1940

Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Wendell Willkie

A 50-minute lesson on the 1940 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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

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2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
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1940: Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Wendell Willkie

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 structural conditions in 1939-40 America that would produce a third-term Roosevelt candidacy. For each identify the specific 1938-40 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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 first U.S. president to break George Washington's 1797 unwritten "two-term tradition" that had been respected 144 years. Election was structurally shaped by WWII (which had begun September 1, 1939) and the structural political conditions of an active foreign-policy crisis. Political conditions had been transformed by global war. Japan invaded China July 1937. Germany annexed Austria March 1938. Germany took Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland October 1938 (Munich Agreement) and rest of Czechoslovakia March 1939. August 23, 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and Soviet Union. September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland; September 3 Britain and France declared war on Germany. WWII began. By summer 1940 Germany conquered Poland (October 1939), Denmark and Norway (April 1940), Netherlands and Belgium and Luxembourg (May 1940), and France (June 1940). Britain stood alone. June 22, 1940 Franco-German armistice produced French collapse. Britain's Battle of Britain (July-October 1940) was RAF defense against German Luftwaffe air attacks. RAF's September 15, 1940 victory ended immediate invasion threat. But Britain desperately short of supplies and resources. FDR's personal political calculation was structural. He had been planning to retire after second term. But Hitler's 1939-40 conquests transformed political conditions. FDR believed: (1) Only he had structural authority to mobilize U.S. support for Britain. (2) Republican alternative would be isolationist and could not lead wartime mobilization. (3) 1940 election was structurally referendum on U.S. wartime preparation. Democratic National Convention Chicago July 15-18, 1940. FDR did not publicly

seek nomination but quietly orchestrated draft. Senator Alben Barkley read FDR's statement that "all the delegates to this convention are free to vote for any candidate." Convention nominated FDR by acclamation on first ballot. Henry A. Wallace - FDR's Secretary of Agriculture, Progressive Republican who switched to Democratic Party in 1933 - was VP. Conservative Democratic wing strongly opposed Wallace but accepted him after FDR threatened to withdraw.

Republican National Convention Philadelphia June 24-28, 1940. Convention faced structural choice between three internationalist Republicans (NY DA Thomas Dewey, Wendell Willkie, Senator Charles L. McNary) and three isolationist Republicans (Senator Robert Taft of Ohio, Senator Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan). Internationalist Republican Wendell Willkie won on sixth ballot. Willkie 48, president of Commonwealth & Southern utility holding company, former Democrat (switched 1939 over New Deal). Never held political office. "Willkie boom" was structural insurgency - he had not been a candidate before convention. Senator Charles L. McNary of Oregon (isolationist) VP to balance ticket.

Campaign focused on war and federal-government expansion. Willkie's message: New Deal had failed to end Depression (unemployment 14% in 1940 from 1937 peak); FDR was aspiring "dictator"; America should remain neutral. FDR's message: New Deal had transformed U.S. economy; Willkie inexperienced; America must prepare for war.

September 1940 Selective Service and Training Act established first peacetime military draft in U.S. history. September 2, 1940 "destroyers for bases" agreement gave Britain 50 WWI-era destroyers in exchange for U.S. rights to British naval bases.

America First Committee (founded September 4, 1940) was leading isolationist organization. ~800,000 members at peak. Charles Lindbergh leading spokesman. Other members: Senator Burton K. Wheeler, Senator Gerald P. Nye, Senator Robert Taft, future President Gerald Ford (Yale Law student), future Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart, Sinclair Lewis. Committee opposed Lend-Lease (March 1941). Dissolved December 11, 1941 after U.S. entry into WWII. Lindbergh's September 11, 1941 Des Moines speech blamed "the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt administration" - damaged his reputation and America First movement.

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." Promise would be operationally violated within 14 months. FDR privately added "except in case of attack" but did not include in speech.

FDR won 449 EV; Willkie 82. FDR carried 38 states; Willkie 10 states (Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Colorado). 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 margin: 4,966,201.

