CLASSROOM EDITION · GRADES 9 — 12

1848

Zachary Taylor vs Lewis Cass

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

1848: Zachary Taylor vs Lewis Cass

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 1848 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1848 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 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 in the February 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo - 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 election's structural significance was the inauguration of the break-down of the Second Party System that would produce the Republican Party in 1854 and the Civil War in 1861. 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. By 1848 the Proviso's congressional fate had been decided eight separate times - always passing the House on sectional vote, always failing in the Senate where slave-state and free-state senators were evenly balanced. 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; his last presidential bid) and Winfield Scott (Taylor's wartime rival; would be the 1852 Whig nominee). Millard Fillmore of New York was selected as the vice presidential candidate to balance the ticket geographically.

Taylor had never voted in an election before 1848 and had no clear political positions. He had been a career military officer since 1808; 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 confrontation by removing federal decision-making from the slavery-extension question. The framework would dominate Democratic slavery-extension politics from 1848 until the 1860 four-way split. General William O. Butler of Kentucky was the Democratic vice presidential candidate.

The Free Soil Party emerged in August 1848 from the merger of three constituencies: the Liberty Party (the 1840-44 abolitionist party); antislavery Whigs ("Conscience Whigs," led by Charles Francis Adams of Massachusetts); and antislavery Democrats ("Barnburners," led by Martin Van Buren's New York faction). The Free Soil platform: "Free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men" - opposition to slavery extension into the territories acquired from Mexico, plus federal funding of internal improvements, free land grants for actual settlers (the Homestead idea), and a tariff for revenue. The August 9-10 Free Soil convention in Buffalo, NY nominated former President Martin Van Buren (the unsuccessful 1844 Democratic candidate, by then 65) and Charles Francis Adams (John Quincy Adams's son, then 41) 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 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 cam-

paign'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 1848 third-party result was politically ironic: Liberty Party antislavery voters elected pro-slavery Polk in 1844; Free Soil antislavery voters elected slaveholding Taylor in 1848. But the structural significance was the same: third-party antislavery mobilization was reshaping presidential outcomes.

Taylor was inaugurated March 5, 1849 (March 4 fell on a Sunday). His sixteen-month presidency confronted the Mexican Cession question directly. He surprised the Whig Party by supporting California's December 1849 application for statehood as a free state - California's constitution prohibited slavery. He opposed Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850 package and threatened to use military force to enforce California's admission against Southern resistance. 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's comprehensive package had failed in early summer. 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 1848 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

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 eight separate times between 1846 and 1850; killed in the Senate every time. The eight-year congressional debate 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.

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

The part of the Compromise of 1850 that strengthened federal enforcement of returning escaped enslaved people to their Southern enslavers. Required Northern law enforcement to assist in returning fugitives; criminalized aiding escapees; denied jury trials to alleged fugitives. Deeply unpopular in the North; central campaign issue in 1856 and 1860.

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. Stephen Douglas built 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 would later join 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 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. The address would prove misleading: Taylor would take a strongly antislavery position on California statehood by December 1849.

> *"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 (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 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 Mexican Cession territories?

( ) 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? Identify the strategic logic.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the three constituencies that merged to form the Free Soil Party in 1848. What did the merger structurally accomplish?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Taylor says in his inaugural that he will defer to "the example of those illustrious patriots ... especially to his example who was by so many titles 'the Father of his Country.'" Explain the strategic political function of the Washington reference.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Zachary Taylor died July 9, 1850. How did his death change the trajectory of the Compromise of 1850?

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1848 election map, identify the regional patterns of Taylor, Cass, and 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 shifted New York to Taylor.

QUESTION 2

Wilmot Proviso. The August 1846 House proposal by Pennsylvania Representative David Wilmot. Passed the House on strict sectional vote eight separate times between 1846 and 1850; killed in the Senate every time.

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 do so. 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. The no-platform approach allowed Northern Whigs to assume Taylor was antislavery and Southern Whigs to assume he was proslavery - a political illusion that depended on Taylor never having to take a position.

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

Three constituencies: (1) Liberty Party voters (committed abolitionists from 1840 and 1844). (2) Conscience Whigs (antislavery Northern Whigs who broke with Taylor over his slaveholding). (3) Barnburners (New York antislavery Democrats led by Martin Van Buren's faction). The merger structurally accomplished three things: (1) it created a coalition large enough to win 10.1% of the popular vote nationally and 26% in New York; (2) it broke the convention that antislavery had to be a purist abolitionist position by including pragmatic mainstream voters; (3) it positioned the party as the structural precursor to the Republican Party that would emerge in 1854.

AP students should be able to identify the three-faction Free Soil coalition and its long-term significance for the antislavery movement.

QUESTION 5

Taylor was invoking Washington (the only president who served before the constitutional ratification debates of the 1790s) as the model of constitutional executive restraint. The reference signaled three things: (1) Taylor would govern as a constitutional traditionalist, restoring the Whig theory of executive limitation after twelve years of Jacksonian-Polk executive expansion. (2) Taylor was positioning himself as a military hero who would exercise civilian restraint - the same framing Washington had used in 1789. (3) The Washington reference invoked the Whig coalition's identity as the inheritor of Federalist constitutional traditions. The strategic function was to position Taylor as substantively above partisan politics rather than as an active partisan.

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

QUESTION 6

Taylor had opposed Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850 package and threatened to use military force to enforce California's admission against Southern resistance. Vice President Fillmore reversed this position immediately upon taking office. Fillmore worked with Stephen Douglas to pass the Compromise of 1850 in September 1850 - five separate bills rather than Clay's failed comprehensive package. The structural consequences: (1) the Compromise passed; (2) the Fugitive Slave Act's strengthening fueled Northern antislavery sentiment that would coalesce into the Republican Party; (3) immediate sectional confrontation was postponed from 1850 to 1854 (Kansas-Nebraska) and 1860-61 (Civil War). Counterfactually, a Taylor presidency that continued might have produced immediate sectional crisis over California admission.

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

QUESTION 7

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. The 1848 map is the visible foundation of the sectional breakdown that produced the Civil War.

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

Discussion prompts

1. The Free Soil Party's 10.1 percent of the 1848 popular vote was the highest 19th-century third-party share. Identify two structural conditions that produced the Free Soil surge, and explain why the same antislavery coalition would dominate the Republican Party by 1856.

2. The Whig Party nominated Taylor without adopting a platform - the only major-party convention in U.S. history to do so. Identify two strategic reasons for the choice and explain how the no-platform approach contributed to the Whig Party's collapse by 1854.