1840

William Henry Harrison vs Martin Van Buren

A 20-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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3. Three questions
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1840

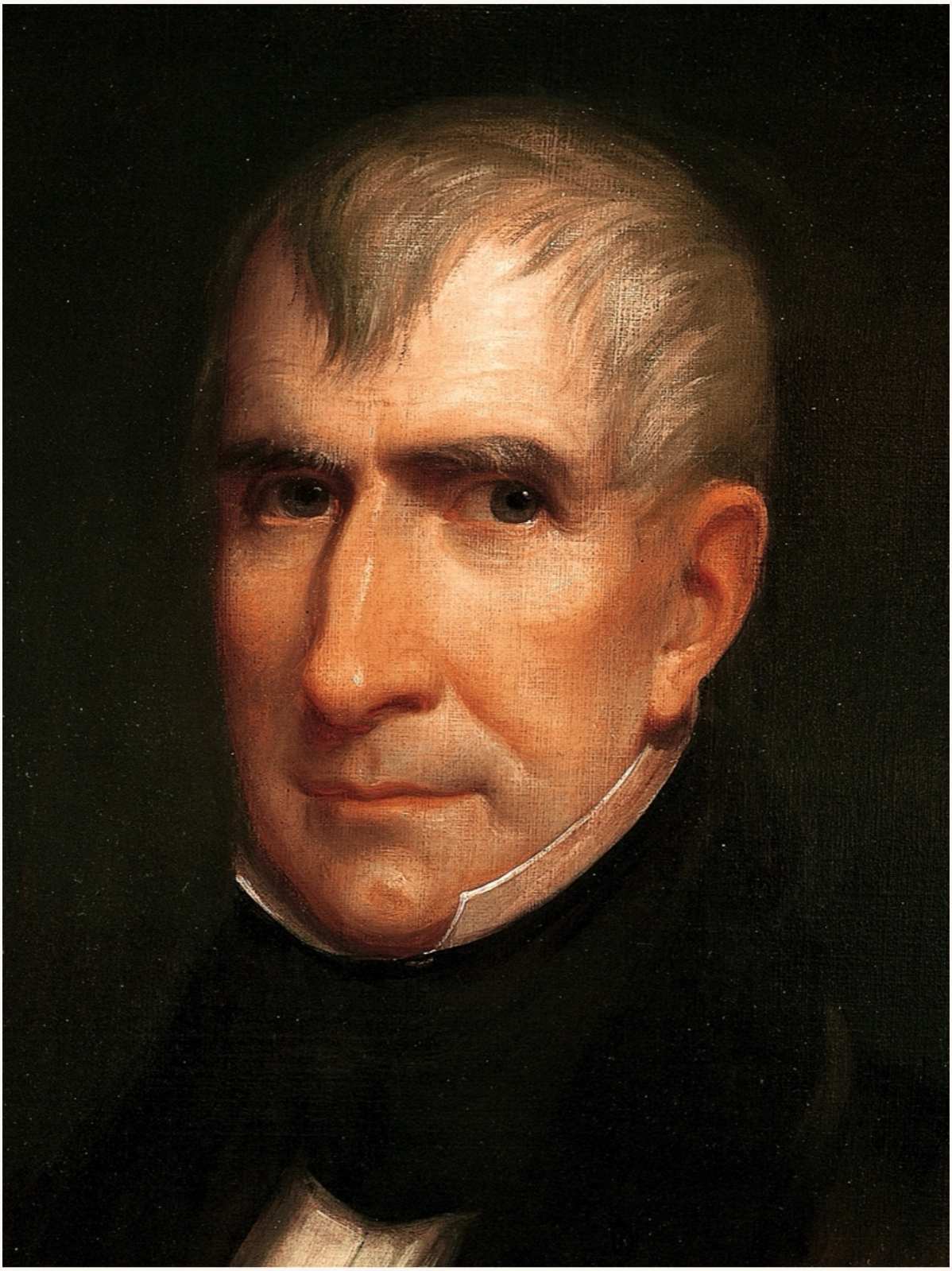
Look at the picture. That is William Henry Harrison, an old general from the West. He had won the Battle of Tippecanoe against Tecumseh and the British way back in 1811. His nickname was "Old Tippecanoe."

The Whigs picked Harrison after meeting at their first big national convention. They knew Harrison's war record made him popular. They also knew he was old and would not stir up controversy. He was 67 years old in 1840 - the oldest person ever nominated for president to that point.

The Whigs made the campaign about images, not policies. They put up log cabins everywhere - even though Harrison had been born rich and lived in a big house. They handed out hard cider to crowds. They sang songs about "Tippecanoe and Tyler too" (John Tyler was his running mate). They had parades with rolling log cabins on wagons.

President Van Buren had no good answer. The Panic of 1837 had hurt everyone. People wanted to blame him. Harrison's common-man image worked perfectly.

Harrison won by a huge amount - 234 electoral votes to Van Buren's 60. He became the first Whig president and the ninth U.S.



William Henry Harrison, the ninth U.S. president. He served only one month before dying of pneumonia - the shortest presidency in U.S. history.
JAMES REID LAMBDIN (1807-1889), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the ninth president of the United States?

2.

What was the Log Cabin Campaign?

3.

Why did President Harrison serve only one month in office?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1840 the country was still suffering from the Panic of 1837. People needed jobs and money. The Whigs decided to copy Andrew Jackson's style and run a common-man candidate against President Van Buren.

Answer key

1.

William Henry Harrison. He was the ninth U.S. president and the first Whig elected. He won 234 electoral votes to Van Buren's 60.

Harrison was 67 when elected - the oldest U.S. president until Ronald Reagan in 1980.

2.

The 1840 Whig campaign style. Whigs put up log cabins everywhere and gave out hard cider to make Harrison seem like a common man (even though he had been born rich and lived in a big house). They sang the campaign song "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" and had parades with rolling log cabins on wagons. The campaign focused on images rather than policies.

The Log Cabin Campaign is one of the most-cited examples of image-based political marketing in U.S. history. The Whigs adopted Jacksonian populist style they had previously criticized.

3.

Harrison gave the longest inauguration speech in U.S. history - almost two hours - on a cold rainy day in March 1841. He caught a cold. The cold turned into pneumonia. He died on April 4, 1841 - 31 days after taking office. He was the first U.S. president ever to die in office.

Harrison's 31-day presidency remains the shortest in U.S. history. His Vice President John Tyler became the 10th president.