Geographic pattern showed Willkie strength in rural Midwest and Plains - isolationist heartland that opposed WWI and now WWII. 1940 map showed structural Democratic strength but also rural-Midwestern isolationist Republican counter-base.

FDR inaugurated to third term January 20, 1941. March 11, 1941 Lend-Lease Act (Public Law 77-11) authorized president to "sell, transfer title to, exchange, lease, lend, or otherwise dispose of, to any such government any defense article." Lend-Lease provided ~$50B (~$640B in 2024 dollars) in U.S. military aid to Allies through September 1945.

August 14, 1941 Atlantic Charter (FDR + Churchill aboard USS Augusta off Newfoundland) articulated post-war war aims: no territorial aggrandizement; self-determination; free trade; freedom from fear and want; disarmament. Structural framework for United Nations.

December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. 2,403 Americans killed. December 8 Congress declared war on Japan with one dissenting vote (Jeannette Rankin of Montana). December 11 Germany and Italy declared war on U.S. WWII would last until September 2, 1945. U.S. mobilized 16 million soldiers and lost 405,399 American military deaths.

1940 election's structural significance was threefold. First, broke 144-year-old two-term tradition. Second, confirmed FDR's political authority for wartime mobilization. Third, produced 1941-45 FDR wartime presidency that shaped U.S. governance through WWII, post-war settlement, and Cold War.

After FDR's 1944 fourth-term election and April 12, 1945 death, 22nd Amendment ratified February 27, 1951. Amendment made two-term limit constitutional - structurally restoring Washington's 1797 precedent in constitutional rather than traditional form. FDR remains only U.S. president to serve more than two terms.

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

Third-term tradition

Unwritten U.S. tradition that presidents retire after two terms. Established by George Washington 1797. Respected 144 years. FDR broke it 1940 and 1944. 22nd Amendment (ratified 1951) made two-term limit constitutional.

America First Committee

September 1940 - December 1941 isolationist organization opposing U.S. entry into WWII. ~800,000 members. Charles Lindbergh leading spokesman. Dissolved December 11, 1941 after Pearl Harbor.

Selective Service and Training Act (1940)

September 16, 1940 federal law establishing first peacetime military draft in U.S. history.

Atlantic Charter

August 14, 1941 joint statement by FDR and Churchill aboard USS Augusta off Newfoundland. Articulated post-war war aims. Structural framework for United Nations.

Wendell Willkie

1940 Republican presidential nominee. President of Commonwealth & Southern. Never held political office. Former Democrat (switched 1939). Internationalist. Lost 449-82 EV.

"Your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars"

FDR's famous 1940 promise (Boston October 30, 1940). Operationally violated within 14 months.

Lend-Lease Act

March 11, 1941 federal law authorizing president to sell/transfer/lease defense articles to any government. Provided ~$50B in U.S. military aid to Allies through September 1945.

Address at Boston Garden ("Your boys" speech)

FRANKLIN D. ROOSEVELT, OCTOBER 30, 1940

FDR delivered this address at the Boston Garden on October 30, 1940 - five days before Election Day. The speech was FDR's most explicit campaign promise about U.S. neutrality in WWII. The "your boys" passage was the structural commitment that would be operationally violated within 14 months by U.S. entry into WWII following Pearl Harbor. FDR's political dilemma: he had to win a difficult third-term election against an internationalist Republican (Willkie) without alienating the substantial isolationist sentiment in the country. The promise was politically necessary in October 1940 but structurally untenable given the trajectory of European events. FDR privately added "except in case of attack" to draft notes but did not include the qualification in the public 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. They are going into training to form a force so strong that, by its very existence, it will keep the threat of war far away from our shores. The purpose of our defense is defense. The first purpose of our foreign policy is to keep our country out of war. At the same time we seek to keep foreign conceptions of government out of the United States. That is why we make ourselves strong; that is why we muster our resources to make this Nation impregnable; and that is why we must continue to build up our defenses, and continue to build them up with all the speed at our command. There is no other way to insure peace."*

Roosevelt, "Address at Boston Garden" (Boston, October 30, 1940). Public domain.

