

Lesson Activities

- **Activity 1. Background on the Issues and the Interpretation of Political Cartoons**
- **Activity 2. The Panic of 1837 in Political Cartoons**
- **Activity 3. A Primer on Party Politics in Jacksonian America**

Activity 1. Background on the Issues and the Interpretation of Political Cartoons

1. Ask the students to think about how historians interpret and learn from primary source material such as political cartoons. In guiding the students through this preliminary activity, you might need to offer a few clues. They should, for example, consider:

- The subject selected
- The particular message about that subject
- Artistic style and how that contributes to the message
- Use of specific images and/or caricatures
- The simplicity or complexity of the cartoon
- The “tone” of the drawing
- The anticipated audience

You might also ask students to think about the difference between a visual and a “verbal” document and, in particular, what advantages the visual has over the “verbal.” In what ways does the visual have an advantage over the “verbal” from the historian’s point of view?

Use one or more of the following cartoons in a whole class lesson or assign one cartoon to each of as many as six small groups. All of the cartoons are thought to be from 1837 except “Sober Second Thoughts,” which is probably from 1838.

- **Capitol Fashions for 1837** (criticism of power wielded by President Van Buren)
- **Fifty Cents. Shin Plaster** (mock paper money)
- **New Edition of Macbeth. Bank-Oh's! Ghost** (Van Buren criticized for maintaining Jackson’s policies)
- **The Times** (plight of the working class)
- **Uncle Sam Sick with LaGrippe** (bank failures)
- **Sober Second Thoughts** (effect on specific trades)

For now, ask each group to scan its cartoon quickly to list the

historical events, people, and terms one would need to understand to interpret the cartoon. Note that each of the chosen cartoons has a different focus, although there is overlap in information. Tell the students that they will return to an analysis of these same cartoons after reading secondary material on related historical events and working with relevant cartoons.

When the groups have made their lists, compile a comprehensive class list.

2. Provide background for the class on events during President Jackson's second term that continued to be important during Van Buren's term in office. Share a secondary account such as [The Celebrated Bank War](#) from the EDSITEment resource [Digital History](#).

3. In the whole-class setting, model the interpretation of primary sources using either or both of the following:

- **Written Sources:** Share with the class [Interpreting Primary Sources: Handout on Controversy of Re-Charter of National Bank](#) from [Digital History](#). If desired, use the [Written Document Analysis Worksheet](#) from EDSITEment resource [Digital Classroom](#) as you model the interpretation of written documents
- **Cartoons:** Share with the class the following two cartoons:
 - [King Andrew the First](#) (anti-Jackson)
 - [The Downfall of the Mother Bank](#) (pro-Jackson)
- If desired, use the [Cartoon Analysis Worksheet](#) from [Digital Classroom](#) as you model the interpretation of political cartoons. Suggested discussion questions for the primary sources:
 - What important individuals and events are mentioned in the primary sources?
 - What reasons do those against the bank give for their opposition?
 - What reasons do those for the bank give for their support?
 - What criticisms of President Jackson's veto of the re-charter of the bank bill and other policies do his opponents offer?
 - What arguments in favor of President Jackson's actions do his supporters offer?

- To what extent was Jackson’s handling of the bank influenced by party politics? Explain and provide evidence for your position.

Activity 2. The Panic of 1837 in Political Cartoons

1. Share with the class a secondary account of the Panic of 1837 and President Van Buren, such as the section “Economic Panic of 1837” in [Martin Van Buren: Domestic Affairs](#) from the EDSITEment resource [The American President](#).

2. Return to the cartoons about the Panic of 1837 with the whole class or small groups. Using the [Cartoon Analysis Worksheet](#) from [Digital Classroom](#) in conjunction with [this interactive tool](#), the whole class or each group should prepare an analysis of the cartoon(s).

- [Capitol Fashions for 1837](#) (criticism of power wielded by President Van Buren)
- [Fifty Cents. Shin Plaster](#) (mock paper money)
- [New Edition of Macbeth. Bank-Oh's! Ghost](#) (Van Buren criticized for maintaining Jackson’s policies)
- [The Times](#) (plight of the working class)
- [Uncle Sam Sick with LaGrippe](#) (bank failures)
- [Sober Second Thoughts](#) (effect on specific trades)

Each group should briefly share its cartoon with the class. Once the students have discussed the cartoons using the background provided and their own interpretations, distribute to each group the explanation of the cartoon provided by [Harp Week](#).

Guided Discussion Questions

Suggested whole group discussion questions for the cartoons:

- What important individuals, terms, and/or events are prominently mentioned in the cartoons? Which of these were mentioned in the secondary accounts? Which items still seem in need of further research to aid in understanding the cartoon?
- What reasons do those against Van Buren’s policies give for their opposition?
- What reasons do those in favor of Van Buren’s policies give for their support?

- What “propaganda techniques” are used in the cartoons?
- What factors that also contributed to the downturn in the American economy and the Panic of 1837 are ignored in the cartoons?
- Why did the artists focus on certain factors and ignore others when drawing their cartoons?
- What kind of information can a historian learn from a cartoon that is/may not be apparent in traditional written sources? Of what importance are visual materials to the study and understanding of history?

