule

The series of resolutions (1836-1844) passed by the Democratic-controlled House to block reading of anti-slavery petitions. John Quincy Adams (returned to the

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. Paralleled the 1824 four-way fragmentation but failed because Van Buren ran a stronger national campaign.

Distribution Act of 1836

The federal law distributing the federal surplus (accumulated from tariff revenue and land sales) to the states. Federal deposits in "pet banks" were transferred to states beginning January 1837. The states then deposited the funds in over-leveraged state banks - contributing to the 1837 Panic.

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.

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 mass rallies represented the Whigs' adoption of the Jacksonian campaigning style they had previously criticized. The strategic reversal allowed the Whigs to win the presidency for the first time.

House after his 1828 defeat) led the fight against the Gag Rule, finally winning its repeal in 1844. The Gag Rule controversy crystallized the antislavery movement's political identity.

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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Inaugural Address

MARTIN VAN BUREN, MARCH 4, 1837

“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.

SOURCE B

Special Session Message on the Panic of 1837

MARTIN VAN BUREN, SEPTEMBER 4, 1837

“All communities are apt to look to government for too much. Even in our own country, where its powers and duties are so strictly limited, we are prone to do so, especially at periods of sudden embarrassment and distress. But this ought not to be. The framers of our excellent Constitution and the people who approved it with calm and sagacious deliberation acted at the time on a sounder principle. They wisely judged that the less government interferes with private pursuits the better for the general prosperity. It is not its legitimate object to make men rich or to repair by direct grants of money or legislation in favor of particular pursuits losses not incurred in the public service.”

Van Buren, "Special Session Message" (Washington, DC, September 4, 1837). Public domain.

The 1836 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Van Buren's Inaugural) that articulates the doughface framing on slavery. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Special Session Message) that articulates Van Buren's strict-construction theory of federal economic intervention. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources are Van Buren documents that extend Jacksonian Democracy into new domains. Identify the specific extension each source makes.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A was delivered before the Panic of 1837; Source B during the crisis. What does the six-month evolution tell you about how Van Buren's political situation transformed across his first months in office?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B says government "is not its legitimate object to make men rich or to repair by direct grants of money or legislation ... losses not incurred in the public service." Identify two specific later U.S. economic crises in which the federal government rejected Van Buren's strict-construction framework and intervened directly.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 1840 Whig campaign positioning Harrison as a common-man Westerner against Van Buren's elite image was called the:

( ) A. Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign
( ) B. Tippecanoe campaign
( ) C. Old Tip and the Tile Roof campaign
( ) D. Hard Money campaign

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 1840 federal law separating federal funds from any bank was the:

( ) A. Distribution Act
( ) B. Independent Treasury Act
( ) C. Bank Repeal Act
( ) D. Subtreasury Act

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was Van Buren's 1840 defeat structural, policy-based, or coalitional? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Van Buren's 1837 Inaugural (Source A) frames his presidency as a continuation of Jacksonian Democracy on both economic policy (Bank Veto continuation) and slavery (doughface opposition to congressional emancipation). His September 1837 special-session message (Source B) extends the Jacksonian framework into economic-crisis response: government should not intervene to "repair by direct grants of money or legislation" the financial distress of the Panic. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1832-1845 period, evaluate the extent to which Van Buren's 1840 defeat resulted from (a) the structural inheritance of the Panic from Jackson's 1836 Specie Circular and the end of the Second Bank, (b) Van Buren's specific decision to maintain strict-construction non-intervention during the economic crisis, or (c) the Whig consolidation around Harrison in 1840 that finally produced a unified opposition coalition. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the structural-vs-policy-vs-coalition axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Specie Circular, the Distribution Act, the Bank Veto, the Log Cabin campaign, the Gag Rule. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "the inflexible and uncompromising opponent of every attempt on the part of Congress to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia", "a determination equally decided to resist the slightest interference with it in the States where it exists". The "inflexible and uncompromising opponent" phrase is the cleanest doughface framing.

Van Buren's 1837 doughface framing established the political identity that would dominate Northern Democratic politics through the 1850s.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "all communities are apt to look to government for too much", "the framers of our excellent Constitution ... wisely judged that the less government interferes with private pursuits the better for the general prosperity", "it is not its legitimate object to make men rich or to repair by direct grants of money or legislation ... losses not incurred in the public service". The "less government interferes" phrase is the cleanest articulation.

Van Buren's strict-construction framework defined his economic-policy identity. The framing was ideologically consistent but politically catastrophic during an economic crisis voters expected the government to address.

QUESTION 3

Source A extends Jacksonian Democracy into the slavery domain - establishing the doughface framework that would dominate Northern Democratic politics through the 1850s. Source B extends Jacksonian Democracy into economic-crisis response - establishing that federal non-intervention applies even during financial collapse. The two extensions together demonstrate how Jacksonian ideology could be applied across substantively different policy domains - and how the strict-construction principle could become politically untenable when applied to economic emergency.

AP students should be able to identify Jacksonian Democracy as a coherent ideological framework rather than just an economic-policy program.

QUESTION 4

The six-month gap covers the May 10, 1837 New York bank suspension, the nationwide bank suspensions following, the collapse of cotton prices and British credit, the freezing of federal deposits in pet banks, and Van Buren's September 1837 special session. The temporal evolution tells you that Van Buren's political situation transformed entirely between March and September 1837. The March inaugural assumed continuity with Jackson's prosperity; the September special session confronted the worst U.S. economic contraction to that point. Van Buren's strict-construction framework - politically defensible during prosperity - became politically untenable during depression. The 1840 election would be a referendum on the framework's adequacy to economic crisis. The Whigs' Log Cabin campaign would frame Van Buren as elite, out-of-touch, and indifferent to the suffering the crisis had caused.

AP students should be able to articulate how a single economic event can transform a political situation entirely.

QUESTION 5

Accept any two of: (1) The 1893 Panic - Cleveland's second term included federal action to address the financial crisis, though Cleveland himself remained strict-construction. (2) The 1907 Panic - resulted in the 1913 Federal Reserve Act, structurally rejecting Van Buren's framework. (3) The Great Depression (1929-39) - Hoover's 1932 RFC and Roosevelt's 1933-38 New Deal completely abandoned the strict-construction framework. (4) The 2008 Financial Crisis - TARP and the Federal Reserve's emergency lending rejected Van Buren's framework. (5) The 2020 COVID economic response - the CARES Act's $2.2 trillion intervention was the largest single rejection of the framework in U.S. history.

AP students should be able to trace the long-term policy trajectory and recognize that Van Buren's framework has been progressively abandoned across U.S. economic history.

QUESTION 6

Log Cabin and Hard Cider campaign.

The 1840 Whig campaign positioned Harrison as a common-man Westerner against Van Buren's elite New York image. The campaign's populist symbols (log cabins, hard cider, "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" slogan) represented the Whigs' adoption of Jacksonian campaigning style.

QUESTION 7

Independent Treasury Act.

The 1840 federal law separated federal funds from any bank. Politically unpopular; repealed by Whigs in 1841; restored under Polk in 1846. The system lasted until 1921 when the Federal Reserve absorbed the function.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the structural-vs-policy-vs-coalition axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric evaluates the full essay.