



“The Dark Horse”

Introduction

James Polk is known as the first dark horse candidate for the US presidency. Though it is a stretch to call a former seven term US congressman, Speaker of the House, and governor unknown, many people were surprised by his nomination.

Political campaigns were a lot different when Polk was alive. As a dark horse candidate, James Polk and the Democrats had to come up with a way to beat Henry Clay and the Whigs. In this lesson plan, your students will explore what the presidential campaign of 1844 looked and sounded like through the analysis of primary and secondary sources then plan, develop, and execute their own campaign.

Objectives

- A. Research and analyze primary and secondary sources to explore how political conventions worked in 1844.
- B. Examine primary source excerpts from newspapers, personal accounts, and political documents to identify differences between the two major political parties during James Polk’s candidacy.
- C. Analyze political cartoons, ribbons, and songs to understand how political messages were spread during the 1844 campaign.
- D. Demonstrate understanding of the complex issues facing the United States during the 1844 campaign through the creation of political cartoons, songs, and speeches.

TN State Standards

5.4 Identify the impact of important Tennesseans prior to the Civil War, including: President James K. Polk (Manifest Destiny)

8.53 Identify the major events and impact of James K. Polk’s presidency, including the annexation of Texas and the settlement of the Oregon boundary.

TN.22 Describe the contributions of President James K. Polk to Tennessee and American history.

SSP.01-SSP.04



Vocabulary

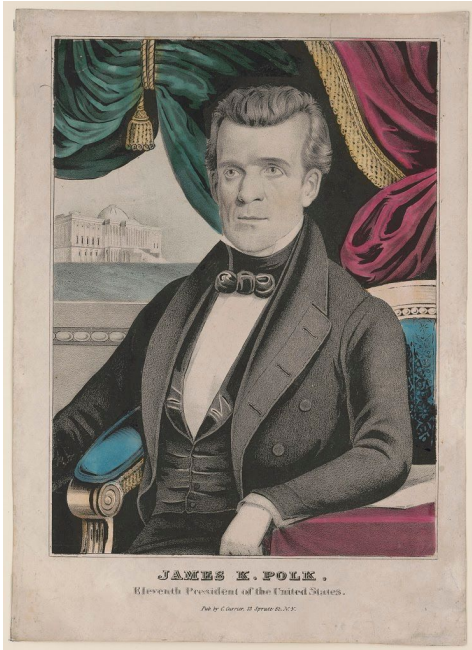
annexation	the act of one nation taking territory from another nation through force or agreement.
campaign	a race between candidates for political office in which political goals and plans are shared with voters.
campaign song	a song that shared the ideas and goals of a political campaign often by changing the words to a popular song.
candidate	a person who applies for a job or is nominated for election.
Dark Horse	a candidate for office who is either unknown or unexpected.
delegate	a person sent or authorized to represent the interests of voters at a convention.
Democratic Party	The political party that James Polk belonged to which advocated western expansion and the rights of free white working class voters.
platform	a set of political goals supported by a party and candidate and presented to appeal to voters.
political cartoon	artwork that expresses the artist's opinion on a political issue. Often these works contain depictions of politicians.
Western Expansion	The movement of settlers into the American West during the 1800s, beginning with the Louisiana Purchase and fueled by the Gold Rush, the Oregon Trail and a belief in "manifest destiny"
Whig Party	A political party founded in the 1830s to oppose the policies of President Andrew Jackson and the Democratic party. Henry Clay was the Whig candidate in 1844.



Section 1 - The Convention

James K. Polk’s nomination to run for president in 1844 came as a surprise to many, earning him the title of the first Dark Horse candidate for president. Polk was a compromise candidate. The Democrats were split over sectional tensions surrounding slavery and the annexation of Texas. The presumptive nominee had been Martin Van Buren until he publicly came out against Texas annexation. Van Buren believed correctly that annexation would lead to controversy and war with Mexico.

