1852

Franklin Pierce vs Winfield Scott

A 75-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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1852: Franklin Pierce vs Winfield Scott

Standards alignment

NCSS · D2.His.4.9-12 (chronological reasoning) · D2.His.14.9-12 (causation in U.S. history). CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2 (key ideas/details in primary sources).

Materials

One copy of the student worksheet per student. Optional: the 1852 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1852 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1852 that would produce a Democratic landslide. 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. Historians now treat this period as the structural calm before the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska storm. 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 over 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, 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 doughface Democrat that Southern delegates considered acceptable. William R. King of Alabama was selected as the vice presidential candidate. King would die of tuberculosis on April 18, 1853 - six weeks after the inauguration - making him the only vice president to die in office during the antebellum era.

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 (popular in the North but unpopular in the South for his antislavery statements). The convention deadlocked through 53 ballots before Scott won the nomination on June 21. 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, Salmon P. Chase of Ohio, 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 April 1851 Boston capture of Thomas Sims (returned to Georgia and whipped); the October 1851 Christiana Riot in Pennsylvania (a free Black community resisted federal slave-catchers, killing the slaveholder); the May 1854 capture of Anthony Burns in Boston (returned to Virginia under massive Boston resistance). Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (published March 20, 1852) sold 300,000 copies in its first year. The novel transformed Northern public opinion against slavery in ways that the political system would absorb only gradually.

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 Monroe's 1820 231-1 re-election. Pierce was inaugurated March 4, 1853 (he affirmed rather than swore the oath, citing his Quaker-influenced religious views). 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) 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. Then review the Key Terms on the background page so students share vocabulary before the primary-source work.
15 min	**Primary source**	Read the excerpt aloud once. Students annotate individually (3 min), then pair-share on worksheet questions 6 and 7 (5 min).
15 min	**Discussion**	Small groups (3–4). Pick one of the three prompts at the back of this packet (or assign one). Each group reports back two sentences.
20 min	**Assessment**	Student worksheet. Seven questions, mixed format (5 about the reading, 2 about the primary source). Answer key in the instructor section at the back.
5 min	**Closure**	One-sentence exit ticket — see Closure section below.

Closure

One-sentence exit ticket: "What is one thing the 1852 election tells you about the Second Party System era that the textbook didn't?"

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.

Republican Party

The new U.S. political party formed in 1854 from the Free Soil Party, antislavery Whigs (Conscience Whigs), antislavery Democrats (Barnburners), and former members of the Liberty Party. Founded specifically to oppose the Kansas-Nebraska Act's extension of slavery into territories. Would elect Abraham Lincoln in 1860.

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. Transformed Northern public opinion against slavery.

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." 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. 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 expansion framing was directly contradicted by Pierce's subsequent inability to acquire Cuba; the Compromise endorsement was directly contradicted by his May 1854 signature on the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

> *"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 (key terms and primary source), then answer the seven questions below. Questions 6 and 7 ask you to quote from the primary source.

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?

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

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify three antebellum factors that fueled Northern antislavery sentiment between 1850 and 1854 despite the Compromise of 1850.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the Whig Party's 1852 platform endorsement of the Compromise of 1850 contribute to its 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." Identify two specific 1853-1855 expansion attempts and explain their political consequences.

SOURCE ANALYSIS — QUESTIONS 6 AND 7 REFERENCE THE PRIMARY SOURCE ON THE BACKGROUND PAGE.

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why is Pierce one of only two elected presidents in U.S. history (with John Tyler) to be denied his own party's renomination?

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1852 election map, identify the four states Scott carried. What does the pattern reveal about Whig coalition structure?

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. Long convention deadlock between Cass, Douglas, Buchanan, and Marcy.

AP students should know the 49-ballot nomination as a structural sign of Democratic Party factionalism.

QUESTION 3

Accept any three of: (1) The Fugitive Slave Act's Northern enforcement requirement produced high-profile recovery cases (Thomas Sims April 1851; Anthony Burns May 1854). (2) Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin (March 1852) sold 300,000 copies and transformed Northern public opinion. (3) The Christiana Riot (October 1851) demonstrated armed resistance to fugitive-slave recovery. (4) The Underground Railroad expanded its operations after 1850. (5) Antislavery Whigs (Conscience Whigs) began organizing what would become the Republican Party. (6) Free Black communities organized vigilance committees against fugitive recovery.

AP students should be able to identify multiple specific antebellum factors feeding antislavery mobilization.

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 - Charles Sumner, Salmon P. Chase, William H. Seward, and others - 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 because the Compromise itself was structurally untenable. After the 1852 loss, the Whig Party rapidly disintegrated. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act broke whatever remained; 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 collapse.

QUESTION 5

Accept any two of: (1) The 1853 Gadsden Purchase from Mexico (29,670 sq mi of present-day Arizona and New Mexico for $10 million, providing a southern transcontinental railroad route). (2) The October 1854 Ostend Manifesto (recommending Cuba acquisition from Spain "by every law, human and divine"). (3) William Walker's 1855-1857 filibustering expeditions in Nicaragua (which Walker briefly conquered and recognized as president). (4) The 1854 Treaty of Kanagawa with Japan (Commodore Perry opening Japan to U.S. trade). The Gadsden Purchase succeeded; the Cuba/Walker efforts backfired politically when leaked, suggesting slavery expansion through Caribbean adventures and fueling Northern antislavery sentiment.

AP students should be able to identify multiple specific Pierce-administration expansion attempts and their political consequences.

QUESTION 6

Pierce signed the May 30, 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act repealing the Missouri Compromise. The Act triggered the breakdown of the Second Party System: the Whig Party collapsed; the Republican Party emerged; "Bleeding Kansas" violence began in 1855-56; antislavery Northern Democrats began breaking with the party. By the 1856 Democratic Convention, Northern Democrats considered Pierce politically toxic - his renomination would have produced certain defeat against the new Republican Party. The Convention nominated James Buchanan instead - who had been minister to Britain during the Kansas-Nebraska controversy and could position himself as untainted by the legislation. Pierce became the only elected president of the antebellum era denied his own party's renomination. The other case is John Tyler (1844) - but Tyler had been expelled from the Whig Party in 1841 and was running as an independent at the 1844 convention; he withdrew before the vote.

AP students should be able to identify both the proximate cause (Kansas-Nebraska Act) and the structural significance.

QUESTION 7

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 structurally bifurcated. It could hold Northern antislavery voters and Southern moderate voters but could not consolidate them. The same bifurcation would destroy the party by 1856 when Kansas-Nebraska forced both wings to choose sides on slavery extension.

AP students should be able to read the 1852 map as evidence of structural Whig Party weakness foreshadowing 1856 collapse.

Discussion prompts

1 Pierce won the 1852 election as a unifying dark horse and then signed the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act that destroyed his coalition. Identify two structural reasons a unifying-coalition president would sign legislation that would damage his own party.

2 The 1852 election was the last U.S. election with a competitive Whig Party. Identify two structural causes of the Whig Party's collapse between 1852 and 1856.