1852

Franklin Pierce vs Winfield Scott

A 50-minute lesson on the 1852 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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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3. Background: key terms + source
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1852: Franklin Pierce vs Winfield Scott

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.6-8 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.6-8 (causation). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2 (central ideas in primary sources).

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	List two structural conditions in 1852 that would produce a landslide Democratic victory. For each, identify the specific 1850-1852 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1852 election was the 17th U.S. presidential election. It was held two years after the Compromise of 1850 had passed and would prove to be the last presidential election before the breakdown of the Second Party System. The Whig Party would never elect another president; within four years, it would no longer exist as a national political organization. The political environment was deceptively calm. The Compromise of 1850 had passed in five bills in September 1850. California had been admitted as a free state; Utah and New Mexico had been organized on popular sovereignty principles; the Texas-New Mexico boundary had been settled; the slave trade had been abolished in Washington, DC; and the Fugitive Slave Act had been strengthened. The Compromise appeared to have settled the slavery-extension question that had dominated politics since the 1846 Wilmot Proviso. Major-party leaders of both parties endorsed the Compromise as "the final settlement" of slavery issues. Both 1852 party platforms endorsed it explicitly. The Democratic National Convention met in Baltimore on June 1-5, 1852. The leading candidates were Lewis Cass of Michigan (the 1848 nominee), Stephen Douglas of Illinois (the architect of the 1850 Compromise), James Buchanan of Pennsylvania (former Secretary of State), and William L. Marcy of New York (former Secretary of War). None could win the two-thirds nomination required by the 1844 rule. The convention deadlocked through 48 ballots. On the 49th ballot, delegates compromised on Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire - the second dark horse candidate in U.S. history. Pierce was 47, a relatively young candidate by 19th-century standards. He had served two terms in the U.S. House (1833-37), four years in the U.S. Senate (1837-42), and 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 (a slaveholding senator who would die of tuberculosis just six weeks after his March 1853 inauguration) was selected as the vice presidential candidate.

The Whig National Convention met in Baltimore on June 16-21, 1852. The party split between supporters of incumbent President Millard 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). The convention deadlocked through 53 ballots before Scott won the nomination. William Graham of North Carolina was selected as the vice presidential candidate. The party platform endorsed the Compromise of 1850 - a position that effectively denied antislavery Whig voters any reason to support Scott. Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and other antislavery Whigs began organizing what would become the Republican Party.

The Free Soil Party - which had won 10.1 percent in 1848 - had collapsed by 1852. The Compromise of 1850 had returned many Free Soil voters to the major parties: Barnburners returned to the Democrats, Conscience Whigs returned to the Whigs. The 1852 Free Soil candidate, John P. Hale of New Hampshire, won only 4.9 percent of the popular vote. The party would dissolve before 1856; many members would join the Republican Party.

The campaign was bland by mid-19th-century standards. Pierce stayed home in Concord, 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 on the central question of slavery extension. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 had also fueled antislavery sentiment in the North through high-profile fugitive-recovery cases (the May 1851 capture of Thomas Sims in Boston; the September 1851 capture of Anthony Burns in Boston) and through Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (published March 20, 1852; 300,000 copies sold in its first year).

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 1852 result was the largest electoral landslide since 1820 (Monroe's 231-1 re-election).

Pierce was inaugurated March 4, 1853. His presidency would be defined by two disasters. First, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act (drafted by Stephen Douglas, signed by Pierce on May 30, 1854) organized the Kansas and Nebraska territories on popular sovereignty principles. The Act repealed the Missouri Compromise's 36°30' line and allowed slavery to be voted in north of the line - which had been free territory since 1820. The Act triggered the breakdown of the Second Party System: 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. Second, the Pierce administration's repeated efforts to acquire Cuba (the 1854 Ostend Manifesto and the William Walker filibustering expeditions in Nicaragua

		and elsewhere) further inflamed Northern antislavery sentiment by suggesting the administration was pursuing slavery expansion through Caribbean adventures. 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	**Primary source**	Read aloud once. Annotate individually. Quick pair-share on the source-analysis question.
10 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one prompt; report back two sentences.
10 min	**Worksheet**	Six questions: 2 multiple-choice, 3 short-answer, 1 map-read.

Background

Before the worksheet, review the key terms below and then read the primary source carefully. The two source-analysis questions on the worksheet (questions 6 and 7) ask you to quote from the excerpt.

Key terms

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. The 49-ballot Democratic nomination is one of the longest in U.S. political history.

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. Both 1852 major-party platforms endorsed it.

Kansas-Nebraska Act

The 1854 federal law drafted by Stephen Douglas and signed by Pierce on May 30, 1854. 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.

Doughface

A Northern Democrat who supported Southern slavery interests. Pierce was the most prominent doughface president. The 1852-1860 Democratic Party was dominated by doughface political alignment.

Uncle Tom's Cabin

Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1852 novel attacking slavery and the Fugitive Slave Act. Published March 20, 1852; sold 300,000 copies in its first year. President Lincoln reportedly greeted Stowe at the White House by saying "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war."

