Opening the Door to History

The Opening the Door to History handouts that follow can be used in a variety of ways, depending on the teacher’s goals. The handouts can be used as background for the teacher, distributed to the students by an individual page, or distributed to students as a complete packet.

For more information, contact Harding Home Site Manager Sherry Hall at shall@hardinghome.org. Please credit the Harding Home Presidential Site for all information references.
Opening the Door to History:
Warren G. Harding’s Front Porch Campaign

Setting the Stage

Warren G. Harding, the 29th President of the United States, was elected by a landslide victory on Nov. 2, 1920. His huge victory, representing the largest margin of success for any presidential candidate until that point in history, culminated a three-month campaign.

Harding’s Democratic opponent, James A. Cox, staged a two-month campaign. Besides both conducting relatively short campaigns, as compared to modern times, the campaign styles of the two men were completely opposite.

Cox chose to campaign in a more modern but somewhat controversial style – traveling from town to town by train, giving speeches to as many people as possible using a new invention, the microphone and amplification system. His running mate, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who would become President himself in the 1930s, also crisscrossed the country giving speeches. This type of campaigning, called barnstorming, was not universally acceptable. It was thought by many to be frenzied and undignified because the candidate was seen as bragging about his qualifications.

Harding used his upper middle-class home in Marion, Ohio as his campaign headquarters. He chose to give speeches from the uniquely designed round front porch to crowds who would come to him. His running mate, Calvin Coolidge, gave some speeches in various locations but, overall, kept a low profile. Harding’s version of campaigning – minus the porch aspect -- was more in keeping with the traditional way of running for office.

Harding’s decision to run a front porch campaign was not a new idea. The campaign would be the fourth staged on a candidate’s front porch – with all four tied to Ohio-born presidents. Ohio Presidents Benjamin Harrison, James Garfield and William McKinley all won with front porch campaigns. Harding’s would be the final one in Ohio and American history.
By basing his campaign in Marion, a town of 29,000 people, Harding showcased his small-town roots and strong Midwestern values, demonstrating that someone indeed could take, as he said, “Main Street to the White House.” Most Americans in 1920 had much in common with Warren Harding. A self-made man, Harding owned a small business, the Marion Daily Star newspaper, with a circulation of about 11,500. He lived in a nice home, but certainly not a mansion. A friendly, outgoing person who genuinely liked to meet and chat with people, Harding easily won over the crowds who felt they were chatting with a neighbor from around the corner, rather than a presidential candidate.

Harding’s looks helped, too. Considered an extremely handsome man, Harding made an impressive “presidential” figure. He possessed a charisma which is well documented. His voice was described by contemporaries as “silver,” a deep, warm voice which made a lasting impression.
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Warren G. Harding’s Front Porch Campaign 

Excitement in Ohio

Warren G. Harding won the nomination for Republican candidate for president of the United States during the Republican National Convention in Chicago in June 1920. Unlike recent presidential elections, in which the leading candidate has been unofficially chosen for months, no one was sure who would emerge from Chicago as the candidate in 1920. Harding was selected on the 10th ballot, or the 10th vote of the delegates attending the convention.

Harding’s opponent, James A. Cox, then the sitting governor of Ohio, was selected the Democratic nominee on the 44th ballot during the Democratic National Convention in San Francisco in August. Each man’s vice presidential candidate was chosen by the convention, not by Cox or Harding.

The length of the presidential campaigns was much different from today. Harding’s campaign officially opened on July 31, 1920 and would last about three months. Cox’s campaign started in late August, so would last just over two months. Today’s presidential candidates often begin assembling funding and publicity a couple of years before they actually run for president.

Harding’s campaign required the help of his hometown citizens in order to be successful. In showcasing Marion, Ohio, Harding also wanted to demonstrate the hospitality of its townspeople. They did not let him down.

As soon as the campaign strategy was decided upon, Marionites swung into action. They had just a few weeks to plan all of the activities for Nomination Day, the day when the Republican leaders would arrive in Marion to officially tell Warren Harding that he was their candidate for president. He, in turn, would officially accept the nomination.
Thousands of visitors were expected for Nomination Day, a true challenge for the town of 29,000. The Marion Civic Association formed many committees to handle all aspects of the visitors’ needs. Welcome committees would be stationed at the train station downtown to welcome the many people arriving in Marion by train. Other committees would be in place at the north, south, east and west roads leading into Marion to greet incoming automobile traffic. Committees were established to provide food and lodging for the guests. Information booths, “emergency restaurants” (concession stands), first aid stations and directions to restrooms were established. The women of the households near the Harding home on Mount Vernon Avenue were asked to open their homes and their hearts to the visitors.

Four marching bands were to be on duty at all times, some to lead guests in parades through the center of town to the Harding home. Another would provide arriving guests with cheery tunes as they disembarked from their trains. Still another band would set up on the newly constructed bandstand at the school along the parade route.

