3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1840

William Henry Harrison vs Martin Van Buren

A 35-minute lesson on the 1840 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Second Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 294 total
WINNER William Henry Harrison (Whig) · 234 EV	RUNNER-UP Martin Van Buren (Democratic) · 60 EV
KEY ISSUE Economic depression from the Panic of 1837; opposition to Jacksonian Democrats	TURNOUT 80.3%

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

1840: William Henry Harrison vs Martin Van Buren

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When voters are angry about hard economic times, sometimes they vote out the people in power. Why does this often happen during a recession?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1840 election was the 14th U.S. presidential election. It was the first U.S. presidential election won by the Whig Party - and the first U.S. election decided primarily by economic depression rather than by ideology, region, or candidate experience. The political environment had been transformed by the Panic of 1837. The depression that began two months after Van Buren's inauguration had lasted three years and showed no signs of ending. Unemployment remained around 20 percent in major cities. Bank suspensions, business failures, and Western land foreclosures had become routine. Van Buren's Independent Treasury Act (1840) - separating federal funds from any bank - appeared inadequate to address the crisis. Voters were ready for change. The Whig Party had learned from its 1836 multi-candidate failure. The December 1839 Whig National Convention in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania nominated General William Henry Harrison of Ohio over Henry Clay (the favored candidate of the Whig political establishment) on the fourth ballot. Convention manager Thurlow Weed of New York engineered the result, calculating that Harrison's military reputation and Western base would be more electorally effective than Clay's clear policy positions. John Tyler of Virginia, a former Democrat who had broken with Jackson over nullification, was selected as the vice presidential candidate to balance the ticket geographically. Harrison was 67 years old - the oldest person nominated for president to that point. His political resume was uneven. He had been the U.S. military commander at the November 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe (a draw, but framed as a great American victory). He had served briefly as governor of Indiana Territory, U.S. minister to Colombia (1828-29), and as a U.S. senator from Ohio. But his real political asset was his image as the common-man Westerner who had fought for America against Native American resistance. The Whig campaign was a strategic masterpiece. Whig publicists turned a Democratic newspaper insult against Harrison - "give him a barrel of hard cider and a pension and he'll be content in his log cabin" - into the central campaign theme. Whigs

		erected log cabins at every campaign rally; distributed hard cider to voters; sang campaign songs ("Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" was the most famous); produced rolling log cabin floats for parades; printed log cabin engravings on campaign materials. The campaign focused on images rather than policies. The strategic insight: in the depression of 1837-43, voters wanted relief, not policy debates. Harrison embodied the promise of a return to common-man prosperity. The Whigs had finally adopted the Jacksonian campaign style they had been criticizing for eight years. The 1840 cycle's turnout reached 80.2 percent - the highest in U.S. history to that point. Harrison won 234 electoral votes to Van Buren's 60. Harrison carried 19 of 26 states. Van Buren held only Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Missouri, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Virginia. The popular vote was 53 percent to 47 percent. Harrison was inaugurated March 4, 1841. He delivered the longest inauguration speech in U.S. history - 8,495 words, almost two hours - on a cold and rainy day. He refused to wear a coat or hat. He caught a cold. The cold turned into pneumonia. Harrison died on April 4, 1841, exactly 31 days after taking office. He was the first U.S. president to die in office. Vice President John Tyler became the 10th president and would prove politically problematic for the Whig Party: Tyler vetoed two Whig bills to recharter a national bank in 1841, leading to his expulsion from the Whig Party in September 1841.
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 1840 Election

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The political environment had been transformed by the Panic of 1837. The depression that began two months after Van Buren's inauguration had lasted three years and showed no signs of ending. Unemployment remained around 20 percent in major cities. Bank suspensions, business failures, and Western land foreclosures had become routine. Van Buren's Independent Treasury Act (1840) - separating federal funds from any bank - appeared inadequate to address the crisis. Voters were ready for change.

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American resistance.