The 1940 Election

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

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

FDR says "your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars." What is the rhetorical purpose of this passage, and how was it operationally violated?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the America First Committee and why did it dissolve December 11, 1941?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1940 election map, identify FDR's 38 states and Willkie's 10 states (Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Colorado). What does the geographic pattern reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

449. FDR 449; Willkie 82.

AP students should know the 449-82 split.

QUESTION 2

Wendell Willkie. President of Commonwealth & Southern. Internationalist Republican who supported aid to Britain.

AP students should know Willkie.

QUESTION 3

FDR broke 144-year-old two-term tradition because of WWII. Structural justifications: (1) Hitler's 1939-40 conquests transformed political conditions - Germany conquered most of Western Europe; Britain stood alone. (2) FDR believed only he had structural authority to mobilize U.S. support for Britain. (3) Republican alternative could not lead wartime mobilization. (4) 1940 election was referendum on U.S. wartime preparation. (5) Theodore Roosevelt 1912 had tried but failed to break the tradition. FDR's 1940 success demonstrated right political conditions could overcome the unwritten norm. (6) 22nd Amendment (ratified 1951) made two-term limit constitutional - structurally restoring Washington's 1797 precedent.

AP students should be able to articulate justifications.

QUESTION 4

FDR's "your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars" rhetorical purpose: (1) Address widespread isolationist sentiment in the country. The America First Committee had ~800,000 members; many Americans opposed WWII entry. (2) Counter Willkie's charge that FDR was secretly committed to entering the war. (3) Defuse the political cost of FDR's simultaneous wartime preparation (Selective Service Act, destroyers-for-bases). FDR was structurally walking a tightrope: preparing for war while promising neutrality. The promise was operationally violated within 14 months: December 7, 1941 Pearl Harbor; December 8 U.S. declared war on Japan; December 11 Germany and Italy declared war on U.S. By 1945, U.S. had mobilized 16 million soldiers and lost 405,399 American military deaths. FDR's private "except in case of attack" qualification was honest about his expectations but politically excluded from the public promise. The structural lesson: presidential campaign promises about war can be operationally violated by events outside the president's control. The Pearl Harbor attack was the structural event that violated the promise.

AP students should be able to articulate the rhetorical purpose.

QUESTION 5

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 peak. Leading spokesman: Charles Lindbergh. Other members included Senator Burton K. Wheeler, Senator Gerald P. Nye, Senator Robert Taft, future President Gerald Ford (Yale Law student), future Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart (Yale Law student), Sinclair Lewis, General Robert E. Wood. Opposed Lend-Lease (March 1941) and the September 1941 "shoot on sight" naval policy against German U-boats. Lindbergh's September 11, 1941 Des Moines speech blamed "the British, the Jewish, and the Roosevelt administration" - damaged the movement. Dissolved December 11, 1941 after U.S. entry into WWII following Pearl Harbor. The Committee's dissolution reflected the structural collapse of isolationism after Pearl Harbor: the December 1941 surprise attack made isolationism politically untenable. The America First name was revived in 2016 by Donald Trump for an "America First" foreign-policy approach.

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

QUESTION 6

FDR states (38): Solid South (11) + Border States + Mid-Atlantic + most of Old Northwest (except IN, MI) + Mountain West (except CO) + West Coast + New England (except ME, VT). Willkie states (10): Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maine, Michigan, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Vermont, Colorado. Geographic pattern reveals: (1) Willkie strength in rural Midwest and Plains - isolationist heartland that opposed WWI and now WWII. (2) FDR's 1940 coalition was geographically comprehensive but less dominant than 1936 (lost Indiana, Michigan, Colorado, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa compared to 1936). (3) The 1940 map shows the structural rural-Midwestern isolationist Republican counter-base that would persist through the 1940s-50s. (4) The Solid South remained Democratic - FDR's economic policies offset any concerns about his "dictator" tendencies. (5) The 1940 result demonstrated that even in wartime crisis, the New Deal coalition had structural staying power.

AP students should be able to articulate the geographic pattern.