3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1940

Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Wendell Willkie

A 35-minute lesson on the 1940 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA New Deal Coalition	ELECTORAL VOTES 531 total
WINNER Franklin D. Roosevelt (Democratic) · 449 EV	RUNNER-UP Wendell Willkie (Republican) · 82 EV
KEY ISSUE Third term precedent; World War II neutrality; preparedness vs. isolationism	TURNOUT 62.4%

CONTENTS

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

1940: Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Wendell Willkie

Timing

5 min	Warm-up	When an unwritten political tradition is broken, what political conditions justify the breaking?
15 min	Reading	1940 election was 39th U.S. presidential election. Produced FDR's 449-82 electoral-vote victory over Republican Wendell Willkie - FDR's unprecedented third presidential election victory. FDR was the first U.S. president to break George Washington's 1797 unwritten "two-term tradition" that had been respected for 144 years. The election was structurally shaped by WWII (which had begun September 1, 1939 in Europe) and the structural political conditions of an active foreign-policy crisis. Political conditions had been transformed by global war. Japan had invaded China July 1937. Germany had annexed Austria March 1938 (Anschluss). Germany had taken Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland October 1938 (Munich Agreement) and the rest of Czechoslovakia March 1939. The August 23, 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union shocked Western Communists and isolationists. September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland; September 3 Britain and France declared war on Germany. WWII began. By summer 1940 Germany had conquered Poland (October 1939), Denmark and Norway (April 1940), Netherlands and Belgium and Luxembourg (May 1940), and France (June 1940). Britain stood alone against Nazi Germany. The June 22, 1940 Franco-German armistice produced French collapse; the German occupation of France threatened British survival. Britain's Battle of Britain (July-October 1940) was a Royal Air Force defense against German Luftwaffe air attacks intended to prepare a German cross-Channel invasion. The RAF's September 15, 1940 victory effectively ended the immediate invasion threat. But Britain remained desperately short of military supplies and financial resources. FDR's personal political calculation was structural. He had been planning to retire after his second term (1936-40) - returning to Hyde Park, New York. But Hitler's 1939-40 conquests had transformed the political conditions. FDR believed: (1) Only he had the structural authority and political capital to mobilize U.S. support for Britain. (2) The Republican alternative would be isolationist and could not lead wartime mobilization. (3) The 1940 election was structurally a referendum on U.S. wartime

preparation.

Democratic National Convention met in Chicago July 15-18, 1940. FDR did not publicly seek the nomination but quietly orchestrated his draft. Senator Alben Barkley of Kentucky read FDR's statement on July 16 that "the President wishes in earnest and in all sincerity to make it clear that all the delegates to this convention are free to vote for any candidate." The convention then nominated FDR by acclamation on the first ballot. Henry A. Wallace - FDR's Secretary of Agriculture, a Progressive Republican who had switched to the Democratic Party in 1933 - was VP. The conservative Democratic wing strongly opposed Wallace (he was seen as too radical) but accepted him after FDR threatened to withdraw from the nomination.

Republican National Convention met in Philadelphia June 24-28, 1940. The convention faced a structural choice between three internationalist Republicans (New York DA Thomas E. Dewey, Wendell Willkie, Senator Charles L. McNary of Oregon) and three isolationist Republicans (Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg of Michigan, Herbert Hoover's former Treasury Secretary Andrew Mellon). The internationalist Republican Wendell Willkie won the nomination on the sixth ballot. Willkie was 48, the president of Commonwealth & Southern (utility holding company), a former Democrat (switched to Republican 1939 over the New Deal). He had never held political office. The "Willkie boom" was a structural insurgency in the Republican Party - he had not been a candidate before the convention. Senator Charles L. McNary of Oregon (an isolationist) was VP - to balance the ticket.

The campaign focused on war and federal-government expansion. Willkie's message: the New Deal had failed to end the Depression (unemployment had risen back to 14% in 1940 from the 1937 peak); FDR was an aspiring "dictator" seeking unconstitutional power; America should remain neutral in the European war. FDR's message: the New Deal had transformed the U.S. economy; Willkie was inexperienced; America must prepare for war; only experienced leadership could navigate the crisis.