Ostend Manifesto

The October 1854 document drafted by U.S. ministers James Buchanan, John Y. Mason, and Pierre Soule recommending that the United States acquire Cuba from Spain "by every law, human and divine," through force if Spain refused to sell. Leaked in March 1855; deeply embarrassed the Pierce administration.

Inaugural Address

FRANKLIN PIERCE, MARCH 4, 1853

Pierce took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1853 without using a Bible - an unusual choice. He affirmed rather than swore the oath, citing his Quaker-influenced religious views. The address was strikingly aggressive on territorial expansion and explicitly endorsed the Compromise of 1850 as final settlement. The "I shall not be deterred" framing on expansion was directly contradicted by Pierce's subsequent inability to acquire Cuba.

> *"The policy of my Administration will not be controlled by any timid forebodings of evil from expansion. Indeed, it is not to be disguised that our attitude as a nation and our position on the globe render the acquisition of certain possessions not within our jurisdiction eminently important for our protection. I believe that the constituted authorities of this Republic are bound to regard the rights of the South in this respect as they would view any other legal and constitutional right, and that the laws to enforce them should be respected and obeyed, not with a reluctance encouraged by abstract opinions as to their propriety in a different state of society, but cheerfully and according to the decisions of the tribunal to which their exposition belongs."*

Pierce, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1853). Public domain.

The 1852 Election

Read the background page, then answer the six questions below.

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Franklin Pierce win in 1852?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

On which ballot did Franklin Pierce win the Democratic nomination in 1852?

( ) A. 25th
( ) B. 37th
( ) C. 49th
( ) D. 53rd

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the 1852 Free Soil Party collapse from 10.1% (1848) to 4.9% (1852)?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Whig Party's 1852 platform endorsement of the Compromise of 1850 contribute to the party's subsequent collapse?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Pierce says in his inaugural that his administration will not be "controlled by any timid forebodings of evil from expansion." What political message was he sending, and what specific 1853-1855 expansion attempt would test the framing?

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1852 election map, identify the four states Scott carried. What pattern do they share?

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 the largest electoral landslide since Monroe's 1820 231-1 re-election.

QUESTION 2

49th. The Democratic Convention deadlocked through 48 ballots between Cass, Douglas, Buchanan, and Marcy before settling on Pierce as a compromise dark-horse candidate.

The 49-ballot nomination is one of the longest in U.S. political history. AP students should know it as a structural sign of Democratic Party factionalism.

QUESTION 3

The Compromise of 1850 had appeared to settle the slavery-extension question. Many 1848 Free Soil voters returned to the major parties: Barnburners returned to the Democrats (because the Democratic platform endorsed the Compromise); Conscience Whigs returned to the Whigs (same reason). The 1852 Free Soil candidate, John P. Hale, won only 155,210 votes - less than half the 1848 Van Buren total. The collapse was misleading: the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act would re-energize antislavery politics and produce the Republican Party.

AP students should recognize the 1852 Free Soil collapse as structurally temporary.

QUESTION 4

The 1852 Whig platform endorsement of the Compromise of 1850 effectively denied antislavery Whig voters any reason to support Scott. Northern antislavery Whigs (Conscience Whigs, including Charles Sumner and Salmon P. Chase) began organizing what would become the Republican Party. Southern Whigs found Scott personally suspect because of his antislavery statements. The platform commitment to the Compromise was an attempt to hold both wings together; the attempt failed. After the 1852 loss, the Whig Party rapidly disintegrated. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act broke whatever remained of the Whig coalition; by 1856 the Republican Party had largely absorbed Northern Whig voters.

AP students should be able to identify the 1852 Whig platform as a structural cause of the party's subsequent collapse.

QUESTION 5

Pierce was signaling that his administration would pursue territorial expansion aggressively - a Manifest Destiny continuation of Polk's expansionist program. The political message was specifically to Southern Democrats who wanted Caribbean expansion (especially Cuba). The 1853-1855 test came in two forms: (1) the 1853 Gadsden Purchase from Mexico (a southern strip of present-day Arizona and New Mexico for a southern transcontinental railroad route); (2) the October 1854 Ostend Manifesto recommending acquisition of Cuba from Spain "by every law, human and divine." The Cuba effort backfired: when the Manifesto leaked in March 1855, Northern antislavery sentiment denounced it as an attempt to extend slavery through Caribbean adventures. The administration backed down.

AP students should be able to identify both the rhetorical framing and the specific policy attempts.

QUESTION 6

Vermont (5 EV), Massachusetts (13), Kentucky (12), Tennessee (12). Pattern: two New England antislavery Whig strongholds (Vermont, Massachusetts) + two upper-South Whig strongholds (Kentucky, Tennessee). The pattern reveals the Whig Party as a structurally bifurcated coalition - it could hold Northern antislavery voters and Southern moderate voters but could not consolidate them. The same bifurcation would destroy the party by 1856.

AP students should be able to read the 1852 map as evidence of structural Whig Party weakness.