While the Whigs selected their nominee on the first ballot of their convention, the Democratic convention disintegrated to bickering and blame. After several ballots it became clear that no candidate had the votes to secure the nomination. It was at this point that Polk’s name was suggested as a compromise. He was a party loyalist who had advocated for Texas annexation and was backed by Andrew Jackson. On the 9th ballot of the convention Polk received enough of a majority to secure the nomination. During the dramatic proceedings in Baltimore, James Polk was home in Columbia. In fact it took two weeks for a letter to arrive informing him of the nomination. Thus earning him the nickname “The Dark Horse.”



Secondary Source Excerpt: [James K. Polk: Campaigns and Elections](#)

...When the balloting began, Van Buren peaked on the first ballot, then fell downward while Cass moved up. On the fifth ballot, Cass overtook Van Buren. Seeing that he would never be nominated and furious with Cass for having robbed him of the nomination, Van Buren threw his support behind the first dark horse candidate ever to be nominated by a major political party: James K. Polk. It had happened on the ninth ballot at 2 p.m. on May 30, 1844.

Early the next morning, the Democrats nominated George M. Dallas of Pennsylvania for vice president and presented the expected party platform: strict construction of the U.S. Constitution and opposition to the Whigs' "American System" of a national bank, high protective tariffs, and federally funded internal improvements such as canals and roads. The platform also denounced federal interference with "the domestic institutions of the several States"—meaning slavery. On the issue of westward expansion, Democrats committed their party to the "reoccupation of Oregon and the re-annexation of Texas, at the earliest practicable period." This was a compromise between southern Democrats who wanted immediate annexation and northern Democrats who had their doubts about any annexation treaty at all.

Suggested Activity 1: Have students use a [paragraph shrinking](#) exercise on excerpts from the MillerCenter.Org article to answer questions about the candidates and platform. Alternatively, challenge the students to use the internet to do their own research on aspects of the 1844 convention to write an ACES (Answer, Cite, Explain, Summarize) paragraph to answer a question.



Primary Source: [Polk's Letter of Acceptance for the Democratic Nomination](#)

Gentlemen: I have had the honor to receive your letter of the 29th ultimo, informing me that the Democratic National Convention, then assembled at Baltimore, had designated me to be the candidate of the Democratic party for President of the United States, and that I had been unanimously nominated for that office. It has been well observed that the office of President of the United States should neither be sought nor declined. I have never sought it, nor shall I feel at liberty to decline it, if conferred upon me by the voluntary suffrages of my fellow citizens. In accepting the nomination, I am deeply impressed with the distinguished honor which has been conferred upon me by my republican friends, and am duly sensible of the great and mighty responsibilities which must ever devolve upon any citizen who may be called to fill the high station of President of the United States. I deem the present to be a proper occasion to declare, that if the nomination made by the Convention shall be confirmed by the people, and result in my election, I shall enter upon the discharge of the high and solemn duties of the office with the settled purpose of not being a candidate for re-election. In the event of my election it shall be my constant aim, by a strict adherence to the old republican landmarks, to maintain and preserve prosperity, and at the end of four years I am resolved to retire to private life....Your ob't servant, James K. Polk."

Suggested Activity 2: Guide the class or assign groups to use a [Question the Author](#) activity to encourage comprehension and determine key facts about Polk's nomination. Example questions: *Where was Polk nominated? How does Polk feel about the nomination? Does he intend to run for reelection if he wins?* Help students with vocabulary and concepts by breaking the letter into smaller excerpts.