The Whig campaign was a strategic masterpiece. Whig publicists turned a Democratic newspaper insult against Harrison - "give him a barrel of hard cider and a pension and he'll be content in his log cabin" - into the central campaign theme. Whigs erected log cabins at every campaign rally; distributed hard cider to voters; sang campaign songs ("Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" was the most famous); produced rolling log cabin floats for parades; printed log cabin engravings on campaign materials. The campaign focused on images rather than policies. The strategic insight: in the depression of 1837-43, voters wanted relief, not policy debates. Harrison embodied the promise of a return to common-man prosperity.

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Key words

Log Cabin Campaign	The 1840 Whig campaign that positioned William Henry Harrison as a common-man Westerner through log cabins, hard cider, parades, and the "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" slogan. Reversed the Whig Party's previous criticism of Jacksonian campaigning style.
Panic of 1837	The major U.S. financial crisis that began May 10, 1837 and lasted until 1843. The longest U.S. economic contraction prior to the Great Depression. Crippled Van Buren's presidency and produced the 1840 Whig landslide.
Thurlow Weed	The New York Whig political organizer who managed the 1839 Harrisburg convention. Engineered the Harrison nomination over Clay by calculating military reputation would be more electorally effective than policy clarity.
John Tyler	Harrison's 1840 running mate and the 10th U.S. president after Harrison's death. A former Democrat who had broken with Jackson over nullification, Tyler vetoed two Whig bank bills in 1841 and was expelled from the Whig Party.
Tippecanoe and Tyler Too	The 1840 Whig campaign slogan combining Harrison's 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe with Tyler's name. The catchiest political slogan of 19th-century American politics; widely sung at campaign rallies and printed on campaign materials.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did William Henry Harrison win in 1840?

( ) A. 189
( ) B. 212
( ) C. 234
( ) D. 247

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the Log Cabin Campaign, and why did it succeed?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did Harrison win the Whig nomination over Henry Clay at the 1839 Harrisburg convention?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What happened when Harrison died one month after his inauguration?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

234. Harrison 234; Van Buren 60. Harrison carried 19 of 26 states. The popular vote was 53% to 47%. Turnout reached 80.2% - the highest in U.S. history to that point.

The 1840 result was a Whig landslide built on Panic-of-1837 voter punishment of Van Buren plus the strategic Log Cabin Campaign.

QUESTION 2

The Log Cabin Campaign positioned William Henry Harrison as a common-man Westerner through log cabins, hard cider, parades, and the "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" slogan. Whig publicists turned a Democratic newspaper insult against Harrison into the central campaign theme. The campaign succeeded because: (1) voters were ready for change after three years of depression; (2) the image-based approach matched Harrison's greatest political asset (his military reputation) while avoiding his policy weaknesses; (3) turnout reached 80% as the Whig style mobilized previously non-voting men; (4) Van Buren had no effective response to the populist framing.

The Log Cabin Campaign is one of the most-cited examples of image-based political marketing in U.S. history. AP students should know the strategic significance.

QUESTION 3

Convention manager Thurlow Weed of New York engineered the result on the fourth ballot. He calculated that Harrison's military reputation and Western base would be more electorally effective than Clay's clear policy positions. Clay was the favored candidate of the Whig political establishment but had been associated with the controversial American System (protective tariff, internal improvements, Second Bank) for nearly two decades. Harrison had no clear policy positions - which made him harder for Democrats to attack. Weed prioritized winnability over ideological clarity.

The Weed strategy is one of the founding examples of professional political management overriding ideological preference in U.S. party nomination contests.

QUESTION 4

Vice President John Tyler became the 10th U.S. president on April 4, 1841 - the first time a vice president had taken over because the president died in office. Tyler proved politically problematic for the Whig Party: he vetoed two Whig bills to recharter a national bank in 1841, leading to his expulsion from the Whig Party in September 1841 and the resignation of his entire Cabinet (except Secretary of State Webster). Tyler served out the remaining 47 months of Harrison's term as a man without a party. His Whig successor would not be elected until Taylor in 1848.

The Harrison-Tyler succession is one of the structurally important moments in U.S. presidential history. AP students should know that Tyler set the precedent of the VP fully assuming presidential authority (rather than just acting as president).