1940

Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Wendell Willkie

A 75-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

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

1940: Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Wendell Willkie

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 1940 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1940 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify 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. Political conditions transformed by global war. Japan invaded China July 1937. Germany annexed Austria March 1938. Germany took Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland October 1938 (Munich) and rest March 1939. August 23, 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. 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. FDR's personal political calculation: only he had structural authority to mobilize U.S. support for Britain; Republican alternative would be isolationist; 1940 election was structurally referendum on U.S. wartime preparation. Democratic National Convention Chicago July 15-18, 1940 nominated FDR by acclamation on first ballot. Henry A. Wallace (Secretary of Agriculture, Progressive Republican who switched 1933) VP. Republican National Convention Philadelphia June 24-28, 1940 nominated Wendell Willkie on sixth ballot over Dewey, Taft, Vandenberg. Willkie 48, Commonwealth &

Southern utility holding company president, former Democrat (switched 1939). Never held political office. "Willkie boom" structural insurgency. Charles L. McNary (Oregon isolationist) VP.

Campaign focused on war and federal-government expansion. Willkie: New Deal failed; FDR aspiring "dictator"; America should remain neutral. FDR: New Deal transformed economy; Willkie inexperienced; America must prepare for war.

September 1940 Selective Service and Training Act = first peacetime military draft. September 2, 1940 "destroyers for bases" gave Britain 50 WWI destroyers for U.S. rights to British naval bases.

America First Committee founded September 4, 1940. ~800,000 members. Lindbergh leading spokesman. Members included Sen Wheeler, Sen Nye, Sen Taft, future Gerald Ford, future Justice Potter Stewart, Sinclair Lewis. Lindbergh's September 11, 1941 Des Moines speech damaged movement. Dissolved December 11, 1941 after Pearl Harbor.

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." Operationally violated within 14 months.

FDR won 449 EV; Willkie 82. FDR carried 38 states; Willkie 10 (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 margin: 4,966,201.

FDR inaugurated to third term January 20, 1941. March 11, 1941 Lend-Lease Act (Public Law 77-11). Lend-Lease provided ~$50B (~$640B in 2024 dollars) in U.S. military aid to Allies through September 1945. August 14, 1941 Atlantic Charter - 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). December 11 Germany and Italy declared war on U.S. WWII until September 2, 1945. U.S. mobilized 16M soldiers, lost 405,399 American military deaths.

1940 election's structural significance: (1) Broke 144-year-old two-term tradition. (2) Confirmed FDR's political authority for wartime mobilization. (3) Produced 1941-45 FDR wartime presidency that shaped U.S. governance through WWII, post-war settlement, and Cold War.

22nd Amendment ratified February 27, 1951. Amendment made two-term limit constitutional. FDR remains only U.S. president to serve more than two terms.

		The 1940-1945 FDR wartime presidency would produce the structural foundations of post-WWII U.S. governance: (1) Federal economic mobilization - the War Production Board (January 1942), the Office of Price Administration (1941), the National War Labor Board (1942). (2) Federal income tax expansion - rates rose to 94% on top incomes by 1944; the August 1942 Revenue Act introduced withholding. (3) Manhattan Project (1942-45) - the federal atomic-bomb program that produced the August 1945 Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. (4) Federal scientific research - the Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD) under Vannevar Bush. (5) Federal civil rights initiatives - the June 1941 Executive Order 8802 prohibiting federal contractor racial discrimination (after A. Philip Randolph's threatened March on Washington); the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). (6) Internationalist foreign policy - the Lend-Lease, Atlantic Charter, Casablanca Conference 1943 (unconditional surrender doctrine), Tehran Conference 1943, Yalta Conference February 1945. (7) Post-war institutional framework - Bretton Woods July 1944 (IMF, World Bank), Dumbarton Oaks August-October 1944 (United Nations), San Francisco April-June 1945 (UN founding). The transformations would shape U.S. federal government structure through the Cold War and into the 21st century. 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 1940 election tells you about the New Deal Coalition 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

Third-term tradition

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

America First Committee

September 1940 - December 1941 isolationist organization opposing U.S. entry into WWII. ~800,000 members. Lindbergh leading spokesman.

