



Background for the Teacher

After the debacle of the one-party presidential campaign of 1824, a new two-party system began to emerge. Strong public reaction to perceived corruption in the vote in the House of Representatives, as well as the popularity of Andrew Jackson, allowed Martin Van Buren to organize a Democratic Party that resurrected a Jeffersonian philosophy of minimalism in the federal government. This new party opposed the tendencies of National Republicans such as John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay to invest more power in the federal government. Van Buren built a political machine to support Jackson in the 1828 election. Van Buren's skills helped give the Democrats a head start on modern-style campaigning and a clear advantage in organization.

The Democrats defeated the National Republicans in 1828 and 1832. The Democrats maintained their hold on the presidency when they bested the Whigs—a union of former National Republicans, Antimasons, and some states' rights advocates—in 1836. But a major economic depression in 1837 finally gave the Whigs their best chance to occupy the White House. They faced Andrew Jackson's political organizer, vice-president, and handpicked successor, President Martin Van Buren, who was vying for a second term.

By the time forces were readying themselves for the election of 1840, both Democrats and Whigs understood how to conduct effective campaigns. In an election that would turn out an astounding 80 percent of a greatly expanded electorate, the parties were learning to appeal to a wide range of voters in a variety of voting blocks, a vast change from the regionally based election of 1824.

The Democrats felt, despite hard times, that the issues were on their side. They published a fairly specific platform, the first document of its kind from a major national party.

The Democrats re-nominated Van Buren and adopted a platform denouncing internal improvements at national expense, a protective tariff, a national bank, and any interference by Congress with slavery. The campaign, however, was not fought on these issues...Hard times and falling prices for wheat and cotton played a large part in the contest, but the main issue presented to the people was a manufactured one. ...Portraying their candidate as an honest high-principled farmer who lived in a log cabin with the latch string always out, a coon skin nailed to the door and a barrel of cider (sweet cider in prohibition areas) for the refreshment of visitors... they contrasted this democratic simplicity with the... luxury that surrounded "Sweet Sandy Whiskers" Van Buren at the White House."

This hullabaloo undoubtedly swayed thousands of voters, but more effective still was the Whig organization for the campaign., the outlines of which were set up at *Harrisburg* (site of the Whig convention) and developed by *Weed* (Thurlow Weed, 1797-1882, a New York journalist and founding editor of the *Albany Evening Journal*, a pro-Whig—

and later, pro-Republican—newspaper, who worked behind the scenes as a political operative) and other party leaders... A Whig committee composed of members of Congress and with headquarters in Washington used congressional *franks* (the privilege of members of Congress to mail items free of charge) to distribute speeches, handbills, and a pamphlet entitled “The Contest” which told the voters they had to choose between “Harrison and Prosperity or Van Buren and Ruin.” There were Whig state committees and county committees and a personal campaign committee to advise Harrison and handle his correspondence. And there were numerous ratification meetings, Tippecanoe clubs, Victory Ball marches and many *campaign papers* (most notably Horace Greeley’s *Log Cabin*. At the height of the campaign, Greeley printed as many as 80,000 copies of the *Log Cabin*.)

-- From Glyndon G. Van Deusen (“The Whig Party,” *History of U.S. Political Parties, Volume 1*. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Ed. 4 vols. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1973. 343-344.)

The Whigs did not publish a platform—not surprisingly, as the practice was not yet an obligatory part of the nominating process. In fact, the Democratic platform was the first of its kind from a major party. But Van Deusen ascribes a different reason to the lack of a platform (“The Whig Party,” *History of U.S. Political Parties, Volume 1*. Ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. editor. 4 vols. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1973. 343):

With an eye to the... need for stressing different aims in different sections of the country, the convention agreed that it would be better not to have a platform and none was drafted.

Whatever the reason, no statement about positions came out of the nominating process. Whether or not issues were important to the campaign is a question on which students can reflect as they analyze campaign documents. Whether issue or image, the campaign combined traditional organizing with much that was new or on a much grander scale.

The Democrats undertook a campaign in what had become a traditional style. They depended on organization, full use of their patronage platoons and a conventional propaganda barrage. They deplored the “demagoguery” of the Whigs and tried to deal with issues, although they also heaped abuse on Harrison. The total effect was rather staid and prosaic.

