AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1844

James K. Polk vs Henry Clay

A 105-minute lesson on the 1844 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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

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2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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5. Worksheet (8 questions)
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7. Answer key + discussion

1844: James K. Polk vs Henry Clay

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. politics by 1844 that would make Texas annexation a polarizing campaign issue. For each, identify the specific 1836-1844 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1844 election is the structural founding moment of three durable features of American politics. The Liberty Party's decisive intervention demonstrated that a third party could swing a major-party presidential election. Polk's dark-horse nomination established that convention politics could produce surprise nominees. And Polk's subsequent four-year term delivered the largest U.S. territorial expansion since the Louisiana Purchase, operationalizing Manifest Destiny as state-directed national policy. 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 Republic of Texas had repeatedly petitioned for U.S. annexation; Northern antislavery sentiment had blocked it. President John Tyler - expelled from the Whig Party in September 1841 - made annexation his signature foreign-policy goal as a politically isolated president. His April 12, 1844 Tyler-Texas Treaty failed in the Senate on June 8, 1844 by 35-16 - far short of the two-thirds needed for treaty ratification. Tyler then pursued the joint-resolution procedure requiring only simple congressional majorities - a constitutional innovation that bypassed the two-thirds requirement and would be used again for the 1898 annexation of Hawaii. 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 antislavery base and his Southern pro-Texas base on the central campaign

issue. The structural lesson would echo through 19th-century American politics: trying to take a middle position on a polarizing issue can produce simultaneous alienation of both bases rather than coalition-building.

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") in coordination with Clay - the two former presidential opponents had agreed to position their parties as anti-annexation. The coordination proved catastrophic for both. 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. George M. Dallas of Pennsylvania was the vice presidential nominee. The two-thirds nomination rule would govern Democratic conventions until 1936, when Franklin Roosevelt's allies replaced it with a simple majority.

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. The Liberty Party paradox: by drawing antislavery Whig voters out of the Clay coalition, the party indirectly elected the pro-Texas pro-expansion Democrat - the candidate most opposed to its antislavery goals.

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. 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 fixed the boundary at the 49th parallel (despite the "Fifty-Four Forty" campaign promise - Polk's strategic pivot allowed him to settle the Northwest boundary without war while focusing military resources on the Mexican confrontation). The April 25, 1846 - February 2, 1848 Mexican-American War followed Polk's deliberate January 1846 ordering of General Zachary Taylor into the disputed Texas-Mexico border region (the Nueces Strip). Mexico's April 25, 1846 attack on Taylor's forces (the Thornton Affair) became Polk's casus belli. The February 2, 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo 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.

The Wilmot Proviso - introduced by Pennsylvania Representative David Wilmot in August 1846 - proposed banning slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico. The Proviso passed the House on strict sectional vote but was 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. The Compromise of 1850 - admitting California as a free state, organizing the rest of the Mexican Cession on popular sovereignty principles, and strengthening the Fugitive Slave Act - was the immediate consequence of Polk's territorial expansion. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act would break the Second Party System entirely.

Polk chose not to seek re-election - the first president to keep that public pledge. He died of cholera on June 15, 1849, three months after leaving office. He was 53 years old. His four years had produced more territorial gain per year than any other U.S. president and more long-term sectional crisis than any other 19th-century president before Lincoln.

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

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.

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 January 1846; Mexico's April 25 attack became Polk's casus belli. Opposed by Whigs including freshman Representative Abraham Lincoln. 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.

Free Soil Party

The 1848 third party that merged the Liberty Party with antislavery Whigs and Democrats. Nominated former President Martin Van Buren in 1848; won 10.1% of the popular vote but no electoral votes. Merged with the Republican Party in 1854.

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.

Compromise of 1850

The five-bill federal package brokered by Henry Clay (with Stephen Douglas's tactical assistance) admitting California as a free state, organizing Utah and New Mexico on popular sovereignty principles, settling the Texas-New Mexico boundary, abolishing the slave trade in DC, and strengthening the Fugitive Slave Act. The structural consequence of Polk's territorial acquisitions.

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.

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

JAMES K. POLK, MARCH 4, 1845

"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.

SOURCE B

Spot Resolutions

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, DECEMBER 22, 1847

"Whereas the President of the United States, in his message of May 11, 1846, has declared that the Mexican Government not only refused to receive him (the envoy of the United States) or to listen to his propositions, but, after a long-continued series of menaces, have at last invaded our territory and shed the blood of our fellow-citizens on our own soil: Therefore, Resolved by the House of Representatives, That the President of the United States be respectfully requested to inform this House whether the spot on which the blood of our citizens was so shed was or was not at that time our own soil, whether or not the people of that settlement, or a majority of them, or any of them, had ever submitted themselves to the government or laws of Texas or of the United States, by consent or by compulsion, either by accepting office, or voting at elections, or paying taxes, or serving on juries, or having process served upon them."

Lincoln, "Spot Resolutions" (Washington, DC, December 22, 1847). Public domain.

