1840

William Henry Harrison vs Martin Van Buren

A 75-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%

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

1840: William Henry Harrison vs Martin Van Buren

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 1840 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1840 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1840 that would allow an opposition party to 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, the first U.S. presidential election decided primarily by economic depression, and the structural founding of image-based mass-democratic campaigning in American politics. The Log Cabin Campaign that produced the victory marked the Whig adoption of Jacksonian populist style and reshaped how every subsequent U.S. presidential campaign would operate. 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. By summer 1840, unemployment remained around 20 percent in major cities. Bank suspensions, business failures, and Western land foreclosures continued. Van Buren's July 1840 Independent Treasury Act - 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 had three structural liabilities: (1) the American System framework had been politically discrediting since 1832; (2) the 1825 Corrupt Bargain role with Adams remained a Jacksonian rhetorical weapon; (3) clear policy positions made him an easy opposition target. Harrison had none. 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 to attract Southern states-rights anti-Jackson voters.

Harrison was 67 years old at nomination - 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; governor of Indiana Territory (1801-12); commander at the October 1813 Battle of the Thames (where Tecumseh died); 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 the alleged log cabin biography that Whig publicists constructed for him. Harrison had actually been born in 1773 at Berkeley Plantation in Charles City County, Virginia - one of the largest plantation houses in the colonies - to one of Virginia's wealthiest families. His father, Benjamin Harrison V, had signed the Declaration of Independence and served as governor of Virginia.

The Whig campaign was a strategic masterpiece of image manipulation. The Democratic Baltimore Republican had run a December 1839 column attacking Harrison: "give him a barrel of hard cider and a pension of two thousand a year and he'll be content in his log cabin for the rest of his days." 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" was the most famous; "Van, Van, Van is a used-up man" mocked Van Buren); produced rolling log cabin floats for parades; printed log cabin engravings on campaign materials; held mass political rallies with audiences of 40,000-100,000 (the Dayton, Ohio rally in September 1840 drew an estimated 100,000). The campaign focused on Harrison's constructed image rather than his actual biography or policy positions.

The Whigs had 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 at 81.2%).

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 political 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 on April 4, 1841. Tyler's succession produced what became known as the Tyler Precedent: the vice president who succeeds a deceased president becomes the full president (rather than merely acting president). The Whig Party initially called Tyler "His Accidency" and questioned the propriety. Tyler resolved the ambiguity unilaterally - taking the oath on April 6, moving into the White House, and conducting himself as the legitimate president. The precedent would govern seven later succession cases before being constitutionalized in the 1967 Twenty-Fifth Amendment. Tyler proved politically catastrophic for the Whig Party. He vetoed two Whig bills to recharter a national bank in August and September 1841. The Whig Party expelled Tyler on September 11, 1841 - the only time in U.S. history a major party has formally expelled a sitting president. Tyler's entire Cabinet resigned except Secretary of State Webster. Tyler served 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. 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 1840 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

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 Harrison nomination over Clay. Became one of the most influential Whig and later Republican operatives of the 19th century; mentor to William H. Seward.

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 - the first VP to succeed a deceased president. Vetoed two Whig bank bills in 1841; expelled from the Whig Party September 11, 1841; the only president ever expelled by his own party.

Twenty-Fifth Amendment

Ratified February 1967. Constitutionalized the Tyler Precedent (VP succession to full president); provided for filling vice presidential vacancies; established procedures for presidential disability and removal. Used: 1973 Nixon/Agnew, 1974 Ford-Rockefeller, 2007 Cheney during anesthesia, 2021 Biden COVID precautions.

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.

Liberty Party

The first explicitly antislavery political party in U.S. history. Founded 1839; nominated James G. Birney 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 denied 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). Governed seven later succession cases before being 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." The address was substantively Whig: it articulated the Whig theory of executive restraint that the Bank Veto controversy had crystallized in 1832.

> *"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 (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 Harrison win in 1840?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

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

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

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three specific elements of the 1840 Log Cabin Campaign that became permanent features of U.S. political organization.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Whig Party reverse its eight-year criticism of Jacksonian campaigning style in 1840?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Harrison's inaugural quotes "a Roman consul in an early period of that celebrated Republic." Explain the strategic political function of the classical reference.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Harrison was actually born at a Virginia plantation to one of the colony's wealthiest families. Why did the manufactured log-cabin image succeed politically despite being biographically inaccurate?

QUESTION 7 · SHORT-ANSWER

What constitutional ambiguity did Harrison's death raise, and how did John Tyler's April 1841 actions resolve it? Identify the eventual constitutionalization of the resolution.

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 plus the strategic Log Cabin Campaign.

QUESTION 2

80.2%. The highest in U.S. history to that point. Not surpassed until 1860 (81.2%).

The Log Cabin Campaign's mass-mobilization techniques drew previously non-voting men into the electorate.

QUESTION 3

Accept any three of: (1) Mass rallies with audiences in the tens of thousands. (2) Partisan press infrastructure - Whig newspapers in every major city coordinating unified messaging. (3) Door-to-door voter canvassing at the precinct level. (4) Campaign songs, slogans, and symbols (Tippecanoe and Tyler Too, log cabins, hard cider). (5) Campaign rallies with parades and floats. (6) Branded campaign materials - badges, ribbons, prints, engravings. (7) Mass voter mobilization producing 80%+ turnout. (8) Coordinated state-level party committees feeding into a national strategy.

The 1840 campaign established the mass-democratic campaigning template that would dominate U.S. politics for the next 180 years. AP students should be able to identify multiple specific elements that became permanent.

QUESTION 4

The Whig Party had spent eight years (1832-1840) criticizing Jacksonian campaigning style as demagogic, populist, and unworthy of constitutional government. The 1840 Log Cabin Campaign fully adopted that same style. The reversal was strategic rather than ideological: the 1836 multi-candidate strategy had failed (Van Buren won 170-124), and Whig leaders 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 Log Cabin image succeeded for three reasons: (1) Voters wanted to believe the framing - the depression had made common-man populism politically compelling regardless of literal accuracy. (2) The Democratic press had originated the framing as an insult, then could not credibly contradict it without admitting their own attack had been wrong. (3) Image-based campaigning operates on emotional resonance rather than factual accuracy - Harrison's military reputation and Western credentials gave the log-cabin image enough surface plausibility. The pattern - manufactured biographical image trumping actual biographical detail - became a permanent feature of U.S. political campaigning.

AP students should be able to analyze how image-based campaigning operates regardless of factual accuracy.

QUESTION 7

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 Fillmore, 1865 Johnson, 1881 Arthur, 1901 Roosevelt, 1923 Coolidge, 1945 Truman, 1963 Johnson). The 1967 Twenty-Fifth Amendment constitutionalized the principle.

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

Discussion prompts

1 The 1840 turnout was 80.2 percent of eligible voters - the highest in U.S. history to that point. Identify two structural reasons for the surge, and explain whether the Log Cabin Campaign style's mass-mobilization techniques became permanent features of U.S. political organization or were specific to 1840.

2 Tyler's expulsion from the Whig Party on September 11, 1841 is the only time in U.S. history a major party has formally expelled a sitting president. Identify two reasons the Whig Party concluded that expulsion was politically preferable to working with Tyler's vetoes.