Nomination Day saw Marion astir early due to the excitement and the work to be done. A barbecue for 5,000 was set up at the downtown school building. Church members were busy cooking food to be served for large groups of visitors assigned to their buildings.

The town had never looked better. Red, white and blue bunting (cloth) was draped from many downtown windows. Harding’s picture was everywhere. A Court of Honor, featuring regal pillars with Harding’s picture and eagles on top, lined the streets from downtown to well past Harding’s home. Everything was ready.

The crowds poured in. Starting on Nomination Day, throughout the summer and until the campaign closed, more than 600,000 people visited Marion to be a part of the front porch campaign. It was not unusual for Marion’s population to double for a day on busy campaign days.

Next door to Harding’s home was the George Christian, Jr., house. Christian had been Harding’s personal secretary during Harding’s five years in the U.S. Senate. He rented his house during the summer of 1920 so it could become National Republican Headquarters.

Harding attracted many different types of people to Marion, all eager to hear Harding’s ideas for America. Members of Congress visited regularly, as well as a day when 60 famous Broadway singers and dancers arrived to show their support, dazzling the townspeople along the way. Large groups scheduled their trips to Marion in advance. These groups, representing specific interest groups in the country, were called delegations.

Among the delegations gathering around the porch to hear Harding speak were immigrants, traveling salesmen, Native Americans, African-Americans, pottery workers and women. Women were entering a new era in American history that year – they won the right to vote for president after many years of effort. The 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified (approved) in August 1920.

Harding spoke about many serious issues in official speeches from the front porch. America faced many challenges in 1920, including the monumental one of easing the nation from war to peace. World War I, called the Great War at that time, had ended with the signing of an armistice in 1918. A peace treaty was far from settled. Many of the
nation’s problems centered around the economic and social turmoil associated with the war.

Even though the campaign issues were indeed serious, the mood of the campaign in Marion was light and happy. Election Day was just around the corner.
**Opening the Door to History:**
Warren G. Harding Becomes President

**Landslide Victory**

With several informal polls showing him with a sizeable lead over Democratic rival James Cox, Warren Harding most likely greeted Election Day 1920 with a mix of excitement and apprehension that the top job in the nation might soon be his. That day, November 2, was Harding’s birthday, and he turned 55 years old. He still holds the honor of being the only American president elected on his birthday.

That morning, Harding headed to his precinct voting spot around the corner from his home in Marion, Ohio, and voted for himself for president. His wife, Florence, also wrote in an “X” beside her husband’s name — something no woman could have done in the last presidential election.

After voting, Harding motored (drove) to Columbus, Ohio, where he played golf at the Scioto Country Club. Like most of Ohio’s rural counties, Marion County had no golf courses in 1920, although one was under construction. Harding loved golf, even though he had only started to play it when he moved to Washington in 1915. A quick game probably helped to ease the nervousness he undoubtedly felt, knowing Americans were busy at the polls deciding his future.

After returning to Marion, and enjoying some birthday cake with a few family members and friends, Harding began to tally the early election returns. The results were relayed to Marion by way of telegraph. A special telegraph line had been run into the Christian house next door, specifically to receive the election results. The house was used as National Republican Headquarters during the campaign, and it was bustling with
Republican leaders and campaign workers on election night. For the first time in history, election results were being broadcast nationwide by KDKA Radio in Pittsburgh, but most towns the size of Marion had no way to pick up a radio signal. Most Americans did not yet own radios.

The election results showed Harding with a landslide victory. He won more than 60 percent of the popular vote, and 404 electoral votes. He and Mrs. Harding reportedly stayed up until 5 a.m., reading congratulatory telegrams and contemplating their future in the White House.

Harding took very seriously his role in leading a nation in the midst of a recession and reeling from a staggering war debt. He had made it clear that he did not want an inaugural ball following the ceremonies on Inauguration Day. He considered such an expenditure to be a reckless use of the public’s money.

On Inauguration Day, March 4, 1921, Harding became the first president-elect to ride to his inauguration in an automobile. Up to that point in history, the new president had ridden to the ceremony in a horse and carriage. He was the first president to install a radio in the White House, and the first to address the American people from the White House over the radio. Technology, which had been advancing steadily during Harding’s lifetime, now surged ahead with the close of World War I.

The Hardings immediately opened the White House to visitors, with Mrs. Harding conducting some of the tours. Mrs. Harding termed the residence “the people’s house,” and said Americans should have access to it and to their president.

The Hardings were extremely popular among Americans. Mr. Harding was outgoing and friendly, and liked nothing better than to chat with “normal” Americans. A gentle person, he helped people solve their problems if at all possible. Mrs. Harding was frank and outspoken and granted frequent interviews with women’s magazines.