The Whigs, on the other hand, elaborated their new-style campaign and made it as diverting as it was professional. They used organization to draw huge crowds... Whig propaganda included a panoply of visual devices like Harrison “Liberty Poles” as well as mottoes, songs, jokes, along with “efficient orators.” ...It was all drama and popular commotion mixed with slander and smears designed to destroy “Martin Van Ruin.” It was a combination of merchandizing and militia styles, with all the stops pulled out (669-670).

William Henry Harrison spoke in public—unprecedented for a candidate for president. In at least one speech, he even addressed the accusation that he (and his party) took no stand on the issues. He vehemently denied this in a speech in Dayton on September 10, 1840:

...I am fully aware, my fellow citizens, that you expect from me some opinion upon the various questions which now agitate our country, from centre to circumference, with such fierce contention. Calumny, ever seeking to destroy all that is good in this world, hath proclaimed that I am averse from declaring my opinions on matters so interesting to you; but nothing can be more false.

Have I not, time out of mind, proclaimed my opposition to a citizen's going forward among the people and soliciting votes for the Presidency? Have I not, many a time and often, said, that in my opinion, no man ought to aspire to the Presidency of these United States, unless he is designated as a candidate for that high office by the unbought wishes of the people? If the candidate for so high an office be designated by a portion or a majority of the people. They will have come to the determination of sustaining such a man from a review of his past actions and life, and they will not exact pledges from him of what he will do and what he will not do, for their selection of him is proof enough that he will carry out the doctrines of his party, This plan of choosing a candidate for the Presidency is a much surer bar against corruption than the system of requiring promises. If the pledging plan is pursued, the effect will be, to offer the Presidential chair to the man who will make the most promises. He who would pledge the most, he who would promise most, would be the man to be voted for, and I have no hesitation in declaring my belief, that he who would subject his course to be thus tied up by promises and pledges, would not stop to break them when once in office...

While then, fellow citizens, I have never hesitated to declare my opinions on proper occasions upon the great questions before the nation, I cannot consent to make mere promises the condition of obtaining the office which you kindly wish to bestow upon me. My opinions I am free to express, but you already have them, sustained and supported by the acts of a long and arduous life. That life is a pledge of my future course, if I am elevated by your suffrages to the highest office in your gift (737-738).

Your students can look at an annotated version of this excerpt to evaluate Harrison's defense.

How else was the campaign that followed conducted? According to William Nisbet Chambers ("Election of 1840," *History of American Presidential Elections, Volume 1*. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Ed. 5 vols. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971.):

...the Harrison campaign plan of 1840 exhibits important parallels with certain modern, highly professional campaigns... The Whig managers of 1840 were the new professionals of their party, and they made resourceful use of the proliferating mass media of the time. In the process, they created a political persona for William Henry Harrison that had little to do with actuality. They called it "Old Tip," surrounded it with various trappings such as log cabins and cider barrels, offered it as packaged charisma, as the representative and savior of the common man, and sold it to the masses (644).

... "Old Hickory" was an authentic Military hero. ...By contrast, Harrison was a minor military figure and a folk hero only as the result of the Whig campaign imagery...

One extension to this unit allows students to look at some primary sources to decide for themselves if Harrison was or was not a genuine hero.

The Whig publicists also successfully created a marvelously ingenious negative image of Martin Van Buren (644). If Van Buren were so easily tarnished, why did the Democrats nominate him?

...There was no doubt that the Democrats would nominate Martin Van Buren again. Fifty-eight in 1840, nearly twenty years younger than Harrison, he had served his party well. He had also labored to maintain his position among the various blocs that constituted the party, and he could count on a national cadre of patronage officeholders. Short, round, and a bit dapper with his reddish side-whiskers, he was genial and urbane, a shrewd political manager who had been called the “Red Fox” and the “Little Magician.” Yet he lacked flair, drama, the touch of charisma that makes for a strong popular image. It was all very well to dub him “Old Kinderhook,” but his political persona was less than “O.K.” for the times. In the face of depression and privation, the Whigs were nearer to the mark when they declared that “Matty Van” was a “used-up man” (Chambers, 666).

The contest between Martin Van Buren and William Henry Harrison marked the first truly modern presidential campaign, with methods today’s students are sure to recognize. Lessons in this unit allow students to become familiar with the issues and personalities and to review an assortment of primary documents. As students analyze them, they reflect on the presidential campaign of 1840. How was it conducted? What was the role of campaign advertising? How crucial were issues to the election of William Henry Harrison? How crucial was image?