AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1840

William Henry Harrison vs Martin Van Buren

A 105-minute lesson on the 1840 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 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 (105 min) + framework alignment
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1840: William Henry Harrison vs Martin Van Buren

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 U.S. political organization by 1840 that would allow an opposition party to win the presidency for the first time. For each, identify the specific 1832-1840 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1840 election is the structural foundation of mass-democratic image-based political campaigning in American history. William Henry Harrison's Log Cabin Campaign defeated Martin Van Buren in a 234-60 electoral landslide. The 80.2 percent turnout was the highest in U.S. history to that point. The Whig Party finally won the presidency by fully adopting the Jacksonian populist campaigning style it had been criticizing for eight years. Harrison's death 31 days into his term then produced the Tyler Precedent that would govern vice presidential succession for the next 126 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 by Election Day 1840 and showed no signs of ending. 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 - appeared inadequate to address the crisis. Whig newspapers framed Van Buren as "King Mat" who refused to intervene to relieve common-citizen suffering. The Whig 1840 message: depression demanded a change of administration regardless of policy specifics. 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. Weed prioritized winnability over ideological clarity. 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. 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 and attract Southern states-rights anti-Jackson voters.

Harrison was 67 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; 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 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.

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" being the most famous; "Van, Van, Van is a used-up man" mocking Van Buren); produced rolling log cabin floats for parades; printed log cabin engravings on campaign materials; held mass political rallies with audiences in the tens of thousands. 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 (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. The Liberty Party would prove much more consequential in 1844 when its 16,000 New York votes denied Henry Clay the presidency.

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. His 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). Article II says the powers and duties of the office "shall devolve on the Vice President" - but does not say the VP becomes president. Tyler resolved the ambiguity unilaterally - taking the oath on April 6, moving into the White House, returning unopened any mail addressed to him as "Acting President," and conducting himself as the legitimate president. The Whig Party initially called him "His Accidency." But Tyler's actions stuck. The precedent would govern seven later succession cases (Fillmore 1850, Johnson 1865, Arthur 1881, Theodore Roosevelt 1901, Coolidge 1923, Truman 1945, Lyndon Johnson 1963) before being constitutionalized in the February 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 (who stayed to complete the August 1842 Webster-Ashburton Treaty with Britain). Tyler served the remaining 47 months of Harrison's term as a man without a party. He pursued his own agenda: the December 1844 annexation of Texas (by joint resolution rather than treaty, requiring only simple congressional majorities); the May 1844 Treaty of Wanghia opening U.S. trade with China; the 1842 Webster-Ashburton Treaty fixing the U.S.-Canadian boundary. The Whigs would not elect another president until Zachary Taylor in 1848.

Historians treat 1840 as a structural inflection point for three reasons. First, the Log Cabin Campaign established image-based mass-democratic campaigning as the dominant U.S. political style. Second, the 80.2 percent turnout established the mass electorate as the foundation of presidential politics. Third, the Tyler Precedent established the constitutional norm for vice presidential succession. Each transformation has shaped American politics ever since.

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

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 - the highest in U.S. history to that point.

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 (used 1973 Nixon-Agnew and 1974 Ford-Rockefeller); established procedures for presidential disability and removal.

Texas Annexation

The December 29, 1845 admission of Texas as the 28th U.S. state. Tyler had pursued annexation throughout 1844 as a non-party president seeking historical legacy. Annexation passed Congress by joint resolution (requiring only simple majorities) in February 1845 because Tyler's

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 16,000 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.

Webster-Ashburton Treaty

The August 1842 treaty between the U.S. and Britain negotiated by Secretary of State Webster (who had stayed in Tyler's Cabinet after the other secretaries resigned) and Lord Ashburton. Fixed the U.S.-Canadian boundary east of the Rocky Mountains. One of Tyler's few diplomatic successes.

December 1844 treaty had failed Senate ratification. Triggered the 1846-48 Mexican-American War.

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 articulated the Whig theory of executive restraint that the 1832 Bank Veto controversy had crystallized.

> *"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.

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

WILLIAM HENRY HARRISON, MARCH 4, 1841

“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.

SOURCE B

Tyler Letter on Succession ("Vice President Tyler is now President")

JOHN TYLER, APRIL 9, 1841

“I am the President. The Constitution itself is my authority. I shall act upon it as such, and I will assume no powers other than those which it confers. The death of President Harrison has, by Constitutional provision, conferred upon me the high duties of his office. I have therefore assumed the oath of office and undertaken the duties devolving upon me. I cannot accept any pretended distinction between an acting Presidency and the full Presidency to which the Constitution has called me. I have entered upon the duties without reservation and shall execute them as Constitutional authority requires.”

Tyler, "Letter on Succession" (Washington, DC, April 9, 1841). Public domain.

