1844

James K. Polk vs Henry Clay

A 50-minute lesson on the 1844 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 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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1844: James K. Polk vs Henry Clay

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 structural conditions in 1844 that would make Texas annexation the dominant campaign issue. For each, identify the specific 1836-1844 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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 15,812 New York votes denied Henry Clay the presidency by a margin smaller than the third-party total - and elected dark horse Democrat James K. Polk, who would then deliver the largest U.S. territorial expansion since the Louisiana Purchase. The political environment was dominated by Texas annexation. The Republic of Texas had won independence from Mexico in March 1836 and had been seeking U.S. annexation ever since. Northern antislavery Whigs opposed annexation because it would expand slave territory. Southern Whigs and Democrats supported annexation. President Tyler - expelled from the Whig Party in 1841 - had pursued annexation as his signature foreign-policy goal. His April 1844 Tyler-Texas Treaty failed in the Senate on June 8, 1844 by 35-16 (16-35 against). Tyler then reintroduced the question through a joint resolution requiring only simple congressional majorities - a procedure designed to bypass the two-thirds Senate requirement for treaty ratification. The Whig Party assumed Henry Clay would be the 1844 nominee. The May 1, 1844 Whig National Convention in Baltimore unanimously confirmed him. But Clay made a fatal political misstep. On April 17, 1844, two weeks before the convention, Clay wrote a letter from Raleigh, North Carolina (the "Raleigh Letter") opposing immediate annexation of Texas. Clay attempted to thread the needle - opposing annexation now while leaving open future possibility - but Southern Whigs read it as anti-Texas. Two months later, on July 1, 1844 (the "Alabama Letter"), Clay published a second 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 on the central campaign issue. The Democratic Party convention in Baltimore on May 27-30, 1844 was chaotic.

Former President Martin Van Buren had been the frontrunner but, like Clay, had publicly opposed Texas annexation on April 27, 1844 (his "Hammet Letter"). Southern Democrats immediately demanded a pro-annexation candidate. The convention adopted a two-thirds nomination rule at Andrew Jackson's urging, designed to deny Van Buren the nomination. The convention deadlocked through eight ballots. On the ninth ballot, James K. Polk of Tennessee - a 49-year-old former Speaker of the House (1835-39) and former Governor of Tennessee (1839-41) - 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 Andrew Jackson's political protege; Jackson had personally endorsed Polk for the VP slot before the convention boosted him to top spot. George M. Dallas of Pennsylvania was the vice presidential nominee.

Polk's platform was strikingly ambitious: immediate annexation of Texas; assertion of full U.S. claim to Oregon to the 54°40' parallel ("Fifty-Four Forty or Fight"); reduced tariff (the Walker Tariff would pass in 1846); 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 percent in 1840 - but its 2.3 percent in 1844 was concentrated in key Northern states. In New York alone, the Liberty Party won 15,812 votes. Clay lost New York to Polk by only 5,106 votes. New York's 36 electoral votes were enough to swing the election. If Liberty Party voters had voted Clay, Clay would have won New York and the presidency (177 EV to Polk's 134).

Polk won 170 electoral votes to Clay's 105. The popular vote was 1,339,494 (49.5%) to 1,300,004 (48.1%) - a margin of 1.4 percent. Polk carried 15 states; Clay 11. Polk was inaugurated March 4, 1845. The lame-duck Tyler administration successfully passed Texas annexation by joint resolution on February 28, 1845 - one of Tyler's last acts. Texas was formally admitted as the 28th state on December 29, 1845.

Polk's four-year term delivered the largest U.S. territorial expansion since the Louisiana Purchase: the June 15, 1846 Oregon Treaty with Britain (fixing the boundary at the 49th parallel, despite the "Fifty-Four Forty" campaign promise); the April 25, 1846 - February 2, 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 for $15 million plus assumption of $3.25 million in U.S. claims against Mexico). The U.S. expanded by approximately one-third under Polk. Polk chose not to seek re-election - the first president to keep that public pledge - and died three months after leaving office (June 15, 1849).

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

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 in 1844. The term derives from horse racing - an unknown horse coming out of the dark stables.

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 (15,812 NY votes denying Clay the presidency) is the clearest example of third-party impact in 19th-century American politics.

Two-thirds nomination rule

The Democratic Party rule requiring two-thirds of convention delegates to nominate a presidential candidate. Adopted at the 1844 Democratic convention at Andrew Jackson's urging to deny Van Buren the nomination. Lasted until 1936 when FDR's allies replaced it with simple majority.

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.

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.

Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo

The February 2, 1848 treaty ending the Mexican-American War. Mexico ceded California, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona, half of New Mexico, parts of Colorado and Wyoming - 525,000 square miles - to the U.S. for $15 million plus assumption of $3.25 million in U.S. claims against Mexico.