Section 2 - The Campaign:

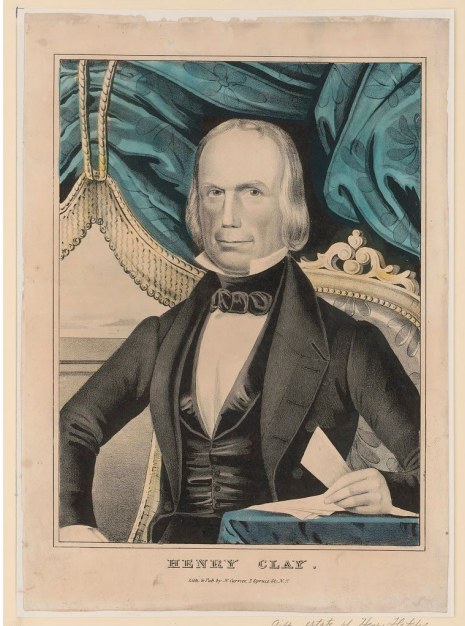
Presidential Campaigning looked a lot different in 1844. Candidates rarely gave campaign speeches and instead depended on party members and politicians to campaign for them. And since information traveled slowly, both sides of the ballot used campaign tools to help spread their message. These tools included public letters from the candidates, partisan newspaper articles, rallies with food and alcohol, parades, campaign cartoons and lithographs, ribbons, and songs.

In this section students will research the party platforms of the Whigs and Democrats in 1844, analyze primary source campaign tools, and apply their research to create their own campaign for either the Whigs or the Democrats.

The Party Platforms

The presidential campaign of 1844 was very close. The Whig candidate was Henry Clay from Kentucky. The Whig Party Platform was focused on economic improvement based on Henry Clay’s “[American System](#).” Notably, the Whigs did not include annexation or western expansion. The Democratic Party Platform did.

Suggested Activity 1: Divide the class into groups, some with excerpts from the [Democratic Party Platform](#), some with the [Whig Party Platform](#). Use a simple [Summarizing Exercise](#) to allow students to find out for themselves what each party wanted for the nation. Have each group teach the class what they outlined in their summary. As a class, ask the students to reflect on their findings. *Example Questions: Did your party have a clear plan? Do you think your party’s platform would persuade voters?*





Partisan Newspapers:

News in 1844 was not fair and balanced. Most papers proclaimed to be either Whig or Democrat proudly and wrote articles to please their bases. During the campaign editors would publish highly partisan articles championing their candidates and vilifying the others.

Suggested Activity 2: Nominate a strong reader to read an excerpt about James Polk from a partisan paper representing both sides. Ask students to decide which party each paper represented. For further study, find political articles from contemporary sources and repeat the exercise. *Example Questions: What is different about the tone of each article? Do you think the article is true? How do you think the author wants you to feel? Has journalism changed much since 1844?*

Primary Source: A Speech by Gansevoort Melville printed in the Washington Globe on June 7, 1844.

“Hereafter he shall be known as Young Hickory... We have had one old hickory tree... Sixteen millions of Americans have reposed under its shade in peace and happiness. It is yet vigorous-but it cannot live forever. And now, to take its place, is springing up at its very side a tall and noble sapling. It imbibes its nourishment from the same soil. It flourishes in the same atmosphere. It springs from the staunch old democratic stock. It is heart of oak and sound to the core... Its growth cannot be checked... We and our children will yet live in prosperity under the broad branches of this new young hickory tree. On the 4th day of March next, that young hickory tree will be transplanted by the people to the people’s house at Washington; and you and I, will assist in that transplanting.”

Primary Source: Editorial from the *New York Courier and Enquirer* quoted in the *Washington Madisonian* on Nov. 15 1844.

“Let every citizen “put it to his conscience whether he can vote for a man pledged to the ‘immediate Texas... a step conceived by traitors and base conspirators against the union... Let him remember that if he votes for Polk he votes to turn out the employment of EIGHT HUNDRED THOUSAND American citizens, now engaged in manufacturing... Let him remember that if he votes for James K. Polk he votes for a man who... owes his selection to the fact that he is a pliant tool of Southern disunionists... who would instantly plunge us into a disgraceful war, which he has not the ability to conduct-who would set in motion causes which could not fail to result in disunion and civil war.”