The 1844 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 (Polk's Inaugural) that frames Texas annexation as peaceful rather than conquest. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Lincoln's Spot Resolutions) that challenges Polk's war justification. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address the constitutional basis of Polk's expansionism, but they make incompatible claims about it. Identify the specific claim each source makes.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B was issued two and a half years after Source A. What does the temporal gap tell you about how the political character of the Texas-Mexican expansion evolved across Polk's term?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B demands that Polk identify "the spot on which the blood of our citizens was so shed." Identify the strategic political function of the spot-identification framing, and explain why it was politically effective even when Polk did not respond.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The August 1846 House proposal to ban slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico was the:

( ) A. Compromise of 1850
( ) B. Wilmot Proviso
( ) C. Free Soil Resolution
( ) D. Crittenden Compromise

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 1848 third party that merged the Liberty Party with antislavery Whigs and Democrats was the:

( ) A. Free Soil Party
( ) B. Anti-Masonic Party
( ) C. Know-Nothing Party
( ) D. Liberty Party

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was Polk's expansion structural, specific, or foundational? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Polk's 1845 Inaugural (Source A) frames Texas annexation as "peaceful acquisition of a territory once her own" - a constitutional and providential expansion that should not be feared as conquest. Lincoln's 1847 Spot Resolutions (Source B) challenge the Polk administration's war justification by demanding identification of the exact spot where Mexican blood had been shed - implying that Polk had manufactured a pretext rather than responding to actual Mexican aggression. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1844-1860 period, evaluate the extent to which Polk's territorial expansion program was (a) a structural fulfillment of Manifest Destiny ideology that any Democratic president of the era would have pursued, (b) a specific consequence of Polk's 1844 dark-horse coalition that required pro-annexation platform commitments to mobilize Southern Democratic support, or (c) the political-strategic foundation of the sectional crisis that produced the breakdown of the Second Party System and the Civil War. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the structural-vs-specific-vs-foundational axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Wilmot Proviso, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Free Soil Party. 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: "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", "the world has nothing to fear from military ambition in our Government". The "peaceful acquisition of a territory once her own" phrase is the cleanest framing.

Polk's "once her own" framing claims Texas was originally part of the United States. AP students should recognize the historical revisionism.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "whether the spot on which the blood of our citizens was so shed was or was not at that time our own soil", "whether or not the people of that settlement, or a majority of them, or any of them, had ever submitted themselves to the government or laws of Texas or of the United States", "by consent or by compulsion". The "spot on which the blood of our citizens was so shed was or was not at that time our own soil" phrase is the cleanest challenge.

Lincoln's framing demands evidentiary precision about Polk's casus belli. AP students should recognize the rhetorical structure.

QUESTION 3

Source A claims the Texas annexation and broader expansion is constitutionally peaceful - a willing federation of territories that had always been rightfully American. Source B challenges this framing by demanding evidentiary proof that the disputed Texas-Mexico territory had ever been under U.S. jurisdiction. The two claims are politically incompatible: Source A treats expansion as a constitutional fait accompli; Source B treats it as a contested factual question requiring presidential accountability.

AP students should recognize the two framings as procedurally distinct rather than just policy-different.

QUESTION 4

The 31-month gap covers the April 1846 - February 1848 Mexican-American War, the August 1846 Wilmot Proviso, the 1846 Oregon Treaty, and the negotiation phase of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The temporal gap reveals an expansionist program that became progressively more politically contested as it operationalized. Polk's 1845 framing assumed peaceful constitutional expansion would be uncontroversial; Lincoln's 1847 Resolutions reflect the antiwar mobilization that the actual war's casualties (13,283 American dead) had produced. The gap tells you that ideological consensus on Manifest Destiny eroded rapidly as the costs became concrete.

AP students should be able to trace the evolution of political support for expansion across Polk's presidency.

QUESTION 5

The spot-identification framing demanded that Polk make a specific factual claim that could be verified or falsified - rather than allowing him to rely on general assertions about Mexican aggression. The strategic function: force Polk into a binary position where he would either provide evidence (which Lincoln could then contest) or refuse to respond (which would itself become political evidence of a manufactured pretext). Polk did not respond directly - which became the Whig narrative that the war had been Polk-manufactured. The framing was politically effective even without Polk's response because the demand for specificity itself created political pressure. The technique - demanding factual precision on contested casus belli claims - would be used repeatedly in U.S. politics through the 21st century (the 2003 Iraq War WMD debate echoed it explicitly).

AP students should be able to identify the spot-identification framing as a deliberate rhetorical strategy with long-term political legacy.

QUESTION 6

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.

AP students should know the Wilmot Proviso as the founding moment of the Republican Party's eventual antislavery platform.

QUESTION 7

Free Soil Party. The 1848 third party that merged the Liberty Party with antislavery Whigs and Democrats. Nominated former President Martin Van Buren in 1848; won 10.1% of the popular vote but no electoral votes. Merged with the Republican Party in 1854.

AP students should know the Free Soil Party as the structural precursor to the Republican Party.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the structural-vs-specific-vs-foundational 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.