1840

William Henry Harrison vs Martin Van Buren

A 50-minute lesson on the 1840 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 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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2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1840: William Henry Harrison vs Martin Van Buren

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 1840 that would let an opposition party win the presidency for the first time. For each, identify the specific 1837-1840 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1840 election was the 14th U.S. presidential election. It was the first Whig Party victory and the first U.S. presidential election decided primarily by economic depression rather than ideology, region, or candidate experience. The Log Cabin Campaign that produced the victory marked the Whig adoption of Jacksonian populist style and the inauguration of image-based mass-democratic campaigning that would dominate American politics for the next 180 years. 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 (July 1840) - separating federal funds from any bank by requiring the government to hold its own deposits in subtreasury offices - appeared inadequate to address the crisis. Whig newspapers framed Van Buren as "King Mat" - the elite New York doughface who refused to intervene to relieve common-citizen suffering. 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 on the fourth ballot. Convention manager Thurlow Weed of New York engineered the result. Clay was the favored candidate of the Whig political establishment but had three problems: (1) his association with the controversial American System framework had been politically discrediting since 1832; (2) his 1825 Corrupt Bargain role with Adams remained a Jacksonian rhetorical weapon; (3) his clear policy positions made him an easy target for Democratic opposition research. Harrison had none of these liabilities. Weed prioritized winnability over ideological clarity. 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 and ideologically.

Harrison was 67 years old - the oldest person nominated for president to that point. His political resume was uneven. He had been U.S. military commander at the November 1811 Battle of Tippecanoe (a tactical draw later framed as great American victory). He had served briefly as governor of Indiana Territory (1801-12), commanded U.S. forces at the October 1813 Battle of the Thames (killing Tecumseh), served as U.S. minister to Colombia (1828-29), and served terms in the U.S. House and Senate. But his real political asset was his Western military reputation and his alleged log cabin background.

The Whig campaign was a strategic masterpiece of image manipulation. The Democratic Baltimore Republican had run a column attacking Harrison: "give him a barrel of hard cider and a pension and he'll be content in his log cabin." Whig publicists turned the insult 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" being the most famous); produced rolling log cabin floats for parades; printed log cabin engravings on campaign materials. The campaign focused on Harrison's image rather than his policies. The strategic insight: in the depression of 1837-43, voters wanted relief, not policy debates. Harrison embodied the promise of return to common-man prosperity.

The Whigs had finally adopted the Jacksonian campaign style they had been criticizing for eight years. They organized state party committees, partisan newspapers, parades, songs, rallies, and door-to-door canvassing at scale. The 1840 cycle's turnout reached 80.2 percent of eligible voters - the highest in U.S. history to that point (and a level not surpassed until 1860).

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 1,275,612 (52.9%) to 1,128,854 (46.8%). The Liberty Party, the first explicitly antislavery party in U.S. history, ran James G. Birney and won 6,797 votes (0.3 percent) without carrying any state.

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. Tyler immediately proved politically problematic for the Whig Party: he vetoed two Whig bills to recharter a national bank in August and September 1841, leading to his September 11 expulsion from the Whig Party (the only time in U.S. history a major party has expelled a sitting president) 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. The Whigs would not elect another president until Zachary Taylor in 1848.

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

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 and produced 80.2% turnout.

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. Became one of the most influential Whig and later Republican operatives of the 19th century.

John Tyler

Harrison's 1840 running mate. Former Democrat who broke with Jackson over nullification. Became the 10th U.S. president on April 4, 1841 after Harrison's death - the first VP to take over because the president died in office. Vetoed two Whig bank bills in 1841; expelled from the Whig Party September 11, 1841.

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. Caused by the 1836 Specie Circular, the end of the Second Bank, British credit contraction, and over-leveraged state-bank credit. Crippled Van Buren's presidency.

Liberty Party

The first explicitly antislavery political party in U.S. history. Founded 1839; nominated James G. Birney for president in 1840 and 1844. Won 0.3% of the 1840 vote but 2.3% in 1844 - in 1844 the Liberty Party's New York votes were enough to deny Henry Clay the presidency. Merged with the Free Soil Party in 1848.

Tyler Precedent

The constitutional principle established by John Tyler's April 1841 actions: a vice president who succeeds a deceased president becomes the full president (rather than acting president). Tyler explicitly took the oath of office, moved into the White House, and conducted himself as the legitimate president. The precedent was constitutionalized in the 1967 Twenty-Fifth Amendment.

