3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1844

James K. Polk vs Henry Clay

A 35-minute lesson on the 1844 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Second Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 275 total
WINNER James K. Polk (Democratic) · 170 EV	RUNNER-UP Henry Clay (Whig) · 105 EV
KEY ISSUE Texas annexation; Oregon boundary; Manifest Destiny and westward expansion	TURNOUT 79.2%

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

1844: James K. Polk vs Henry Clay

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a country is growing fast, people argue about where to grow next. What kinds of arguments do you think the country had about whether to add Texas?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1844 election was the 15th U.S. presidential election. It was decided by the most consequential third-party intervention in 19th-century American politics. The Liberty Party's 16,000 New York votes denied Henry Clay the presidency and elected dark horse Democrat James K. Polk - who would then deliver the largest territorial expansion of the United States since the Louisiana Purchase. The political environment was dominated by Texas. The Republic of Texas had won independence from Mexico in 1836 and had been seeking U.S. annexation ever since. President Tyler (expelled from the Whig Party in 1841) had pursued annexation as his signature foreign-policy goal. His April 1844 treaty of annexation failed in the Senate on June 8, 1844 by 35-16 - far short of the two-thirds needed. Tyler reintroduced the question through a joint resolution requiring only simple majorities. The Whig Party assumed Henry Clay would be the 1844 nominee. The May 1844 Whig National Convention unanimously confirmed him. But Clay made a fatal mis-step: he wrote a letter on April 17, 1844 from Raleigh, North Carolina (the "Raleigh Letter") opposing immediate annexation of Texas. Clay tried to thread the needle - opposing annexation now while leaving open future possibility - but Southern Whigs read it as anti-Texas. Two months later Clay published a second letter (the "Alabama Letter") suggesting he might support annexation under certain conditions. Northern antislavery Whigs read this as pro-slavery. Clay had managed to alienate both his Northern and Southern bases. The Democratic Party convention in Baltimore in May 1844 was chaotic. Former President Martin Van Buren had been the frontrunner but, like Clay, had publicly opposed Texas annexation on April 27, 1844. Southern Democrats demanded a pro-annexation candidate. The convention deadlocked through eight ballots. On the ninth ballot, James K. Polk of Tennessee - a 49-year-old former Speaker of the House and former Governor of Tennessee - was nominated. Polk was the first dark horse candidate in U.S. history: he had not been mentioned before the convention as a presidential contender. He was Jackson's political protege (Andrew Jackson, in retirement at the Hermitage near Nashville, had personally endorsed Polk for VP - the convention boosted him to top spot). George M. Dallas of Pennsylvania was the vice presidential nominee. Polk's platform: immediate annexation of Texas; assertion of full U.S. claim to Oregon

		to the 54°40' parallel ("Fifty-Four Forty or Fight"); reduced tariff; restoration of the Independent Treasury (which Whigs had repealed in 1841). His campaign slogan: "Reannexation of Texas and Reoccupation of Oregon." The platform combined Manifest Destiny territorial expansion with Democratic strict-construction economics. The Liberty Party, founded in 1839 as the first explicitly antislavery party, again nominated James G. Birney of New York. The Liberty Party was small - it had won only 0.3% in 1840 - but its 2.3% in 1844 was concentrated in key Northern states. In New York alone, the Liberty Party won 15,812 votes. Henry Clay lost New York to Polk by only 5,106 votes. New York's 36 electoral votes were enough to swing the election: Clay 141, Polk 170. If New York had voted Clay, Clay 177, Polk 134. Polk won 170 electoral votes to Clay's 105. The popular vote was 1,339,494 to 1,300,004 - a margin of 1.5 percent. Polk carried 15 states; Clay 11. Polk was inaugurated March 4, 1845. His four-year term delivered: the December 29, 1845 admission of Texas; the June 1846 Oregon Treaty with Britain fixing the boundary at 49° (despite the "Fifty-Four Forty" campaign promise); the April 1846 - February 1848 Mexican-American War; the February 2, 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (acquiring California, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona, half of New Mexico, parts of Colorado and Wyoming - 525,000 square miles). The U.S. expanded by approximately one-third under Polk. He chose not to seek re-election; he died three months after leaving office.
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 1844 Election

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House and former Governor of Tennessee - was nominated. Polk was the first dark horse candidate in U.S. history: he had not been mentioned before the convention as a presidential contender. He was Jackson's political protege (Andrew Jackson, in retirement at the Hermitage near Nashville, had personally endorsed Polk for VP - the convention boosted him to top spot). George M. Dallas of Pennsylvania was the vice presidential nominee.

