AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1848

Zachary Taylor vs Lewis Cass

A 105-minute lesson on the 1848 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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

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

1848: Zachary Taylor vs Lewis Cass

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 conditions in U.S. politics by 1848 that would inaugurate the breakdown of the Second Party System over slavery extension. For each, identify the specific 1845-1848 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1848 election is the structural inauguration of the breakdown of the Second Party System. 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 produced a politically incoherent Whig presidency (a slaveholding general with no clear positions) and accelerated the sectional realignment 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 (Northern Democrats joined Whigs against Southern Democrats). 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 had been voted on eight separate times. 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 (his last presidential bid; he would die in 1852) 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. Taylor had never voted in an election before 1848. 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 under Jackson and former U.S. 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 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) and Charles Francis Adams. 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. 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 1848 result was politically ironic: Liberty Party antislavery voters elected pro-slavery Polk in 1844; Free Soil antislavery voters elected slaveholding Taylor in 1848.

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.

The Compromise of 1850 included five federal laws: California admitted as a free state; Utah and New Mexico organized on popular sovereignty principles; Texas-New Mexico boundary settled; slave trade abolished in Washington, DC; and the Fugitive Slave Act strengthened (requiring Northern law enforcement to assist in returning escaped enslaved people; criminalizing aiding escapees; denying jury trials to alleged fugitives). The Fugitive Slave Act's Northern enforcement requirement would fuel the antislavery movement that consolidated into the Republican Party. Harriet Beecher Stowe published Uncle Tom's Cabin in 1852 partly in response to the Fugitive Slave Act; the novel sold 300,000 copies in its first year and became one of the most politically consequential books in American history.

The 1848 election produced four durable structural consequences. First, the Free Soil Party's 10.1 percent demonstrated that antislavery sentiment was now electorally consequential. Second, popular sovereignty became the dominant Democratic slavery-extension framework, governing the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and the 1860 four-way split. Third, the Whig no-platform strategy demonstrated that the Whig Party had become structurally incapable of taking substantive policy positions on slavery extension - a structural weakness that would produce its 1854 collapse. Fourth, Taylor's death and Fillmore's reversal allowed the Compromise of 1850 to pass, postponing immediate sectional crisis from 1850 to 1854 but consolidating the political identity of the antislavery Republican coalition.

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

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.

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.

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. 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.

Fugitive Slave Act of 1850

The part of the Compromise of 1850 that strengthened federal enforcement of returning escaped enslaved people. 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.

Uncle Tom's Cabin

Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel attacking slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act. Sold 300,000 copies in its first year - one of the most politically consequential books in American history. President Lincoln reportedly greeted Stowe at the White House by saying "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war."

Kansas-Nebraska Act

The 1854 federal law organizing the Kansas and Nebraska territories on popular sovereignty principles. Repealed the Missouri Compromise's 36°30' line by allowing slavery to be voted in north of the line. Triggered the breakdown of the Second Party System: the Whig Party collapsed; the Republican Party emerged.

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.

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

ZACHARY TAYLOR, MARCH 5, 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.

SOURCE B

Free Soil Party Platform (Buffalo Convention)

FREE SOIL PARTY CONVENTION, AUGUST 9-10, 1848

“Resolved, That the Proviso of Jefferson, to prohibit the existence of Slavery after 1800, in all the territory then belonging to the United States, was passed by Congress; and that this fact, and the fact that Congress did not extend the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific Ocean, demonstrate that the will of our fathers was, that the federal government should not interfere with the institution of Slavery within the States where it exists, and that the federal government should not, by any direct legislation, give existence or extension to slavery elsewhere; and the Bill of Rights guarantees the right to all our citizens to oppose to the death any Federal extension of the institution of Slavery upon free soil. Resolved, That our fathers ordained the Constitution of the United States, in order, among other great national objects, to establish justice, promote the general welfare, secure the blessings of liberty; but expressly denied to the Federal Government, which they created, all constitutional power to deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due legal process. Resolved, that, in the judgment of this Convention, Congress has no more power to make a SLAVE than to make a KING; no more power to institute or establish slavery, than to institute or establish a Monarchy.”

Free Soil Party Platform (Buffalo, NY, August 9, 1848). Public domain.

