3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1848

Zachary Taylor vs Lewis Cass

A 35-minute lesson on the 1848 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Second Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 290 total
WINNER Zachary Taylor (Whig) · 163 EV	RUNNER-UP Lewis Cass (Democratic) · 127 EV
KEY ISSUE Slavery in territories gained from Mexico; Wilmot Proviso	TURNOUT 72.8%

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

1848: Zachary Taylor vs Lewis Cass

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a country has just fought a war and won new land, big arguments often follow about what to do with the new territory. Why does this happen?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1848 election was the 16th U.S. presidential election. It was the first U.S. election to occur after the country had acquired the Mexican Cession - 525,000 square miles of territory from California to New Mexico - and it was decided by the political question of what would happen to slavery in that territory. The Whig Party assumed it could win in 1848 by nominating a military hero (the strategy that had worked for Harrison in 1840). General Zachary Taylor of Louisiana was the most famous American military hero. He had won the February 1847 Battle of Buena Vista against a Mexican army four times the size of his own. The June 1848 Whig National Convention in Philadelphia nominated Taylor on the fourth ballot over Henry Clay and Winfield Scott. Millard Fillmore of New York was selected as the vice presidential candidate. Taylor had never voted in an election before 1848 and had no clear political positions. He had been a career military officer; he owned 100 enslaved people on a Louisiana plantation; and his political beliefs were largely unknown. The Whig Party deliberately avoided adopting a platform - the only major-party convention in U.S. history to nominate a candidate without an accompanying platform. The strategic logic: Taylor's lack of clear positions would let him run as the candidate of "no problem" in both the antislavery North and the proslavery South. The Democratic Party nominated Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan, 65 years old, a former Secretary of War and former minister to France. Cass's platform: popular sovereignty - the doctrine that new territories should decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. The framework was a deliberate compromise designed to defuse the Wilmot Proviso's sectional confrontation by removing federal decision-making from the slavery-extension question. General William O. Butler of Kentucky was the Democratic vice presidential candidate. The Free Soil Party emerged in August 1848 from the merger of the Liberty Party + antislavery Whigs ("Conscience Whigs") + antislavery Democrats ("Barnburners"). The Free Soil platform: "Free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men" - opposition to slavery extension into the territories acquired from Mexico. The August 9-10 Free Soil convention in Buffalo, NY nominated former President Martin Van Buren and Charles Francis Adams (John Quincy Adams's son) for vice president. Van Buren's candidacy was a deliberate political reversal: he had opposed Texas annexation

		in 1844 (which cost him the Democratic nomination), now ran as the antislavery alternative. The campaign was strategically distinct from earlier ones. Taylor refused to take public positions on issues; his campaign relied on his military reputation and Whig organizational mobilization. Cass campaigned on popular sovereignty and the Democratic policy program. Van Buren campaigned on antislavery principle. The campaign's sectional character was unprecedented in U.S. presidential politics. Taylor won 163 electoral votes to Cass's 127 and Van Buren's 0. Taylor carried 15 states; Cass carried 15 states. Van Buren won no states but received 291,501 popular votes - 10.1 percent of the total. The Free Soil Party was the most electorally successful 19th-century third party by vote share. New York was decisive: Van Buren's 120,510 New York votes (26 percent) shifted the state from Cass to Taylor - the same Liberty Party pattern that had hurt Clay in 1844, but now in reverse. Taylor was inaugurated March 5, 1849 (March 4 fell on a Sunday). His sixteen-month presidency dealt with the Mexican Cession question. He surprised the Whig Party by supporting California's 1849 application for statehood as a free state - confronting the Compromise of 1850's emerging architecture. He opposed Henry Clay's Compromise package and threatened to use military force to enforce California's admission. On July 9, 1850 Taylor died of acute gastroenteritis (likely caused by contaminated food at a July 4 celebration). He had served 16 months. Vice President Millard Fillmore became the 13th president and immediately reversed Taylor's opposition to the Compromise of 1850, which passed in September 1850.
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 1848 Election

The 1848 election was the 16th U.S. presidential election. It was the first U.S. election to occur after the country had acquired the Mexican Cession - 525,000 square miles of territory from California to New Mexico - and it was decided by the political question of what would happen to slavery in that territory.

The Whig Party assumed it could win in 1848 by nominating a military hero (the strategy that had worked for Harrison in 1840). General Zachary Taylor of Louisiana was the most famous American military hero. He had won the February 1847 Battle of Buena Vista against a Mexican army four times the size of his own. The June 1848 Whig National Convention in Philadelphia nominated Taylor on the fourth ballot over Henry Clay and Winfield Scott. Millard Fillmore of New York was selected as the vice presidential candidate.

Taylor had never voted in an election before 1848 and had no clear political positions. He had been a career military officer; he owned 100 enslaved people on a Louisiana plantation; and his political beliefs were largely unknown. The Whig Party deliberately avoided adopting a platform - the only major-party convention in U.S. history to nominate a candidate without an accompanying platform. The strategic logic: Taylor's lack of clear positions would let him run as the candidate of "no problem" in both the antislavery North and the proslavery South.