The 1840 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 (Harrison's Inaugural) that articulates constitutional restraint of executive power. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Tyler's succession letter) that asserts full presidential authority. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address the constitutional structure of the presidency. Identify the specific aspect each source addresses.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A was delivered 31 days before Source B. What does the rapid sequence tell you about how unprepared the constitutional system was for presidential mortality?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B says Tyler "cannot accept any pretended distinction between an acting Presidency and the full Presidency." Identify two specific 1841 events that demonstrated the political stakes of this distinction.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How long was Harrison's presidency?

( ) A. 12 days
( ) B. 31 days
( ) C. 47 days
( ) D. 93 days

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 1967 constitutional amendment that formalized the Tyler Precedent was the:

( ) A. Twenty-Second
( ) B. Twenty-Third
( ) C. Twenty-Fifth
( ) D. Twenty-Sixth

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1840-41 transition normalization, improvisation, or founding? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Harrison's 1841 Inaugural (Source A) frames the presidency as a constitutionally restrained office whose holder must exercise self-limitation against the temptation to use power expansively. Tyler's April 1841 succession letter (Source B) asserts the full constitutional authority of the presidency for a vice president who has succeeded to the office unexpectedly. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1837-1848 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1840-1841 transition represented (a) the Whig theory of executive restraint becoming structurally normalized in U.S. constitutional practice, (b) a contingent political crisis that the Tyler Precedent resolved by improvisation rather than constitutional principle, or (c) the founding institutional moment for vice presidential succession that the 1967 Twenty-Fifth Amendment merely formalized after 126 years of operating practice. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the normalization-vs-improvisation-vs-founding axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Panic of 1837, the Log Cabin Campaign, the Whig expulsion of Tyler, the Texas annexation, the Twenty-Fifth Amendment. 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: "I appear before you, fellow-citizens, to take the oaths which the Constitution prescribes as a necessary qualification for the performance of its duties", "a summary of the principles which will govern me in the discharge of the duties which I shall be called upon to perform", "a most striking contrast was observable in the conduct of candidates for offices of power and trust before and after obtaining them". The Roman consul reference is the cleanest articulation of constitutional restraint.

Harrison's framing positions the presidency as a constitutionally limited office requiring self-restraint - the Whig response to Jacksonian executive expansion.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "I am the President", "The Constitution itself is my authority", "I cannot accept any pretended distinction between an acting Presidency and the full Presidency to which the Constitution has called me", "I have entered upon the duties without reservation". The "I am the President" phrase is the cleanest assertion.

Tyler's framing positions full presidential authority as a constitutional fact requiring no political negotiation. The directness was strategically necessary.

QUESTION 3

Source A addresses the substantive constitutional structure of the office - the principles that should govern the president's exercise of power. Source B addresses the procedural constitutional structure of succession - the principle that a VP who succeeds a deceased president becomes the full president. The two sources together cover both how the office should be exercised (Whig theory of restraint) and how the office is acquired through succession (Tyler Precedent).

AP students should recognize the two sources as addressing complementary rather than identical constitutional questions.

QUESTION 4

The 31-day gap covers Harrison's entire presidency. The constitutional system had no precedent for presidential mortality - no prior president had died in office. Article II's language was ambiguous; the Twelfth Amendment did not address mid-term succession. The Whig political establishment had no plan for Tyler's succession because they had not seriously considered that Harrison might die so quickly. The temporal sequence tells you that the U.S. constitutional system in 1841 was operationally unprepared for vice presidential succession in a way that would not be addressed until 1967. Tyler's improvisation in real time established the operational norm that the Constitution would not formalize for another 126 years.

AP students should be able to identify how a real-time political decision can establish constitutional norms that survive much longer than the political coalition that produced them.

QUESTION 5

Accept any two of: (1) The August-September 1841 Whig bank-bill vetoes - if Tyler were merely an acting president, his veto authority might be questioned. (2) The September 11, 1841 Whig Party expulsion of Tyler - the expulsion presumed Tyler had full presidential authority that could be politically contested. (3) The Cabinet resignations of September 1841 - the secretaries quit because they treated Tyler as a full president whose policies they could not support. (4) The 1844 Texas annexation by joint resolution - Tyler's decision to annex Texas through congressional joint resolution rather than treaty required full presidential authority. (5) Tyler's veto of the 1842 Tariff Act - if he were acting president, the veto might have been politically illegitimate.

AP students should be able to identify specific 1841-1845 events that demonstrated the practical significance of the acting-vs-full presidency distinction.

QUESTION 6

31 days. Harrison was inaugurated March 4, 1841 and died April 4, 1841 of pneumonia. The shortest presidency in U.S. history.

The 31-day Harrison presidency remains the shortest in U.S. history.

QUESTION 7

Twenty-Fifth. Ratified February 1967. Constitutionalized the Tyler Precedent; provided for filling vice presidential vacancies; established procedures for presidential disability and removal.

AP students should know the Twenty-Fifth Amendment's role in formalizing the Tyler Precedent.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the normalization-vs-improvisation-vs-founding 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.