The 1848 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 (Taylor's Inaugural) that articulates Whig executive restraint. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Free Soil Platform) that articulates the constitutional case against federal extension of slavery. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address the political situation of 1848 but they take incompatible approaches to slavery extension. Identify the specific approach each source takes.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A was delivered as an established Whig governing document; Source B was a third-party founding text. What does this institutional contrast tell you about the relative political maturity of the two coalitions?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B says "Congress has no more power to make a SLAVE than to make a KING." Identify the rhetorical strategy of equating slavery with monarchy and explain its political effectiveness.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 1852 novel that sold 300,000 copies and dramatized the cruelty of the Fugitive Slave Act was:

( ) A. Uncle Tom's Cabin
( ) B. Twelve Years a Slave
( ) C. Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass
( ) D. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 1854 federal law that repealed the Missouri Compromise and triggered the breakdown of the Second Party System was the:

( ) A. Compromise of 1850
( ) B. Fugitive Slave Act
( ) C. Kansas-Nebraska Act
( ) D. Wilmot Proviso

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1848 election structural, contingent, or founding? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Taylor's 1849 Inaugural (Source A) articulates the Whig theory of executive restraint while avoiding substantive policy commitments on slavery extension. The 1848 Free Soil Platform (Source B) articulates an explicit constitutional and political framework against slavery extension. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1846-1860 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1848 election's political situation was (a) a structural moment in which the Whig Party's ideological vagueness on slavery extension created political space for an antislavery third party, (b) a contingent product of Polk's 1844-1848 territorial expansion that the Wilmot Proviso debate had transformed into the dominant national political issue, or (c) the founding moment of an antislavery political coalition that would consolidate into the Republican Party and produce the Civil War. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the structural-vs-contingent-vs-founding axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Wilmot Proviso, popular sovereignty, the Fugitive Slave Act, Uncle Tom's Cabin, the Kansas-Nebraska Act. 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: "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", "To the example of those illustrious patriots I shall always defer with reverence", "these are the most important functions intrusted to the Executive by the Constitution". The "I shall always defer with reverence" framing is the cleanest articulation of restraint.

Taylor's framing positions the presidency as constitutionally constrained by founders' precedent. The Whig theory of executive restraint articulated in response to Jacksonian executive expansion.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "the federal government should not, by any direct legislation, give existence or extension to slavery elsewhere", "Congress has no more power to make a SLAVE than to make a KING", "no more power to institute or establish slavery, than to institute or establish a Monarchy", "the will of our fathers was, that the federal government should not interfere with the institution of Slavery within the States where it exists". The "Congress has no more power to make a SLAVE than to make a KING" phrase is the cleanest constitutional rhetorical formulation.

The Free Soil platform articulates the constitutional theory that would govern Republican Party slavery-extension politics through 1860.

QUESTION 3

Source A approaches slavery extension by ostentatious avoidance - articulating constitutional restraint without committing to any specific position on the underlying question. The strategic logic: ideological vagueness allows the candidate to maintain support in both antislavery and proslavery regions. Source B approaches slavery extension through explicit constitutional argument - claiming the federal government has no constitutional power to establish or extend slavery in territories. The strategic logic: explicit antislavery commitment mobilizes the constituency that is unwilling to accept the Whig avoidance strategy. The two sources represent two structurally distinct political responses to the same underlying question.

AP students should be able to identify the two political strategies as ideologically and procedurally distinct.

QUESTION 4

The contrast tells you that the Free Soil coalition had a clearer political identity in 1848 than the Whig coalition did. The Whig Party had been forced into ideological vagueness by its inability to bridge antislavery Northern Whigs and proslavery Southern Whigs - the no-platform 1848 convention was the structural endpoint of that inability. The Free Soil Party, by contrast, was built explicitly around the slavery-extension question. The structural lesson: a third party with a clear identity on a polarizing issue can be more politically coherent than a major party trying to span the same issue. The lesson would prove decisive: by 1856 the Republican Party (which absorbed Free Soil) would be the structural opposition to the Democrats, and the Whigs would no longer exist.

AP students should be able to identify the structural advantage of explicit ideology over strategic vagueness in polarizing political environments.

QUESTION 5

The "slavery equals monarchy" framing was rhetorically powerful for three reasons. (1) It positioned antislavery as constitutional rather than radical - aligning with the founders' fight against British monarchy. (2) It made the proslavery position seem un-American by associating it with the political institution most opposed to American constitutionalism. (3) It transferred the moral charge of anti-monarchism (already accepted across U.S. politics) to the slavery question. The political effectiveness: the framing made antislavery a constitutional rather than abolitionist position, allowing the Free Soil Party to attract mainstream voters who would not have accepted explicit abolitionism. The framing would dominate Republican Party rhetoric through the Civil War.

AP students should be able to identify rhetorical strategy as substantively political work.

QUESTION 6

Uncle Tom's Cabin. Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel attacking slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act. Sold 300,000 copies in its first year. One of the most politically consequential books in American history.

AP students should know Uncle Tom's Cabin as a structural feature of the 1850s antislavery mobilization.

QUESTION 7

Kansas-Nebraska Act. The 1854 federal law organizing the Kansas and Nebraska territories on popular sovereignty principles. Repealed the Missouri Compromise's 36°30' line by allowing slavery to be voted in north of the line. Triggered the breakdown of the Second Party System: the Whig Party collapsed; the Republican Party emerged.

AP students should know the Kansas-Nebraska Act as the structural endpoint of the Second Party System and the founding moment of the Republican Party.

QUESTION 8

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