1848

Zachary Taylor vs Lewis Cass

A 50-minute lesson on the 1848 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 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%

CONTENTS

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

1848: Zachary Taylor vs Lewis Cass

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 political conditions in 1848 that would make slavery extension the dominant campaign issue. For each, identify the specific 1845-1848 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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 Free Soil Party's 10.1 percent of the popular vote represented the most successful 19th-century third-party performance and demonstrated that antislavery sentiment could no longer be contained within the Whig and Democratic coalitions. The political environment was dominated by the August 1846 Wilmot Proviso debate. Pennsylvania Representative David Wilmot had proposed banning slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico. The Proviso passed the House on strict sectional vote (15 Northern Democrats joining the Whigs against 14 Southern Democrats voting against). It failed in the Senate. The Proviso was reintroduced repeatedly between 1846 and 1850; the eight-year congressional debate transformed slavery extension from a regional dispute into the dominant national political issue. 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 September 1846 Battle of Monterrey, the February 1847 Battle of Buena Vista against a Mexican army four times the size of his own, and the broader Northern Mexico campaign. The June 1848 Whig National Convention in Philadelphia nominated Taylor on the fourth ballot over Henry Clay (the favored establishment candidate) and Winfield Scott (Taylor's wartime rival). 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 Whig theory: military reputation plus ideological vagueness would replicate the 1840 Harrison Log Cabin success.

The Democratic Party nominated Senator Lewis Cass of Michigan, 65 years old, a former Secretary of War (1831-36) under Jackson and former U.S. minister to France (1836-42). 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 and antislavery Whig) 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 he ran as the antislavery alternative. The choice was structurally important: it positioned the Free Soil Party as a coalition of disaffected major-party voters rather than a continuation of the Liberty Party's pure abolitionist tradition.

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 explicit 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). 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. Free Soil voters had elected Taylor by drawing antislavery Democrats away from Cass. The structural lesson was identical to 1844: a third party can swing a major-party election but rarely in the direction its voters intend.

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 and 5 days. Vice President Millard Fillmore became the 13th president and immediately reversed Taylor's opposition to the Compromise of 1850. The Compromise passed in September 1850 in five separate bills, brokered by Stephen Douglas after Henry Clay had failed to pass the comprehensive package.
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

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 eight-year congressional debate (1846-1854) transformed slavery extension into the dominant national political issue.

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." Won 10.1% of the 1848 popular vote - the highest of any 19th-century third party. Merged into the Republican Party in 1854.

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.

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 confrontation. Stephen Douglas would build a long political career on it; the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act made it federal policy.

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. Many later joined the Republican Party.

Compromise of 1850

The five-bill federal package passed September 1850. Admitted California as a free state; organized Utah and New Mexico on popular sovereignty principles; settled the Texas-New Mexico boundary; abolished the slave trade in Washington, DC; strengthened the Fugitive Slave Act. Brokered by Stephen Douglas after Henry Clay's comprehensive package failed.

Inaugural Address

ZACHARY TAYLOR, MARCH 5, 1849

Taylor took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 5, 1849. The address was strikingly brief - 1,090 words - by inaugural standards. Taylor articulated a Whig theory of executive restraint that contrasted with Polk's expansionist activism, but he avoided substantive policy commitments on slavery extension. The strategic ambiguity reflected the campaign's no-platform approach.

> *"For the interpretation of that instrument I shall look to the decisions of the judicial tribunals established by its authority and to the practice of the Government under the earlier Presidents, who had so large a share in its formation. To the example of those illustrious patriots I shall always defer with reverence, and especially to his example who was by so many titles "the Father of his Country." To command the Army and Navy of the United States; with the advice and consent of the Senate, to make treaties and to appoint embassadors and other officers; to give to Congress information of the state of the Union and recommend such measures as he shall judge to be necessary; and to take care that the laws shall be faithfully executed - these are the most important functions intrusted to the Executive by the Constitution."*

Taylor, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 5, 1849). Public domain.

The 1848 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Zachary Taylor win in 1848?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which 1846 House proposal sparked the eight-year debate over slavery in territories acquired from Mexico?

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

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was popular sovereignty, and how did it try to resolve the slavery-extension dispute?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Taylor says in his inaugural that he will defer to "the example of those illustrious patriots." Which presidents was he invoking, and what political message was he sending?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1848 election map, identify the regional pattern of Taylor vs. Cass vs. Van Buren support. What does the pattern reveal about the structural breakdown of the Whig-Democratic coalitions?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

163. Taylor 163; Cass 127; Van Buren 0. Taylor and Cass each carried 15 states; Van Buren won 10.1% of the popular vote but no states.

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

QUESTION 2

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 eight-year congressional debate (1846-1854) transformed slavery extension into the dominant national political issue.

AP students should know the Wilmot Proviso as the founding text of the antislavery Republican coalition.

QUESTION 3

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 on slavery extension.

AP students should recognize the 1848 no-platform strategy as a structural feature of the Whig theory that personality could substitute for ideology.

QUESTION 4

Popular sovereignty was the doctrine that new U.S. territories should decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. Lewis Cass proposed it in 1848 as a deliberate compromise to defuse the Wilmot Proviso confrontation. The framework tried to resolve the slavery-extension dispute by removing federal decision-making from the question - rather than the federal government deciding for or against slavery in territories, each territory would decide for itself. The framework was politically attractive because it could be sold to both Northern Democrats (who could imagine territories choosing free soil) and Southern Democrats (who could imagine territories choosing slavery). The framework would fail catastrophically in Kansas after 1854.

AP students should understand popular sovereignty as a structural attempt to remove the slavery question from federal politics. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act made it federal policy; the 1857 Dred Scott decision made it unworkable.

QUESTION 5

Taylor was invoking Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, and especially Washington ("he who was by so many titles 'the Father of his Country'"). The political message: Taylor would govern as a constitutional traditionalist, restoring Whig theory of executive restraint after twelve years of Jacksonian-Polk executive expansion. The reference to Washington was particularly strategic - Taylor was positioning himself as a military hero who would exercise civilian restraint, contrasting with Polk's military activism. The framing reflected the Whig identity as the party of executive limitation.

AP students should be able to read classical and founding-era references as deliberate political signals.

QUESTION 6

Taylor: New England (most), Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Florida, Louisiana. Cass: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, Arkansas. Van Buren: 10.1% nationally; 26% in New York; significant in Vermont, Massachusetts, Ohio, Pennsylvania. Pattern: the Whig-Democratic coalitions had begun to break down sectionally. Taylor held New England (an antislavery region) by promising not to extend slavery despite being a Louisiana slaveholder. Cass held the West and the Deep South. Van Buren's Free Soil coalition drew from both party bases in the North. The pattern foreshadows the 1854 breakdown: by 1860 the Republican Party would inherit Free Soil's antislavery Northern coalition while the Democratic Party would split North/South.

AP students should be able to read the 1848 map as evidence of the structural breakdown that would produce the Civil War.