1844

James K. Polk vs Henry Clay

A 20-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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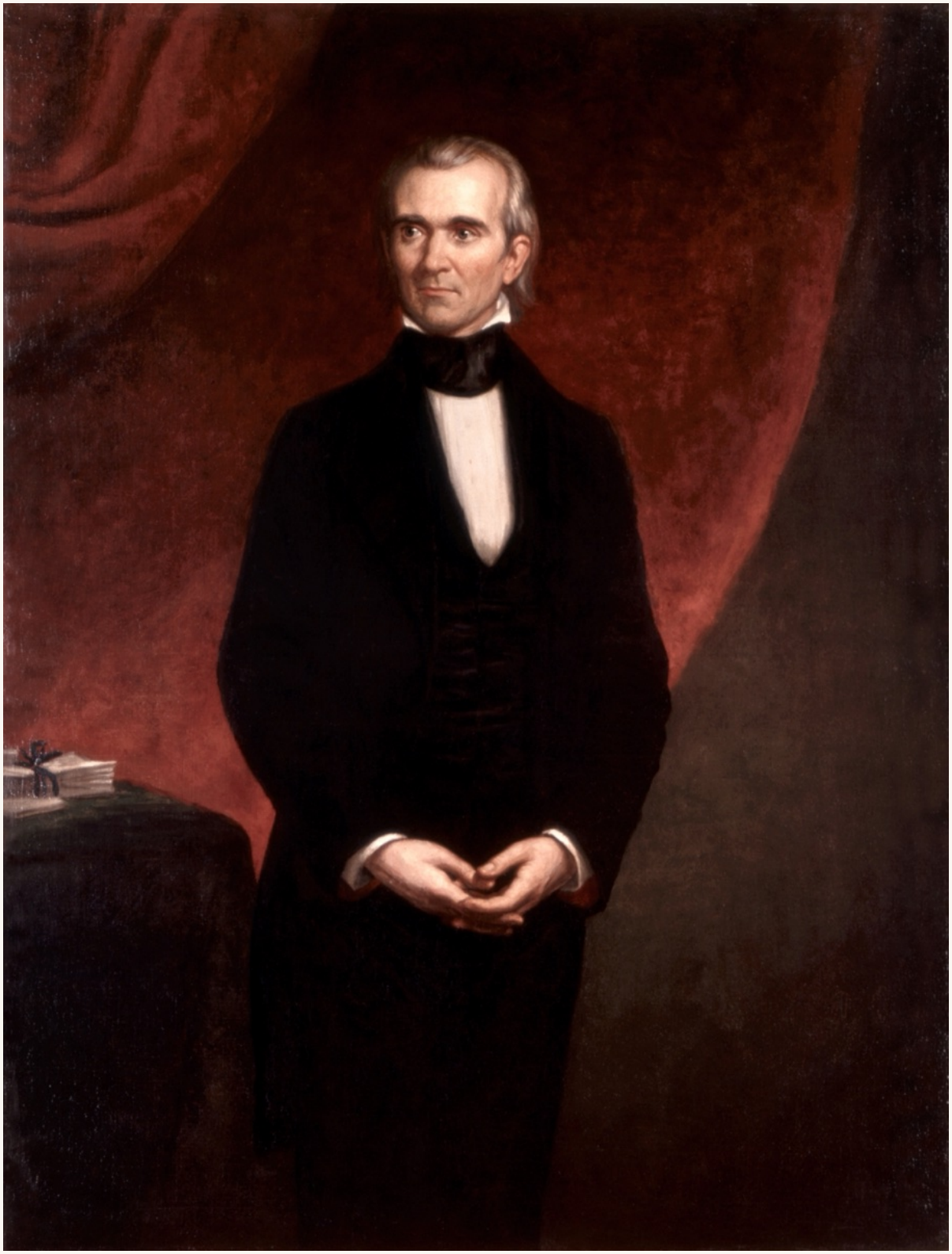
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Look at the picture. The man is James Polk. People called him the first dark horse candidate. That means he was a surprise candidate that almost nobody had heard of before he was picked.

For most of 1844, everyone thought Henry Clay would win the Whig nomination and the presidency. Clay had been a senator, a Speaker of the House, and the leading Whig politician for twenty years. But Clay made a mistake. He said he was against making Texas part of the United States. Many Americans wanted Texas. They believed it was America's destiny to grow all the way to the Pacific Ocean.

The Democrats split. Some wanted Martin Van Buren back. But Van Buren also said no to Texas. So the Democrats voted at their convention nine times without picking anyone. Then someone suggested James Polk. He was a former governor of Tennessee. He was strongly for adding Texas. The Democrats picked him.

The election was very close. James Polk won 170 electoral votes. Henry Clay won 105. But the popular vote was so close that a small new political party - the Liberty Party - probably decided the election. The Liberty Party was against slavery. It took 15,000 votes from Clay in New York. Without those Liberty votes, Clay would have won New York and the presidency.



James K. Polk, the eleventh U.S. president. The first dark horse candidate in U.S. political history. He served one term and died three months after leaving office.
GEORGE PETER ALEXANDER HEALY (1813-1894), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the eleventh U.S. president after the 1844 election?

2.

What does "dark horse candidate" mean?

3.

How did the small Liberty Party probably change the 1844 election?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1844 a brand-new state was about to join the United States: Texas! But not everyone wanted it. The arguments about Texas would decide the 1844 election.

Answer key

1.

James K. Polk. He was the 11th U.S. president and a dark horse candidate from Tennessee.

Polk won 170 electoral votes to Clay's 105. He was the first major-party presidential nominee that voters had not seriously expected to win.

2.

A surprise candidate that almost no one had heard of before the political convention. James Polk was the first dark horse nominated for president by a major party. He had served as Speaker of the House and Governor of Tennessee, but few people considered him presidential material before the Democratic convention.

Polk's nomination on the ninth ballot at the Democratic convention is the founding case of dark-horse political possibility.

3.

The Liberty Party - an antislavery party - took 15,000 votes in New York. Henry Clay (the Whig) lost New York by only 5,000 votes. If the Liberty Party voters had voted for Clay, he would have won New York's 36 electoral votes and become the eleventh president.

The 1844 Liberty Party impact is one of the clearest examples of a small party changing a major election outcome.