K-2 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1836

Martin Van Buren vs William Henry Harrison

A 20-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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2. Story (with a picture)
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1836

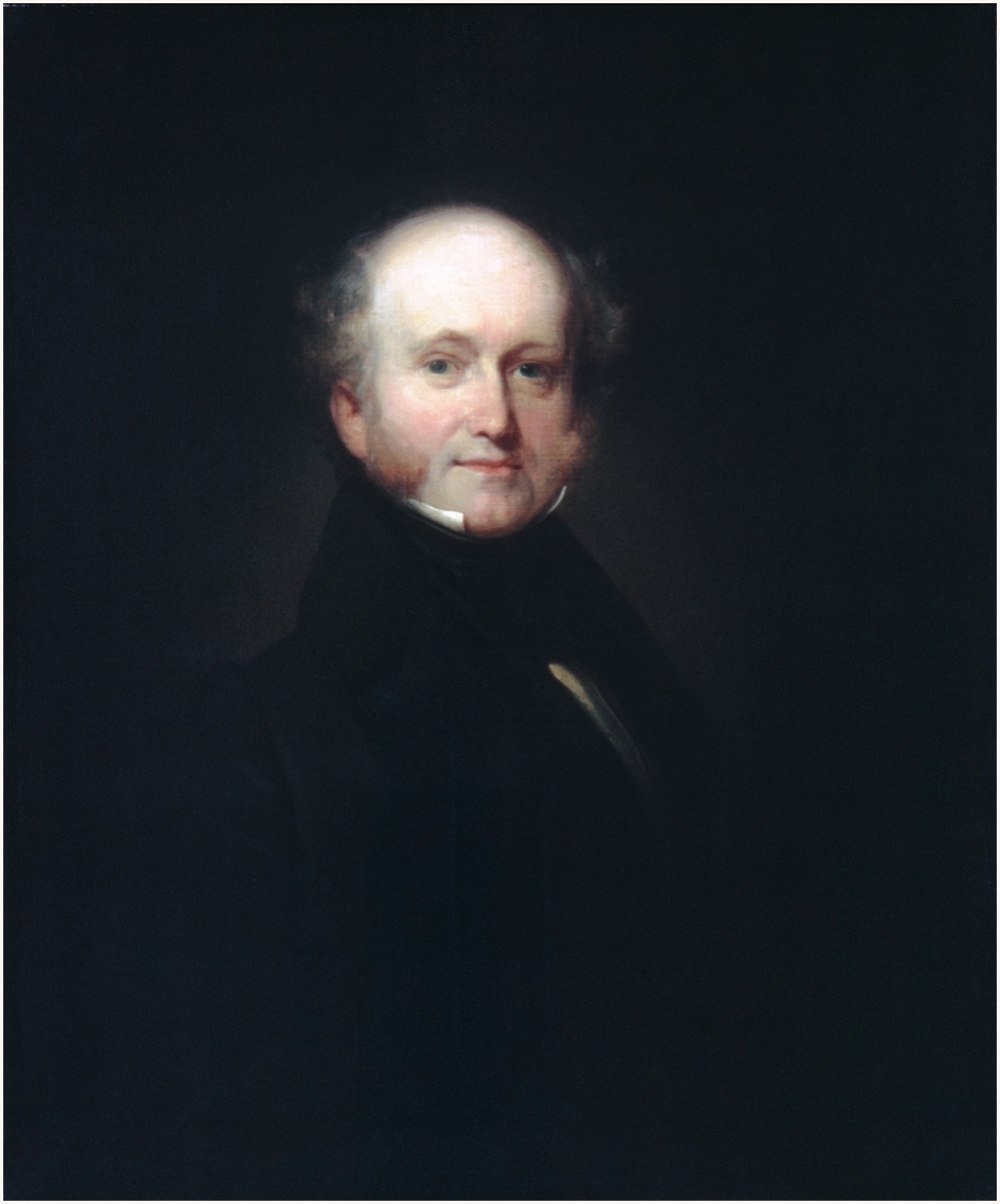
President Andrew Jackson was finishing his second term. He had decided to retire and go home to Tennessee. He wanted his vice president Martin Van Buren to be the next president.

Look at the picture. That is Martin Van Buren. He came from a small town in New York. He had been a lawyer and a senator. He helped Jackson build the Democratic Party. Jackson called him "the Little Magician" because he was so good at political tricks.

The new opposition party, the Whigs, did something strange. They could not agree on one candidate. So they decided to run four different ones - each one popular in a different region. William Henry Harrison ran in the North. Hugh White ran in the South. Daniel Webster ran in New England. Willie Mangum ran in the Deep South.

The Whigs hoped no single candidate would win enough electoral votes for a majority. Then the election would go to the House of Representatives, where Whigs hoped they could win. The same trick had worked for John Quincy Adams in 1824.

It did not work this time. Van Buren won a clear majority. He got 170 electoral votes. All four Whigs combined got 124. Van Buren became the eighth president.



Martin Van Buren, the eighth U.S. president. He was nicknamed "the Little Magician" for his political skill.

GEORGE PETER ALEXANDER HEALY (1813-1894), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the eighth president of the United States after the 1836 election?

2.

What strange thing did the Whig Party try in 1836?

3.

What big problem happened just after Van Buren became president?

Warm-up (5 min)

After eight years of Andrew Jackson, his vice president Martin Van Buren ran for the top job. The Whigs tried a strange trick - they put FOUR different candidates on the ballot in different states!

Answer key

1.

Martin Van Buren. He was Andrew Jackson's vice president and his chosen successor. He won 170 electoral votes.

Van Buren was the first U.S. president born after the Declaration of Independence (1782). He had been New York governor, U.S. senator, Jackson's Secretary of State, and Jackson's Vice President.

2.

The Whigs could not agree on one candidate. So they ran four different candidates - William Henry Harrison in the North, Hugh White in the South, Daniel Webster in New England, and Willie Mangum in the Deep South. They hoped no candidate would win a majority of electoral votes, sending the election to the House of Representatives. The strategy did not work - Van Buren won a clear majority.

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

3.

The Panic of 1837. A big money crash. Banks closed. Workers lost their jobs. Farmers lost their farms. The crisis lasted for years. People blamed Van Buren for the crisis even though it had causes that started before he became president.

The 1837 Panic was caused by complex factors including the end of the Second Bank, Jackson's Specie Circular, British credit contraction, and over-leveraged Western land speculation. Van Buren inherited a crisis he did not create.