Inaugural Address

JAMES K. POLK, MARCH 4, 1845

Polk took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1845, just four days after Tyler's February 28 signing of the Texas annexation joint resolution. The address articulated the Manifest Destiny framework that would govern Polk's four years - defending continental expansion as constitutional, providential, and inevitable. The opening Texas passage was a direct rejection of Northern antislavery arguments against annexation.

> *"The world has nothing to fear from military ambition in our Government. While the Chief Magistrate and the popular branch of Congress are elected for short terms by the suffrages of those millions who must in their own persons bear all the burdens and miseries of war, our Government can not be otherwise than pacific. Foreign powers should therefore look on the annexation of Texas to the United States not as the conquest of a nation seeking to extend her dominions by the sword and violence, but as the peaceful acquisition of a territory once her own, by adding another member to our confederation, with the consent of that member, thereby diminishing the chances of war and opening to them new and ever-increasing markets for their products."*

Polk, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1845). Public domain.

The 1844 Election

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

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 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

On which ballot was Polk nominated at the 1844 Democratic Convention?

( ) A. Third
( ) B. Fifth
( ) C. Ninth
( ) D. Twelfth

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was James K. Polk called a "dark horse" candidate? Identify the structural conditions that produced his nomination.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Henry Clay's 1844 letters (the Raleigh Letter and the Alabama Letter) damage his presidential candidacy?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Polk says in his inaugural that the Texas annexation should be seen as "peaceful acquisition" rather than "conquest." Identify the political audience he was addressing and explain his framing.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1844 election map, identify the regional pattern of Polk vs. Clay support. What does the pattern tell you about the Liberty Party's structural impact?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

170. Polk 170; Clay 105. The popular margin was 1.4 percent.

Polk's 65-vote electoral margin was decisive but the popular margin was extremely thin.

QUESTION 2

Ninth. The Democratic Convention deadlocked through eight ballots between Van Buren and Cass. On the ninth ballot, Polk emerged as the compromise candidate. Andrew Jackson's personal endorsement was crucial.

The ninth-ballot nomination is the founding case of dark-horse political possibility in U.S. politics.

QUESTION 3

Polk had not been mentioned before the 1844 Democratic Convention as a presidential contender. He had served as Speaker of the House (1835-39) and as one-term Governor of Tennessee (1839-41) but few considered him presidential material. The structural conditions producing his nomination: (1) Van Buren's pre-convention opposition to Texas annexation alienated Southern Democrats; (2) the convention's adoption of a two-thirds nomination rule at Jackson's urging blocked Van Buren's plurality; (3) the eight-ballot deadlock left delegates exhausted; (4) Polk had been positioning for the VP slot with Jackson's endorsement; (5) Polk's strong pro-annexation position matched the Southern Democratic demand. The combination produced a compromise nominee whom no one had expected.

AP students should be able to identify multiple structural factors producing the dark-horse outcome.

QUESTION 4

Clay's April 17, 1844 Raleigh Letter opposed immediate annexation of Texas. Southern Whigs read it as anti-Texas - a major problem because annexation was the dominant campaign issue. Clay tried to repair the damage with the July 1, 1844 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 antislavery base and his Southern pro-Texas base on the central campaign issue. The structural lesson: trying to take a middle position on a polarizing issue can produce simultaneous alienation of both bases rather than coalition-building.

AP students should be able to articulate why the let-it-be-known-as-the-Raleigh-and-Alabama-Letters strategy failed.

QUESTION 5

Polk was addressing two political audiences. First, Northern antislavery voters who opposed Texas annexation on the grounds that it expanded slave territory through aggressive expansionism - Polk's "peaceful acquisition" framing positioned annexation as voluntary association of a willing state rather than territorial conquest. Second, European powers (particularly Britain) that had supported Texas independence and might oppose annexation - Polk framed the U.S. as a peaceful constitutional democracy whose territorial growth occurred through consent rather than violence. The framing was strategically necessary because both audiences had reasons to oppose annexation. Polk needed to defuse both objections without explicitly acknowledging the underlying tensions.

AP students should be able to identify multiple political audiences and the strategic framing addressing each.

QUESTION 6

Polk strength: South, West, plus Pennsylvania and New York. Clay strength: New England, parts of the upper South (Kentucky, Maryland), Ohio. Liberty Party impact: concentrated in Northern Whig districts in New York, Ohio, Michigan. The structural pattern: Polk won the South and West on the Texas annexation platform; Clay held New England but lost the swing-state North to Liberty Party defections. New York was decisive: Clay lost it by only 5,106 votes while the Liberty Party won 15,812 - the Liberty defections from Whig antislavery voters elected the pro-slavery-expansion candidate. The Liberty Party paradox: it elected the candidate most opposed to its antislavery goals.

AP students should be able to read the 1844 map as a structural illustration of third-party paradox.