President Harding died while “in office,” or, while he was president. He completed just 29 months of his four-year term, dying of a heart attack in San Francisco on Aug. 2, 1923. The nation was shocked and in deep mourning.

Harding completed several projects as president, and laid the groundwork for others. He convened the first peace conference the world had ever seen, hoping to avoid conflicts between nations which could lead to another devastating war. He started work toward a World Court, which later was achieved. The federal Budget Bureau was started under the Harding Administration, calling for the U.S. government to abide by a budget. A housing department was started, as well as a veterans bureau and veterans’ hospitals to aid the World War I soldiers. The administration worked toward a network of interstate highways, linking improved roads from one state to another.

Harding was successful in dramatically slicing the nation’s war debt by 25 percent in two years and bringing the nation back to economic stability. His economic policies were continued well after his administration was out of office.

The aftermath of war in Europe was not an issue which Harding smoothed too well, and he frankly admitted that he did not have the solution to stabilizing the region. He felt strongly that the U.S. needed to form better friendships with nations in the Western Hemisphere and act more as a cohesive unit before Europe’s problems could be tackled. Toward that end, he recognized many Western Hemisphere governments and offered Americans’ respect to their peoples.
Opening the Door to History: 
Looking Back at the Warren G. Harding Years

Harding Legacy in Review

Warren G. Harding was president for 29 months before dying of a heart attack in San Francisco. An extremely popular president, Harding’s death shocked the nation and sparked a huge outpouring of grief.

With former vice president Calvin Coolidge now serving as president, the administration moved forward on Harding’s ideas. Coolidge kept the cabinet, or group of presidential advisors, virtually intact, and publicly stated that his intent was to pursue Harding’s goals. One person who left the administration was George Christian Jr., Harding’s longtime personal secretary. He now assumed the job of helping Harding’s widow, Florence Kling Harding, in her personal affairs.

The Harding Administration was linked to a couple of scandals within its cabinet ranks which would tarnish the Harding legacy for decades. Charles Forbes, who had headed up the newly formed Veterans Bureau in the Harding cabinet, was accused of selling government supplies from a medical supply base to private companies at extremely low prices. He also took part in dishonorable deals to influence hospital building contracts and sites for new hospitals.

Harding found out early in 1923 about the Forbes situation, but instead of calling for Forbes’ prosecution, he let Forbes resign his post. That decision proved to be disastrous to how Harding would be perceived years to come. Harding’s decision, though, was typical of his personality. He trusted people and found it hard to believe that people he thought were honorable could do such unlawful things. By letting Forbes resign, Harding thought he was doing the best thing for the nation to move forward with the business of the country.
Just two months after Harding’s death, an investigation into Forbes’ actions began, closely followed by another government investigation into yet another cabinet member’s actions.

Albert Fall, Harding’s secretary of the interior, was accused of steering oil leases of government land to private companies in exchange for money. The land in question was called Teapot Dome. He was found guilty of the accusations and spent time in prison.

Even though Harding had no knowledge of Fall’s illegal plans, the dead president was heaped with the blame. Mention of his administration would be tightly linked with the “Teapot Dome Scandal” in history.

In the following few years, several people who knew Harding, and several who didn’t but pretended they had known him, wrote books about their “personal knowledge” of the Harding administration. Much of their information was inaccurate and made up by the authors. But with Harding and his wife, who had died in 1924, unable to set the record straight, the untruths were believed and became the basis for historical study for years to come. The type of writing practiced at the time was called “muckraking,” which meant the authors tried to attract readers with sensational and shocking information. Unfortunately for Harding, it worked.

Harding’s Presidential Papers, the collection of letters, documents and even lists of household expenditures associated with him before and during the presidency, reside at the Ohio History Connection in Columbus, Ohio. They were made public in 1964 and are available for the public to view on microfiche. By 1964, though, historians had little interest in looking at Harding with fresh eyes; the damage done to Harding’s reputation would be hard to correct.

The accomplishments of the Harding years were overshadowed by the actions of cabinet members and the tendency of authors during the 1930s and 1940s to look for blame for the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II of the 1940s.

An historian well-schooled in the truths and myths of the Harding years, Robert K. Murray, stated, “Taken separately, the Harding administration’s achievements were rather impressive – the peace treaties, the Budget Bureau, the Washington Conference, agricultural legislation, economy in government, debt reduction, and business recovery – but the total was more important than any of the parts.”

Still, Harding’s friendly personality, trusting and gentle nature and general affection for people, traits which helped him win the presidency, most likely undermined his ability to lead the nation more effectively once he was in the White House.

Historians for years ranked Harding as worst in the list of American presidents. Recently, historians have taken a fresh look at the 29th president, looking at his accomplishments during a very complicated time in history. Many are realizing that Harding did bring America together as it regrouped after World War I, indeed lending stability to a troubled nation.