And when the content discussion is through, do some self-evaluation on the process: These questions may be raised with the class as well

- What was the process of interpreting the cartoon like for the students? What elements of any of the cartoons are still obscure? Is it possible to learn from the cartoons without understanding those elements?

Activity 3. A Primer on Party Politics in Jacksonian America

1. The Whigs and the Democrats

Share with the class a secondary account (or information from a secondary account) of the two parties, such as the following essays from [Getting the Message Out](#), an exhibit of the [Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project](#), a link from EDSITEment resource [American Studies at the University of Virginia](#).

- [The Democratic Party](#)
- [The Whig Party](#)

2. Martin Van Buren: Jacksonian Democrat Van Buren inherited the conditions that caused America’s first great depression, The Panic of 1837. According to the article [Martin Van Buren: Domestic Affairs](#) from the EDSITEment resource [The American President](#), “The question for the new president was how—and whether—to respond. Van Buren followed a course of action consistent with his Jacksonian belief in the limited powers of the federal government and a suspicion of paper money and easy credit.” The belief that the federal government should only do that which is specifically enumerated in the Constitution can be traced back to Thomas Jefferson. Share with the students—and discuss--the Jacksonian core of Van Buren’s

remarks to Congress in his message of September 5, 1837 (from the [Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, TUESDAY, September 5, 1837](#) from EDSITEment resource [American Memory Project](#)):

All communities are apt to look to Government for too much. Even in our own country, where its powers and duties are so strictly limited, we are prone to do so, especially at periods of sudden embarrassment and distress. But this ought not to be. The framers of our excellent constitution, and the people who approved it with calm and sagacious deliberation, acted at the time on a sounder principle. They wisely judged that the less Government interferes with private pursuits, the better for the general prosperity. It is not its legitimate object to make men rich, or to repair, by direct grants of money or legislation in favor of particular pursuits, losses not incurred in the public service. This would be substantially to use the property of some for the benefit of others. But its real duty—that duty the performance of which makes a good Government the most precious of human blessings—is to enact and enforce a system of general laws commensurate with, but not exceeding, the objects of its establishment, and to leave every citizen and every interest to reap, under its benign protection, the rewards of virtue, industry, and prudence.

Van Buren's political convictions prevented him from offering direct help to citizens and business interests in need. Rather, he initiated steps to reform government monetary policy, discussed in [Activity 2](#). The bitter rivalry between the two major parties guaranteed opposition from the Whigs to almost anything Van Buren proposed. Any changes the president made to Andrew Jackson's policies (such as Van Buren's proposal for a sub-treasury system) guaranteed opposition from members of his own party, the Democrats.

3. Some campaign songs from the 1840 election in which Van Buren was defeated by William Henry Harrison and the Whigs, shed light on the animosity between and positions of the Democrats and Whigs as they had developed beginning with Andrew Jackson's tenure in office. The class will look at two songs (both Whig songs) and, if desired, should use the [Song Analysis Sheet](#) provided in the lesson [Songs of the Times: American Concerns in 19th Century Campaigns](#) by Jennifer Erbach (from [Getting the Message Out](#), an exhibit of the [Abraham Lincoln Historical Digitization Project](#), a link from EDSITEment resource [American Studies at the University of Virginia](#)). The 1840 election is sometimes characterized as solely

about image. That element of the campaign is borne out in the song [Little Vanny](#) (from [Getting the Message Out](#)). Click on the title to access the lyrics and a recording of the music. Work with the class in analyzing the song. What image of Harrison is being conveyed? What image of Van Buren? But issues were important in 1840 in the rivalry between the parties. Van Buren's Jacksonian views were at the core of his response to the Panic of 1837. Share with the class the lyrics to the [Currency Song](#) (also from [Getting the Message Out](#), though no music is available unfortunately). What issues are mentioned in the song that relate to the Panic of 1837 and Van Buren's response to it? You might ask students a few general questions about songs as sources, particularly at a time in history when forms of mass communication were far fewer than they are now and not every one could read and/or afford a newspaper. One of the things you might help students understand with these questions is how tunes/songs have a tendency to replay in one's thought until the ideas are imbedded.

4. The following electoral maps from EDSITEment resource [Digital History](#) demonstrate the rivalry between the parties and the change to national alliances. Note the change in dominance from Jackson's landslide victory in 1832 to Harrison's landslide in 1840. Which states swung from the Democrats to the Whigs between 1836 and 1840? Students can think about this information further by asking:

- Why did these states shift their allegiance from one party to the other?
- Which states remained loyal to a given party? Why?
- What factors, including but not limited to the economy, would have been important to voters in the 1830s?
- [Map of the Presidential Election of 1832](#) (Click on the thumbnail for a larger version.)
- [Map of the Presidential Election of 1836](#) (Click on the thumbnail for a larger version.)
- [Map of the Presidential Election of 1840](#) (Click on the thumbnail for a larger version.)

In 1844 James Polk won back the presidency for the Democrats. In 1848, Zachary Taylor, a Whig, became president. In other words, there was fierce competition between these two parties.