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Key words

Dark horse candidate	A surprise candidate that almost no one had considered before the political convention. James Polk was the first dark horse nominated by a major U.S. political party. He emerged on the ninth ballot of the 1844 Democratic National Convention.
Manifest Destiny	The 19th-century American belief that the United States was destined to expand across the entire North American continent. The phrase was coined by journalist John O'Sullivan in his July-August 1845 essay in the United States Magazine and Democratic Review.
Liberty Party	The first explicitly antislavery U.S. political party. Founded 1839; nominated James G. Birney of New York for president in 1840 and 1844. The 1844 result is the clearest example of third-party impact in 19th-century American politics.
Raleigh Letter	Henry Clay's April 17, 1844 letter from Raleigh, North Carolina opposing immediate Texas annexation. The letter alienated Southern Whig voters and is widely considered a major factor in Clay's 1844 defeat.
Fifty-Four Forty or Fight	Polk's 1844 campaign slogan demanding U.S. annexation of Oregon Territory up to 54°40' north latitude. Polk's June 1846 Oregon Treaty actually settled the boundary at the 49th parallel, not 54°40'.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did James K. Polk win in 1844?

( ) A. 147
( ) B. 170
( ) C. 189
( ) D. 212

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was James K. Polk called a "dark horse" candidate?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Liberty Party probably decide the 1844 election?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What did Polk's campaign slogan "Reannexation of Texas and Reoccupation of Oregon" promise voters?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

170. Polk 170; Clay 105. The popular margin was 1.5 percent (1,339,494 to 1,300,004).

Polk's 65-vote electoral margin was smaller than Van Buren's 1836 margin but produced much more consequential policy outcomes.

QUESTION 2

Polk had not been mentioned before the 1844 Democratic Convention as a presidential contender. He had been a U.S. Representative (Speaker of the House 1835-39) and one-term governor of Tennessee (1839-41), but few considered him presidential material. The Democratic convention deadlocked through eight ballots; on the ninth ballot, Polk emerged as the compromise candidate. Andrew Jackson's personal endorsement (Polk was Jackson's political protege) was crucial. Polk became the first dark horse nominated by a major U.S. political party.

Polk's nomination is the founding case of dark-horse political possibility in U.S. politics.

QUESTION 3

The Liberty Party (the first explicitly antislavery U.S. political party) won 15,812 votes in New York. Henry Clay (the Whig) lost New York to Polk by only 5,106 votes. If the Liberty Party voters had voted for Clay, he would have won New York and its 36 electoral votes. Clay would have become the eleventh president (177 EV to Polk's 134). The Liberty Party's structural impact: by drawing antislavery Whig voters out of the Clay coalition, the party indirectly elected the pro-Texas pro-expansion Democrat. The 1844 result is the clearest example of third-party impact in 19th-century American politics.

The Liberty Party paradox: it elected the candidate most opposed to its antislavery goals. AP-level students should recognize the structural irony.

QUESTION 4

Polk promised voters two specific territorial expansions: (1) "Reannexation of Texas" - immediate U.S. annexation of the Republic of Texas (Texas had been part of Mexico until 1836; Polk's framing implied Texas had always been rightfully American). (2) "Reoccupation of Oregon" - U.S. assertion of full claim to Oregon Territory up to the 54°40' parallel. The combined promise: territorial expansion across both the Southwest and the Pacific Northwest. The platform combined Manifest Destiny with Democratic strict-construction economics.

AP students should be able to identify Polk's platform as a coherent Manifest Destiny program.