Campaign Cartoons:

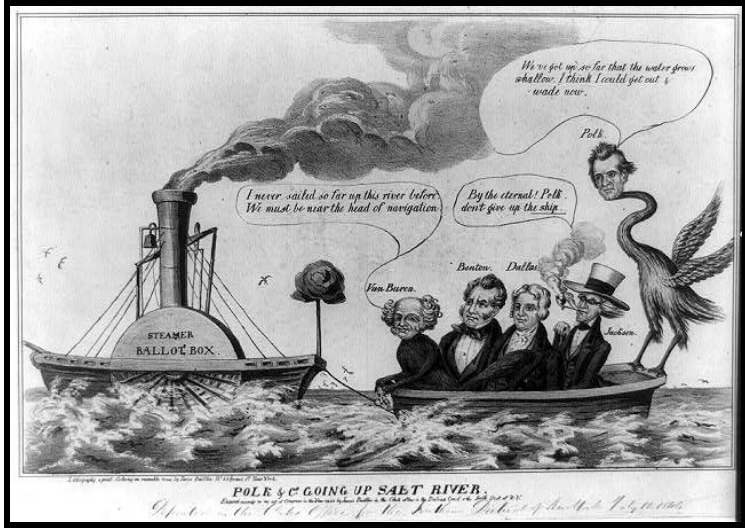
American Political cartoons have been around as long as the nation. Cartoonists published works during the 1844 campaign to garner support for both sides. Many Whig cartoons in the 1844 election presume that Polk is going to lose and present the Democratic party as lost or misguided.

[Example 1](#)

Others present Henry Clay as the stronger candidate and a sure bet to win the presidency.

[Example 2](#)

[Example 3](#)



The question of Texas annexation became one of the deciding factors of the 1844 election. Whigs generally opposed annexation while Democrats were in support. This contentious issue features strongly in the campaign cartoons of 1844 on both sides.

[Example 4](#)

[Example 5](#)

Suggested Activity 3: Ask students to look closely at examples of political cartoons from the 1844 election to identify the artist’s opinions. *Example Questions:* Which candidate did the artist support? What clues in the artwork let you know that? How are the candidates represented? What is the artist’s opinion on Texas and annexation? Why do you think there are fewer examples of pro-Polk cartoons? Challenge the students to choose a campaign issue from the 1844 election to create their own cartoons.



Campaign Songs:

One popular way to spread the word about political candidates was campaign songs. Campaign songwriters were clever. Instead of writing new music and melodies, they would change the words to songs that were already popular so everyone knew the tune. One of the most popular songs in 1844 was "[Ole Dan Tucker](#)." Both the Whigs and Democrats sang versions of the tune.

Suggested Activity 4: As a class, listen to the original version of Ole' Dan Tucker. Then compare the original lyrics with both the Whig and Democratic versions. Divide the class into groups. Assign each group either the Whig or Democratic platforms. Challenge the students to pick a favorite contemporary song, nursery rhyme, or "Ole' Dan Tucker" and change the lyrics to create a new campaign song for the 1844 election.

Ole' Dan Tucker

Well, Old Dan Tucker, was a fine old man
Washed his face in a frying pan
Combed his hair with a wagon wheel
Died with a toothache in his heel

Chorus: Get out of the way! Old Dan Tucker
You're too late to get your supper
Get out of the way! Old Dan Tucker
You're too late to get your supper

Old Dan Tucker, he'd come to town
Riding a billy goat, leading a hound
The hound dog barked, the billy goat jumped
Landed 'Ol Tucker on a stump!



Whig Version

A first rate rhyme was made of late
By a Whig from the Buckeye State;
It Goes to that familiar tune
Which Old Dan Tucker taught the coon.*

Chorus: Hurrah! Hurrah! The country's risin'
For Harry Clay and Frelinghuysen!
Hurrah! Hurrah! The country's risin'
For Harry Clay and Frelinghuysen!

Clay's a patriot through and through,
And so is Frelinghuysen, too;
They are men of truth and candor
Who can't be hurt by Loco* slander

*One of Henry Clay's nicknames was "Ol' Coon." This was a campaign device to invoke his rustic, frontier roots.