The September 1940 Selective Service and Training Act established the first peacetime military draft in U.S. history. The September 2, 1940 "destroyers for bases" agreement gave Britain 50 World War I-era destroyers in exchange for U.S. rights to British naval bases in Newfoundland, Bermuda, the Caribbean, and British Guiana. FDR's wartime preparation moves were politically risky but structurally necessary.

The America First Committee (founded September 4, 1940) was the leading isolationist organization. ~800,000 members at peak. Charles Lindbergh (the famous 1927 transatlantic aviator) was the leading spokesman. The America First Committee opposed U.S. entry into WWII; it would dissolve December 11, 1941 after U.S. entry into the war following Pearl Harbor. Lindbergh's September 11, 1941 Des Moines speech blaming "the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt administration" for pushing the U.S. toward war would damage Lindbergh's reputation and the

America First movement.

The campaign's most famous moment was FDR's October 30, 1940 Boston speech: "I have said this before, but I shall say it again and again and again: Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars." The promise would be operationally violated within 14 months. FDR had privately added "except in case of attack" to his draft notes but did not include the qualification in the speech. The promise was structurally devastating: FDR's 1941-42 wartime mobilization would require explaining why the 1940 promise had been broken.

FDR won 449 electoral votes to Willkie's 82. FDR carried 38 states; Willkie carried 10 states. The popular vote: FDR 27,313,945 (54.7%); Willkie 22,347,744 (44.8%); Thomas (Socialist) 116,599 (0.2%); Babson (Prohibition) 57,812 (0.1%); Browder (Communist) 46,251 (0.1%). FDR-Willkie popular-vote margin: 4,966,201 - reduced from 1936's 11M margin but still decisive.

The geographic pattern showed Willkie strength in the rural Midwest and Plains - the isolationist heartland that had opposed WWI and now opposed WWII. Willkie carried Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, and Colorado. FDR's 38 states included the Solid South, the Northeast, the Mid-Atlantic, most of the Midwest (except IN, IA, MI, NE, ND, SD, KS), the Mountain West, and the West Coast. The 1940 map showed structural Democratic strength but also revealed the rural-Midwestern isolationist Republican counter-base that would persist through the 1940s-50s.

FDR was inaugurated to a third term on January 20, 1941 (the first third-term inauguration in U.S. history). His March 11, 1941 Lend-Lease Act (Public Law 77-11) authorized the President to "sell, transfer title to, exchange, lease, lend, or otherwise dispose of, to any such government any defense article." Lend-Lease provided ~$50 billion (~$640B in 2024 dollars) in U.S. military aid to the Allies (Britain, Soviet Union, China, France) through September 1945. Lend-Lease was the structural commitment to Allied victory.

December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor transformed U.S. politics. December 8 Congress declared war on Japan (with one dissenting vote - Jeannette Rankin of Montana, who had also voted against U.S. entry into WWI in 1917). December 11 Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S. WWII would last until September 2, 1945 (Japan surrender after August 6 Hiroshima and August 9 Nagasaki atomic bombings). U.S. mobilized 16 million soldiers and lost 405,399 American military deaths.

The 1940 election's structural significance was threefold. First, it broke the 144-year-old two-term tradition - structurally transforming U.S. presidential politics. Second, it confirmed FDR's political authority for wartime mobilization. Third, it produced the 1941-45 FDR wartime presidency that would shape U.S. governance

		through WWII, the post-war settlement, and the Cold War. After FDR's 1944 fourth-term election and April 12, 1945 death, the 22nd Amendment was ratified February 27, 1951. The amendment made the two-term limit constitutional - structurally restoring Washington's 1797 precedent but in constitutional rather than traditional form. FDR remains the only U.S. president to serve more than two terms.
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 1940 Election

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Political conditions had been transformed by global war. Japan had invaded China July 1937. Germany had annexed Austria March 1938 (Anschluss). Germany had taken Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland October 1938 (Munich Agreement) and the rest of Czechoslovakia March 1939. The August 23, 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union shocked Western Communists and isolationists. September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland; September 3 Britain and France declared war on Germany. WWII began.

