K-2 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1848

Zachary Taylor vs Lewis Cass

A 20-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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1848

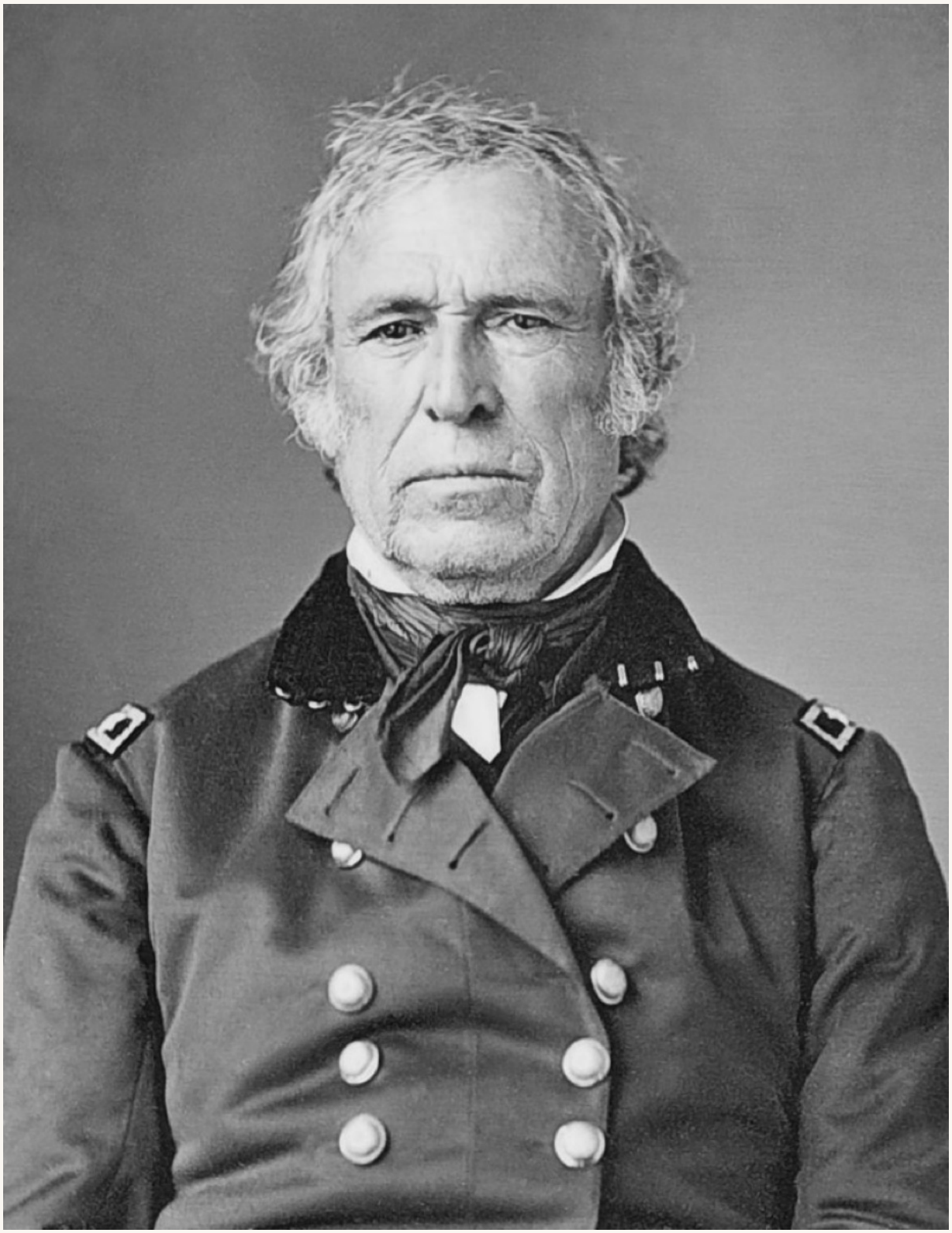
Look at the picture. The man is Zachary Taylor. People called him "Old Rough and Ready" because he was a tough general who did not dress up. Taylor was a hero of the Mexican-American War. He had won the Battle of Buena Vista in 1847 against a much bigger Mexican army.

The Whig Party picked Taylor to run for president even though Taylor had never voted in an election before. They knew his war record was popular. They also knew Taylor was vague about slavery and the tariff - which Whigs thought would help him win in both the North and the South.

The Democrats picked Lewis Cass of Michigan. Cass said new states should decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. People called this idea "popular sovereignty."

A brand-new political party also ran a candidate. The Free Soil Party was against slavery spreading to new states. They picked the man who had been president before: Martin Van Buren! Van Buren did not win any state but he got 10 percent of the popular vote.

When the votes were counted, Zachary Taylor won. He got 163



Zachary Taylor, the twelfth U.S. president. A Mexican-American War hero who served only 16 months before dying in July 1850.

JAMES REID LAMBDIN (1807-1889), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the twelfth U.S. president after the 1848 election?

2.

What does "popular sovereignty" mean?

3.

How did the Free Soil Party probably affect the 1848 election even though it won no states?

Warm-up (5 min)

After the Mexican-American War, the United States had a huge new question: would the new western territory allow slavery? In 1848 the country picked a war hero to figure it out.

Answer key

1.

Zachary Taylor. He was a Mexican-American War general. He won 163 electoral votes.

Taylor was the second Whig president and the second to die in office (after Harrison in 1841).

2.

Popular sovereignty is the idea that new U.S. territories and states should decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. Lewis Cass proposed it as the Democratic position in 1848 - it tried to avoid the slavery question by letting each territory choose.

Popular sovereignty would define Democratic slavery policy through 1860. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act made it federal law for the territories.

3.

The Free Soil Party probably drew antislavery Democrats away from Lewis Cass. Van Buren won 10 percent of the popular vote nationally and large totals in some Northern states. New York gave Van Buren 26 percent of its vote - enough to swing the state to Taylor. The Free Soil Party demonstrated that antislavery sentiment was now strong enough to affect major-party outcomes.

The Free Soil Party in 1848 was the merger of the Liberty Party + antislavery Whigs + antislavery Democrats. Its 10.1% of the popular vote made it the most successful 19th-century third party in vote share.