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The campaign was strategically distinct from earlier ones. Taylor refused to take public positions on issues; his campaign relied on his military reputation and Whig organizational mobilization. Cass campaigned on popular sovereignty and the Democratic policy program. Van Buren campaigned on antislavery principle. The campaign's sectional character was unprecedented in U.S. presidential politics.

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Taylor was inaugurated March 5, 1849 (March 4 fell on a Sunday). His sixteen-month presidency dealt with the Mexican Cession question. He surprised the Whig Party by supporting California's 1849 application for statehood as a free state - confronting the Compromise of 1850's emerging architecture. He opposed Henry Clay's Compromise package and threatened to use military force to enforce California's admission. On July 9, 1850 Taylor died of acute gastroenteritis (likely caused by contaminated food

at a July 4 celebration). He had served 16 months. Vice President Millard Fillmore became the 13th president and immediately reversed Taylor's opposition to the Compromise of 1850, which passed in September 1850.

Key words

Popular sovereignty	The 1848 Democratic doctrine that new U.S. territories should decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. Proposed by Lewis Cass as a compromise to defuse the Wilmot Proviso's sectional confrontation. Stephen Douglas would build a long political career on it.
Free Soil Party	The 1848 third party formed from the merger of the Liberty Party + antislavery Whigs + antislavery Democrats. Platform: "Free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men" - opposition to slavery extension into territories. Won 10.1% of the 1848 popular vote, the highest of any 19th-century third party.
Barnburners	The faction of New York antislavery Democrats who broke with Lewis Cass and joined the Free Soil Party in 1848. The name came from the metaphor of farmers who would burn down their barn to get rid of rats - they would destroy the Democratic Party to defeat slavery.
Conscience Whigs	The faction of antislavery Whigs who broke with Zachary Taylor (a slaveholder) and joined the Free Soil Party in 1848. Included Charles Francis Adams of Massachusetts and many New England Whigs.
Mexican Cession	The 525,000 square miles of territory the U.S. acquired from Mexico in the February 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Included California, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona, half of New Mexico, parts of Colorado and Wyoming. The slavery-extension question over this territory dominated U.S. politics from 1848 until the 1861 Civil War.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Zachary Taylor win in 1848?

( ) A. 127
( ) B. 147
( ) C. 163
( ) D. 189

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Whig Party nominate Zachary Taylor without adopting a party platform?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the Free Soil Party platform, and what kinds of voters did the party attract?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Zachary Taylor's death just 16 months into his term affect U.S. history?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

163. Taylor 163; Cass 127; Van Buren 0. Taylor carried 15 states.

Taylor's 36-vote electoral margin was decisive. The Free Soil Party won no states but its 10.1% popular share shifted New York to Taylor.

QUESTION 2

The Whig Party deliberately avoided adopting a platform - the only major-party convention in U.S. history to nominate a candidate without an accompanying platform. The strategic logic: Taylor's lack of clear positions would let him run as the candidate of "no problem" in both the antislavery North and the proslavery South. The Whigs were betting that the 1840 Harrison strategy of military reputation plus ideological vagueness would work again. Taylor had never voted in an election before 1848 and had no clear political positions.

The 1848 Whig no-platform strategy is unique in U.S. political history. AP students should recognize it as the high-water mark of the Whig theory that personality could substitute for ideology.

QUESTION 3

The Free Soil Party's 1848 platform: "Free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men" - opposition to slavery extension into territories acquired from Mexico. The party attracted three distinct constituencies: (1) Liberty Party voters from 1844 (committed abolitionists); (2) Conscience Whigs (antislavery Northern Whigs alienated by Taylor's slaveholding); (3) Barnburners (New York antislavery Democrats alienated by Cass's popular sovereignty). The combined coalition won 10.1% of the popular vote - the most successful 19th-century third party.

AP students should be able to identify the three-faction Free Soil coalition and its structural significance for later antislavery politics.

QUESTION 4

Taylor died on July 9, 1850 of acute gastroenteritis after eating contaminated food at a July 4 celebration. Vice President Millard Fillmore became the 13th president. Fillmore immediately reversed Taylor's opposition to the Compromise of 1850 - Taylor had threatened to use military force to admit California as a free state without Southern concessions, while Fillmore worked with Henry Clay and Stephen Douglas to pass the five-bill compromise package in September 1850. Taylor's death therefore: (1) prevented an immediate military confrontation over California admission; (2) enabled the Compromise of 1850 to pass; (3) postponed the sectional crisis from 1850 to 1854 (Kansas-Nebraska) and 1860-61 (Civil War). Counterfactually, a Taylor presidency that continued might have produced Civil War earlier.

AP students should be able to identify Taylor's death as a structural inflection point that allowed the 1850 Compromise to pass.