*Loco refers to the Locofocos, a radical wing of the Democratic Party. Opponents applied the term to all Democrats to portray all party members as radical.

Democrat Version

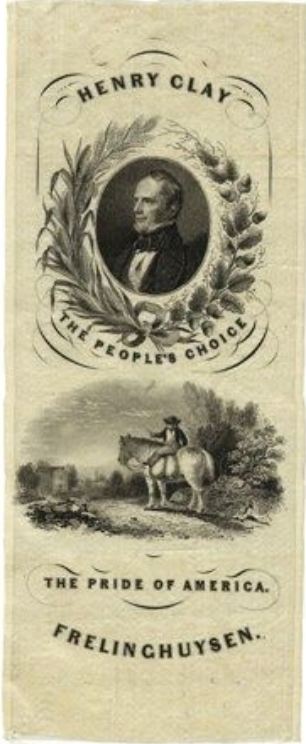
A Psalm we don't object to sing
But Uncle Sam is now the thing,
He cries for Polk and Dallas go,
And save Texas from Mexico

Chorus: Then Whigs clear the way, Whigs give way,
Whigs give way, 'tis freedom beck us,
Whigs clear the way, Whigs give way
For Polk, for Dallas and young Texas

Sly Harry and Theodore so grand,
Instead of gaining Sam more land,
They'd sell each acre to the foe,
And sell the people on it too.

Campaign Flags and Ribbons:

During the early decades of the 1800s both the printing and textiles industries in the United States were expanding. Political candidates took advantage of this growth by printing their candidate’s faces and slogans on ribbons, flags, banners, and more. Ribbons in particular became a great way for people to show their support for their favorite candidate and platform.



Suggested Activity 4: Show the students examples of campaign ribbons from the 1844 election. Let each student choose a candidate and a campaign issue then design a new campaign ribbon and slogan based on what they have learned.



Section 3 - Building a Campaign

At this Point, your class should have an idea of what political campaigning looked and sounded like during the 1844 election. Now it is time to put it all together for a class campaign. In small groups have the students design a campaign by creating a ribbon, song, speech, and newspaper article. Have the groups present their campaigns to the class.

Suggested Activity 1: Hold a Mock Convention. Have the students nominate their peers for class president. Divide the class into delegations. Have each delegation work with a candidate to create a platform. Let each candidate give a speech to persuade the class to vote for them. Hold a vote. If no clear winner is chosen, ask the candidates to meet with their delegation to amend their platform to gain more votes. Let each candidate give another speech to announce their changes to sway other delegates. Then hold another vote. Repeat this process until a winner is chosen. After the election, have each delegation reflect on how their candidate's platform changed to get more votes. Example Questions: *Were there issues that divided the class? Were there issues all candidates agreed on? Did charisma or popularity play a part in the election? Was everyone happy with the result of the election?*

Suggested Activity 2: Using the class presidential candidates from the Mock Convention, have groups of 3 to 5 students apply what they have learned about the 1844 campaign by creating a campaign ribbon, a campaign song, a political cartoon, and a speech or newspaper article. Each group should present their campaign and explain how each element demonstrates their platform.



Resources:

Currier, Charles, Publisher. James K. Polk - eleventh president of the United States. , None. [N.y.: pub. by c. currier, 33 spruce st., between 1866 and 1887] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/98507812/>.

Democratic Party Platforms, 1844 Democratic Party Platform Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273162>

Lambert, Robert S. "The Democratic National Convention of 1844." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1955): 3-23. www.jstor.org/stable/42621214.

N. Currier. Henry Clay. , None. [New york: published by n. currier, between 1835 and 1856] Photograph. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2002695856/>.

Peters, Gerhard, John T. Woolley, Whig Party Platform of 1844 Online, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/273457>

Sellers, Charles. *James K. Polk Continentalist: 1843-1846*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966. 140-142.

Washburn, Clara Bracken. "Some Aspects of the 1844 Presidential Campaign in Tennessee." *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1945): 58-74. www.jstor.org/stable/42620858.