1844

James K. Polk vs Henry Clay

A 75-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 + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1844: James K. Polk vs Henry Clay

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 1844 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1844 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 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 simultaneously the structural test of three things: whether a third party could decide a major-party presidential election; whether dark-horse nomination strategy could succeed in mass-democratic politics; and whether territorial expansion through Manifest Destiny could be mobilized as a winning electoral platform. The answers - yes, yes, and yes - reshaped American politics and triggered 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 after Sam Houston's April 21, 1836 victory at San Jacinto. The 1836-1844 Texas had repeatedly petitioned for U.S. annexation; Northern antislavery sentiment had blocked it. President Tyler - expelled from the Whig Party in 1841 - made annexation his signature foreign-policy goal. His April 12, 1844 Tyler-Texas Treaty failed in the Senate on June 8, 1844 by 35-16. Tyler then reintroduced the question through a joint resolution requiring only simple congressional majorities - a procedural innovation 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 Whig 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 with 146 of 268 delegates initially pledged to him. Van Buren had publicly opposed Texas annexation on April 27, 1844 (his "Hammet Letter") - a strategic decision to align with Northern antislavery sentiment. The decision proved catastrophic. Southern Democrats demanded a pro-annexation candidate. Andrew Jackson, from retirement at the Hermitage near Nashville, lobbied behind the scenes for a pro-annexation nominee. The convention adopted a two-thirds nomination rule at Jackson's urging - designed to deny Van Buren the nomination since he had only a simple-majority pledge. The convention deadlocked through eight ballots between Van Buren, Lewis Cass of Michigan, and James Buchanan of Pennsylvania. 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 unanimously. Polk was the first dark horse candidate in U.S. history. 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 - 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: 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 (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 had 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 strategic pivot allowed Polk to focus on the Mexican confrontation); the April 25, 1846 - February 2, 1848 Mexican-American War; the February 2, 1848 Treaty of

		Guadalupe Hidalgo. The treaty acquired 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 1853 Gadsden Purchase under Polk's successor Franklin Pierce would round out the contiguous lower 48. 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 of cholera June 15, 1849, three months after leaving office. 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 1844 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

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.

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.

Mexican-American War

The April 25, 1846 - February 2, 1848 war between the U.S. and Mexico. Polk had ordered General Zachary Taylor into the disputed Texas-Mexico border region in early 1846. Mexico's response (the April 25, 1846 Thornton Affair) became Polk's casus belli. The war was opposed by Whigs (including freshman Representative Abraham Lincoln) and ended with U.S. acquisition of the Mexican Cession.

Wilmot Proviso

The August 1846 House proposal by Pennsylvania Representative David Wilmot to ban slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico. Passed the House on strict sectional vote; killed in the Senate. The Proviso's eight-year congressional debate (1846-1854) prepared the political ground for the breakdown of the Second Party System over slavery extension.

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.

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 Franklin Roosevelt's allies replaced it with simple majority.

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 (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 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 three structural conditions that produced his nomination.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Liberty Party probably decide the 1844 election? Use specific numbers in your answer.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Polk says in his inaugural that the Texas annexation should be seen as "peaceful acquisition." Identify the specific phrase he uses to characterize Texas's relationship to the U.S. before annexation.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Polk campaigned on "Fifty-Four Forty or Fight" but his 1846 Oregon Treaty fixed the boundary at the 49th parallel. Why did he abandon the campaign slogan?

QUESTION 7 · 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 in Northern Whig districts?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

170. Polk 170; Clay 105. Popular margin: 1.4 percent.

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

QUESTION 2

Ninth. The Democratic Convention deadlocked through eight ballots before Polk emerged as the compromise candidate on the ninth.

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 one-term Governor of Tennessee (1839-41), but few considered him presidential material. Three structural conditions: (1) Van Buren's April 1844 Hammet Letter opposing Texas annexation alienated Southern Democrats. (2) Jackson's personal lobbying for a pro-annexation candidate from Tennessee. (3) The convention's adoption of a two-thirds nomination rule at Jackson's urging - blocking Van Buren's simple-majority pledge. (4) The eight-ballot deadlock between Van Buren, Cass, and Buchanan exhausted alternative options. (5) Polk's positioning for the VP slot with Jackson's endorsement.

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

QUESTION 4

The Liberty Party won 15,812 votes in New York. Clay lost New York to Polk by only 5,106 votes. If Liberty Party voters had voted for Clay, he would have won New York and its 36 electoral votes - giving him 141 + 36 = 177 EV vs. Polk's 170 - 36 = 134 EV. Clay would have become the 11th president. The structural irony: by drawing antislavery Whig voters out of the Clay coalition, the Liberty Party indirectly elected the pro-Texas pro-expansion Democrat - the candidate most opposed to its antislavery goals.

AP students should be able to do the specific arithmetic and recognize the structural irony.

QUESTION 5

Polk says Texas annexation is "the peaceful acquisition of a territory once her own." The "once her own" framing claims Texas was originally part of the United States (under the Louisiana Purchase's western boundary) before being separated through the 1819 Adams-Onis Treaty. The framing positions annexation as restoration of a pre-existing relationship rather than acquisition of new territory.

AP students should recognize the historical revisionism in Polk's "once her own" claim. The Louisiana Purchase's western boundary was disputed; the 1819 Adams-Onis Treaty had given Texas to Spain.

QUESTION 6

Polk abandoned the Fifty-Four Forty position because Britain refused to negotiate the higher boundary and because the simultaneous Mexican-American War made a second war with Britain strategically untenable. The June 15, 1846 Oregon Treaty fixed the boundary at the 49th parallel - which is what Britain had been offering since the 1818 Convention. Polk's pragmatic compromise allowed him to: (1) settle the Northwest boundary without war; (2) focus military resources on Mexico; (3) claim the substantive territorial gain (Oregon south of the 49th) without the political cost of war with Britain. The slogan had been politically successful in mobilizing the campaign; the compromise was strategically necessary for governing.

AP students should be able to identify the strategic-vs-rhetorical tension between campaign promises and governing decisions.

QUESTION 7

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 by 5,106 votes while the Liberty Party won 15,812. The Liberty Party paradox: it elected the candidate most opposed to its antislavery goals. The structural lesson: third parties can change outcomes but rarely in the direction their voters intend.

AP students should be able to read the 1844 map as structural evidence for third-party paradox.

Discussion prompts

1. The 1844 Democratic Convention adopted a two-thirds nomination rule at Andrew Jackson's urging. Identify the strategic purpose of the rule, explain how it transformed Polk from VP candidate into presidential nominee, and assess its long-term consequences for Democratic Party nomination procedures.

2. Polk delivered approximately one-third of the U.S. continental territory in a single four-year term. Identify three specific territorial acquisitions of 1845-1848, and explain how each combined Manifest Destiny ideology with strategic political-economic calculation.