Inaugural Address

WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON, MARCH 4, 1841

Harrison took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1841 on a cold, rainy day. He refused to wear a coat or hat. He delivered the longest inauguration speech in U.S. history - 8,495 words, almost two hours. He caught a cold that turned into pneumonia. He died on April 4, 1841. The address emphasized constitutional limits on executive power - directly responding to the Whig framing of Jackson and Van Buren as "King Andrew" and "King Mat."

> *"Called from a retirement which I had supposed was to continue for the residue of my life to fill the chief executive office of this great and free nation, I appear before you, fellow-citizens, to take the oaths which the Constitution prescribes as a necessary qualification for the performance of its duties; and in obedience to a custom coeval with our Government and what I believe to be your expectations I proceed to present to you a summary of the principles which will govern me in the discharge of the duties which I shall be called upon to perform. It was the remark of a Roman consul in an early period of that celebrated Republic that a most striking contrast was observable in the conduct of candidates for offices of power and trust before and after obtaining them."*

Harrison, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1841). Public domain.

The 1840 Election

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

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 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

What was the U.S. presidential election turnout in 1840?

( ) A. 57.8%
( ) B. 67.2%
( ) C. 80.2%
( ) D. 85.6%

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Whigs choose William Henry Harrison over Henry Clay at the 1839 Harrisburg convention?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Log Cabin Campaign reverse the Whig Party's previous criticism of Jacksonian campaigning?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Harrison's inaugural references "a Roman consul in an early period of that celebrated Republic." Identify the political message Harrison was trying to send by invoking classical Roman republicanism.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

What constitutional question did Harrison's death raise, and how did John Tyler's actions resolve it?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

234. Harrison 234; Van Buren 60. Harrison carried 19 of 26 states with 52.9% of the popular vote.

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

80.2%. The 1840 turnout was the highest in U.S. history to that point. The Log Cabin Campaign's mass mobilization techniques drew previously non-voting men into the electorate.

The 1840 turnout level would not be surpassed until 1860 (81.2%).

QUESTION 3

Convention manager Thurlow Weed of New York engineered the Harrison nomination on the fourth ballot. Weed calculated that Harrison's military reputation and Western base would be more electorally effective than Clay's clear policy positions. Clay had three liabilities: (1) his association with the controversial American System framework had been politically discrediting since 1832; (2) his 1825 Corrupt Bargain role with Adams remained a Jacksonian rhetorical weapon; (3) his clear policy positions made him an easy target for Democratic opposition. Harrison had none of these liabilities. Weed prioritized winnability over ideological clarity.

The 1839 Harrisburg convention is one of the founding examples of professional political management overriding ideological preference in U.S. party nomination contests.

QUESTION 4

The Whig Party had spent eight years (1832-40) criticizing Jacksonian campaigning style as demagogic, populist, and unworthy of constitutional government. The 1840 Log Cabin Campaign fully adopted that same style: mass rallies, parades, partisan press, populist symbolism, image manipulation, voter mobilization. The reversal was strategic rather than ideological: the Whigs concluded that elite-style campaigning could not win in the new mass electorate. The lesson would shape U.S. political organization permanently: even parties whose ideology prioritized restraint must use mass-democratic techniques to compete in mass-electorate elections.

AP students should be able to identify the strategic adoption of opposition methods as a structural feature of mass-democratic politics.

QUESTION 5

Harrison was invoking classical Roman republicanism - the tradition that public officeholders should hold themselves to high constitutional standards rather than partisan calculation. The reference signaled Harrison's commitment to limited executive power and constitutional restraint - directly responding to the Whig framing of Jackson and Van Buren as "King Andrew" and "King Mat." The classical reference also drew on the Whig coalition's educated, classically literate base. Harrison was framing his presidency as a return to constitutional propriety after twelve years of Jacksonian executive expansion.

AP students should be able to read classical references as deliberate political signals to specific audiences.

QUESTION 6

The constitutional question: does the vice president who succeeds a deceased president become the full president, or merely an "acting president" until a special election can be held? Article II says the powers and duties of the office "shall devolve on the Vice President" - but does not say the VP becomes president. John Tyler resolved the ambiguity unilaterally on April 6, 1841 by taking the oath of office, moving into the White House, and conducting himself as the legitimate president. The Whig Party initially called him "His Accidency" and questioned the propriety. But Tyler's actions established what became the Tyler Precedent: a VP who succeeds a deceased president becomes the full president. The precedent governed seven later succession cases (1850 Taylor, 1865 Lincoln, 1881 Garfield, 1901 McKinley, 1923 Harding, 1945 Roosevelt, 1963 Kennedy) before being constitutionalized in the 1967 Twenty-Fifth Amendment.

The Tyler Precedent is one of the most consequential constitutional resolutions in U.S. history. AP students should know both the original ambiguity and Tyler's resolution.