1940

Franklin D. Roosevelt vs Wendell Willkie

A 20-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%

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1940

After FDR's 1936 landslide, he expected to retire after his second term. But the world changed dramatically. Japan invaded China 1937. Germany annexed Austria March 1938. Hitler took Czechoslovakia March 1939. September 1, 1939 Germany invaded Poland - WWII began. By summer 1940, Germany had conquered Poland, Denmark, Norway, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. Britain stood alone against Hitler.

FDR decided he had to run for a third term. No president had ever done this. George Washington had retired after two terms in 1797. The unwritten "two-term tradition" had been respected for 144 years. Theodore Roosevelt 1912 had tried but failed. FDR believed only he could lead America through the war.

Democratic convention picked FDR third term. Wallace Henry A. Wallace - FDR's Secretary of Agriculture - VP.

Look at picture. That FDR - first president to break two-term tradition.

Republicans picked Wendell Willkie - businessman who had never held political office. Willkie was president of Commonwealth &

Southern (utility holding company). He had fought New Deal as anti-business. But Willkie was internationalist - supported aid to Britain. Republican convention picked him over isolationists like Senator Robert Taft of Ohio.

Campaign focused on war. America First Committee (founded September 1940) wanted U.S. to stay out of war. Charles Lindbergh (famous aviator) was leader. FDR promised: "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."

FDR signed Selective Service and Training Act September 1940 - first peacetime military draft in U.S. history. FDR's "destroyers for bases" deal September 1940 gave Britain 50 old destroyers in exchange for British naval bases.

Election Day November 5, 1940: FDR won 449 EV vs Willkie 82. Popular vote 54.7% vs 44.8% - margin reduced from 1936 but still decisive. FDR became first U.S. president to win third term.

WWII soon swallowed FDR's third term. December 7, 1941 Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. December 8 U.S. declared war on Japan. December 11 Germany and Italy declared war on U.S.



Franklin D. Roosevelt, 32nd U.S. president. He became the first president to win a third term in 1940.
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Let's talk about the story

1.

What did FDR do in 1940 that no U.S. president had ever done?

2.

Who was Wendell Willkie?

3.

What happened December 7, 1941?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1940 FDR did something no U.S. president had ever done - ran for a THIRD term. Every president since Washington had retired after two terms. But WWII was raging in Europe and FDR believed only he could lead the country.

Answer key

1.

FDR ran for and won a third term in 1940 - no U.S. president had ever done this before. George Washington had retired after two terms in 1797, establishing the unwritten "two-term tradition" that had been respected for 144 years (1797-1940). Theodore Roosevelt 1912 had tried but lost. FDR's 1940 third-term victory was 449-82 EV over Willkie. FDR would also win a fourth term in 1944 before dying in office April 1945. After FDR, the 22nd Amendment (ratified 1951) made the two-term limit constitutional. FDR remains the only U.S. president to serve more than two terms.

AP students should know the third-term significance.

2.

Wendell Willkie was the 1940 Republican presidential nominee. Born February 18, 1892 in Elwood, Indiana. President of Commonwealth & Southern (utility holding company that had fought the New Deal's TVA). He had never held political office before the 1940 nomination. He was an internationalist - supported aid to Britain - which distinguished him from isolationist Republican alternatives like Senator Robert Taft of Ohio. He had been a Democrat until 1939, when he switched to Republican over the New Deal. The Republican convention picked Willkie at the sixth ballot in June 1940 over the isolationist candidates. Willkie lost the 1940 election 449-82 EV with 44.8% popular vote. After the 1940 election, Willkie worked with FDR as a wartime envoy (visiting Britain, the Soviet Union, China, the Middle East). He wrote "One World" (1943) - a bestseller advocating post-war internationalism. He sought the 1944 Republican nomination but withdrew after the Wisconsin primary. He died October 8, 1944 at age 52.

AP students should know Willkie's significance.

3.

December 7, 1941 was the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The U.S. Pacific Fleet anchored at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii was attacked by Japanese aircraft launched from six aircraft carriers. The attack killed 2,403 Americans and wounded 1,178. Eight U.S. battleships were damaged or destroyed (USS Arizona destroyed; USS Oklahoma capsized). The attack was a surprise - the U.S. had no advance warning. President Roosevelt called December 7 "a date which will live in infamy" in his December 8 address to Congress requesting a declaration of war on Japan. Congress declared war on Japan December 8, 1941 with one dissenting vote (Jeannette Rankin of Montana). Germany and Italy declared war on the U.S. December 11, 1941. The U.S. entered WWII. WWII would last until September 2, 1945 (Japan surrender). The U.S. would mobilize 16 million soldiers and lose 405,399 American military deaths in WWII (~3.5x WWI losses). FDR's 1940 "your boys are not going to be sent into any foreign wars" promise was operationally violated within 14 months of the November 1940 election.

AP students should know Pearl Harbor.