3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1852

Franklin Pierce vs Winfield Scott

A 35-minute lesson on the 1852 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Second Party System	ELECTORAL VOTES 296 total
WINNER Franklin Pierce (Democratic) · 254 EV	RUNNER-UP Winfield Scott (Whig) · 42 EV
KEY ISSUE Slavery compromise; Whig Party collapse; Mexican-American War veterans	TURNOUT 69.5%

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1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1852: Franklin Pierce vs Winfield Scott

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When voters want calm after a hard fight, sometimes they pick the candidate who has not been in the middle of the fighting. Why might this be appealing?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1852 election was the 17th U.S. presidential election. It was held two years after the Compromise of 1850 had passed. Voters were tired of slavery arguments and wanted political calm. The election produced one of the largest electoral landslides of the antebellum era - and proved to be the last presidential election before the breakdown of the Second Party System. The Democratic National Convention met in Baltimore in June 1852. The leading candidates were Lewis Cass (the 1848 nominee), Stephen Douglas of Illinois, James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, and William Marcy of New York. None could win the two-thirds nomination required by the 1844 rule. The convention deadlocked for four days. On the 49th ballot, delegates compromised on Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire - the second dark horse candidate in U.S. history. Pierce was 47 years old. He had served two terms in the U.S. House (1833-37) and four years in the U.S. Senate (1837-42). He had served as a brigadier general in the Mexican-American War. Almost nobody had considered him a presidential candidate before the 49th ballot. Pierce was a Northerner who supported Southern slavery interests - the kind of "doughface" Democrat that Southern delegates considered acceptable. William R. King of Alabama was selected as the vice presidential candidate. The Whig National Convention met in Baltimore in June 1852. The party split between supporters of incumbent President Fillmore (who had signed the Compromise of 1850 and was popular in the South) and supporters of General Winfield Scott (who was popular in the North but had alienated Southern Whigs with statements against slavery extension). Scott won the nomination on the 53rd ballot. William Graham of North Carolina was selected as the vice presidential candidate. The party platform endorsed the Compromise of 1850. The Free Soil Party - which had won 10.1 percent in 1848 - had collapsed by 1852. Its 1852 candidate, John P. Hale of New Hampshire, won only 4.9 percent of the popular vote. Many 1848 Free Soil voters returned to the Democratic Party (Barnburners) or to the Whig Party (Conscience Whigs) because the Compromise of 1850 appeared to have settled the slavery-extension question. The campaign was bland. Pierce stayed home in New Hampshire and let surrogates campaign for him. Scott's campaign was undermined by his own ideological clarity: his attempts to maintain Northern antislavery support while seeking Southern

		Whig backing produced ambiguous statements that alienated both wings. The Whig coalition was visibly fragmenting. The Compromise of 1850's Fugitive Slave Act provisions had also fueled antislavery sentiment in the North through Uncle Tom's Cabin (published March 1852) and through specific high-profile fugitive-recovery cases. Pierce won 254 electoral votes to Scott's 42. Pierce carried 27 of 31 states. Scott held only Vermont, Massachusetts, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The popular vote was 1,607,510 (50.8%) to 1,386,942 (43.9%). Hale won 155,210 (4.9%). The Free Soil Party would dissolve before 1856; many members would join the new Republican Party. Pierce was inaugurated March 4, 1853. His presidency would be defined by two disasters: the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act (which repealed the Missouri Compromise and triggered the breakdown of the Second Party System) and his administration's repeated efforts to acquire Cuba (the 1854 Ostend Manifesto and the William Walker filibusters). By 1856 the Democratic Party had refused to renominate Pierce - making him the only elected president of the antebellum era denied his own party's renomination. James Buchanan would be the 1856 Democratic nominee.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Four questions: one matches key words, three are short answers.
5 min	**Closure**	One sentence: what surprised you about this election?

The 1852 Election

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Key words

Dark horse candidate	A surprise candidate that almost no one had considered before the political convention. Franklin Pierce was the second dark horse U.S. president after James Polk. He was nominated on the 49th ballot.
Doughface	A Northern Democrat who supported Southern slavery interests. Critics called Pierce a doughface. The 1852-1860 Democratic Party was dominated by doughface political alignment.
Compromise of 1850	The five-bill federal package passed September 1850. Admitted California as a free state; organized Utah and New Mexico on popular sovereignty principles; settled the Texas-New Mexico boundary; abolished the slave trade in DC; strengthened the Fugitive Slave Act.
Free Soil Party	The 1848 antislavery party that won 10.1% of the vote. By 1852 it had collapsed to 4.9% as the Compromise of 1850 appeared to settle the slavery-extension question. The party dissolved by 1854; members joined the Republican Party.
Kansas-Nebraska Act	The 1854 federal law that Pierce signed. Organized the Kansas and Nebraska territories on popular sovereignty principles. Repealed the Missouri Compromise's 36°30' line. Triggered the breakdown of the Second Party System.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Franklin Pierce win in 1852?

( ) A. 189
( ) B. 212
( ) C. 254
( ) D. 278

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

How many ballots did the Democrats take to nominate Pierce, and what does this tell you about the Democratic Party in 1852?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Free Soil Party collapse between 1848 (10.1%) and 1852 (4.9%)?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did Pierce break his promise of political calm just two years into his presidency?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

254. Pierce 254; Scott 42. Pierce carried 27 of 31 states. The popular vote was 50.8% to 43.9%.

Pierce's 254 EV was one of the largest landslides of the antebellum era.

QUESTION 2

The Democrats took 49 ballots to nominate Pierce. This tells you the Democratic Party in 1852 was divided among multiple regional factions - Cass (Northwest), Douglas (Old Northwest), Buchanan (Pennsylvania), and Marcy (New York) - none of whom could win two-thirds support. The compromise was a dark-horse candidate (Pierce) with no political enemies on either side of the slavery question. The 49-ballot nomination is one of the longest in U.S. political history.

AP students should recognize the 49-ballot nomination as a structural sign of Democratic Party factionalism that would worsen through 1860.

QUESTION 3

The Compromise of 1850 had appeared to settle the slavery-extension question. Many 1848 Free Soil voters returned to the Democratic Party (Barnburners) or to the Whig Party (Conscience Whigs) because the political ground for antislavery third-party voting seemed to have disappeared. Free Soil candidate John P. Hale won only 155,210 votes in 1852 - less than half the 1848 Van Buren total. The party would dissolve by 1854. The collapse was misleading: it would prove temporary. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act would re-energize antislavery politics and produce the Republican Party.

AP students should be able to identify the 1852 Free Soil collapse as a structural pause rather than a permanent decline.

QUESTION 4

In May 1854 Pierce signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, organizing the Kansas and Nebraska territories on popular sovereignty principles and repealing the Missouri Compromise's 36°30' line. The Act allowed slavery to be voted in north of the line - which had been free territory since 1820. The political consequences were catastrophic: the Whig Party collapsed; the Republican Party emerged in 1854 from the Free Soil, Liberty, and antislavery Whig coalitions; "Bleeding Kansas" violence began in 1855-56; the 1857 Dred Scott decision deepened the crisis; the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates positioned Lincoln nationally; the 1860 election produced secession and the Civil War.

AP students should be able to identify the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act as the structural endpoint of the Second Party System.