Selective Service and Training Act (1940)

September 16, 1940 federal law establishing first peacetime military draft.

Atlantic Charter

August 14, 1941 joint statement by FDR and Churchill. Structural framework for United Nations.

Wendell Willkie

1940 Republican presidential nominee. President of Commonwealth & Southern. Never held political office. 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. 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 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 promise was operationally violated within 14 months by U.S. entry into WWII following Pearl Harbor.

> *"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 (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 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, and how was it operationally violated?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

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

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Explain the 22nd Amendment and why U.S. politics constitutionalized the two-term limit only after FDR.

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1940 election map, identify FDR's 38 states and Willkie's 10 states. 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.

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. (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.

AP students should be able to articulate justifications.

QUESTION 4

FDR's "your boys" rhetorical purpose: (1) Address widespread isolationist sentiment - America First Committee had ~800,000 members. (2) Counter Willkie's charge that FDR was secretly committed to entering the war. (3) Defuse political cost of simultaneous wartime preparation (Selective Service, destroyers-for-bases). FDR was walking a tightrope: preparing for war while promising neutrality. 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. mobilized 16M soldiers, lost 405,399 American military deaths. FDR's private "except in case of attack" qualification was honest about his expectations but politically excluded from public promise. Structural lesson: presidential campaign promises about war can be operationally violated by events outside the president's control.

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; ~800,000 members at peak. Charles Lindbergh leading spokesman. Other members: Sen Burton K. Wheeler, Sen Gerald P. Nye, Sen Robert Taft, future Gerald Ford, future Justice Potter Stewart, Sinclair Lewis, General Robert E. Wood. Opposed Lend-Lease (March 1941) and September 1941 "shoot on sight" naval policy. 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. Committee's dissolution reflected structural collapse of isolationism after Pearl Harbor.

AP students should be able to articulate the Committee.

QUESTION 6

22nd Amendment ratified February 27, 1951. Amendment made two-term limit constitutional: "No person shall be elected to the office of the President more than twice, and no person who has held the office of President, or acted as President, for more than two years of a term to which some other person was elected President shall be elected to the office of the President more than once." Three structural reasons U.S. politics constitutionalized the limit only after FDR: (1) FDR's 12-year presidency demonstrated the dangers of indefinite incumbency. The accumulated executive power, the personal political machine, and the structural advantages of incumbency had reached unprecedented levels by 1945. (2) Republican Congress 1947-49 (the 80th Congress) sought to prevent any future Democratic president from matching FDR. The amendment was proposed in 1947 and ratified by 1951 - during the Truman presidency. Truman was exempted from the amendment (it specifically excluded "the person holding the office of President when this Article was proposed by Congress"). (3) Post-WWII consensus about constitutional governance - the war had demonstrated the value of regular leadership transitions; the amendment institutionalized this consensus. The Washington 1797 precedent had been respected for 144 years; FDR's 1940 and 1944 break of the precedent created the structural conditions for constitutional codification. FDR remains the only U.S. president to serve more than two terms.

AP students should be able to articulate the 22nd Amendment.

QUESTION 7

FDR states (38): Solid South + 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: (1) Willkie strength in rural Midwest and Plains - isolationist heartland. (2) FDR's 1940 coalition less dominant than 1936. (3) Rural-Midwestern isolationist Republican counter-base would persist through 1940s-50s. (4) Solid South remained Democratic - FDR's economic policies offset concerns about "dictator" tendencies.

AP students should be able to articulate the geographic pattern.

Discussion prompts

1. FDR's 1940 third-term victory broke 144-year-old two-term tradition. The 22nd Amendment (1951) made the limit constitutional. Identify three structural reasons U.S. politics constitutionalized the limit only after FDR rather than before.

2. FDR's "your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars" promise was operationally violated within 14 months. Identify three structural reasons FDR made the promise despite knowing U.S. entry into WWII was likely.