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Key words

Third-term tradition	The unwritten U.S. tradition that presidents retire after two terms. Established by George Washington 1797. Respected for 144 years. FDR broke it in 1940 and 1944. After FDR's death 1945, the 22nd Amendment (ratified 1951) made the two-term limit constitutional. FDR remains the only U.S. president to serve more than two terms.
Wendell Willkie	The 1940 Republican presidential nominee. President of Commonwealth & Southern. Never held political office. Former Democrat (switched 1939 over the New Deal). Internationalist. Lost 449-82 EV to FDR. Later wartime envoy and author of "One World" (1943). Died October 8, 1944 at 52.
America First Committee	The September 1940 - December 1941 isolationist organization opposing U.S. entry into WWII. ~800,000 members. Charles Lindbergh leading spokesman. Dissolved December 11, 1941 after U.S. entry following Pearl Harbor.
"Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars"	FDR's famous 1940 campaign promise (Boston October 30, 1940). Operationally violated within 14 months by U.S. entry into WWII December 1941. FDR privately added "except in case of attack" but did not include in speech.
Selective Service and Training Act (1940)	The September 16, 1940 federal law establishing the first peacetime military draft in U.S. history. Required men aged 21-35 to register for military service. Initially trained 16 million men through 1947.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did FDR win in 1940?

( ) A. 419
( ) B. 432
( ) C. 449
( ) D. 472

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Who was the 1940 Republican presidential nominee?

( ) A. Robert Taft
( ) B. Thomas Dewey
( ) C. Wendell Willkie
( ) D. Arthur Vandenberg

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did FDR break the 144-year-old two-term tradition?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the America First Committee?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

449. FDR 449; Willkie 82. FDR's 367-EV margin was reduced from 1936's 515-EV margin but still decisive.

AP students should know the 449-82 split.

QUESTION 2

Wendell Willkie. The 1940 Republican presidential nominee. Former Democrat who had switched to Republican in 1939 over the New Deal. President of Commonwealth & Southern (utility holding company). Internationalist Republican who supported aid to Britain. The "Willkie boom" was a structural insurgency in the Republican Party - he had never held political office before the 1940 nomination.

AP students should know Willkie as the 1940 Republican nominee.

QUESTION 3

FDR broke the 144-year-old two-term tradition because of WWII. The structural justifications: (1) Hitler's 1939-40 conquests had transformed the political conditions. By summer 1940, Germany had conquered most of Western Europe; Britain stood alone. (2) FDR believed only he had the structural authority and political capital to mobilize U.S. support for Britain. The Republican alternative (Willkie was internationalist but inexperienced; Taft and Vandenberg were isolationists) could not lead wartime mobilization. (3) The 1940 election was structurally a referendum on U.S. wartime preparation. FDR's third term would be defined by Lend-Lease (March 1941), Atlantic Charter (August 1941), Pearl Harbor (December 7, 1941), and WWII mobilization. (4) Theodore Roosevelt 1912 had tried but failed to break the tradition. FDR's 1940 success demonstrated that the right political conditions could overcome the unwritten norm. (5) The 22nd Amendment (ratified 1951) made the two-term limit constitutional - structurally restoring Washington's 1797 precedent after FDR's 12-year presidency had demonstrated the dangers of indefinite incumbency.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural justifications.

QUESTION 4

The America First Committee was the September 1940 - December 1941 isolationist organization opposing U.S. entry into WWII. Founded September 4, 1940 by Yale Law School students; quickly attracted ~800,000 members at its peak. The leading spokesman was Charles Lindbergh - the famous 1927 transatlantic aviator. Other prominent members: General Robert E. Wood (CEO of Sears Roebuck); Senator Burton K. Wheeler of Montana; Senator Gerald P. Nye of North Dakota; Senator Robert Taft of Ohio; future President Gerald Ford (as a Yale Law student); future Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart (as a Yale Law student); future writer Sinclair Lewis. The Committee opposed Lend-Lease (March 1941), the September 1941 "shoot on sight" naval policy against German U-boats, and U.S. entry into the war. Lindbergh's September 11, 1941 Des Moines speech blamed "the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt administration" for pushing the U.S. toward war - the speech damaged Lindbergh's reputation and the America First movement. The Committee dissolved December 11, 1941 after U.S. entry into WWII following Pearl Harbor. The America First name was revived in 2016 by Donald Trump for an "America First" foreign-policy approach emphasizing U.S. national interests over multilateral commitments.

AP students should be able to articulate the America First Committee.