AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1852

Franklin Pierce vs Winfield Scott

A 105-minute lesson on the 1852 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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

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2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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7. Answer key + discussion

1852: Franklin Pierce vs Winfield Scott

AP framework alignment

AP US History · Period varies by cycle · Reasoning skills: contextualization, comparison, causation, sourcing. CCSS · CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2 (central ideas), RH.11-12.6 (point of view), RH.11-12.7 (multiple sources). NCSS · D2.His.5.9-12, D2.His.14.9-12, D2.His.16.9-12.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1852 that would make the 1852 election the last competitive Whig presidential campaign. For each, identify the specific 1850-1852 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1852 election is the structural endpoint of the Second Party System. It was the last U.S. presidential election in which the Whig Party seriously competed for the presidency. Within four years the Whig Party would no longer exist as a national political organization. The Republican Party - which would replace the Whigs as the structural opposition to the Democrats - had not yet formed at the time of the 1852 election but would emerge in 1854 in direct response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act that Franklin Pierce would sign 14 months into his term. 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 the 1850-1854 period as the structural calm before the 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. 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, the only VP to die in office during the antebellum era; the vice presidency remained vacant for the rest of Pierce's term).

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, William H. Seward of New York, 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. 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; the October 1851 Christiana Riot in Pennsylvania; the May 1854 capture of Anthony Burns in Boston. 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; the death of his 11-year-old son Benjamin in a railway accident on January 6, 1853 had also profoundly affected him). 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. The 1856 Democratic Convention 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 (he had been Minister to Britain during the Kansas-Nebraska controversy and could position himself as untainted by the legislation). Pierce returned to Concord, New Hampshire, where he became increasingly alcoholic and bitter. He died of liver disease in 1869, three years after the Civil War ended. His historical reputation has been consistently among the worst of any U.S. president - typically ranking in the bottom three with Buchanan and Andrew Johnson.
20 min	**Source A**	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
20 min	**Source B**	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
20 min	**Worksheet**	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.
20 min	**LEQ planning**	Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.
5 min	**Closure**	Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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 as "the final settlement."

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.

Bleeding Kansas

The 1854-1861 violence in Kansas Territory between proslavery and antislavery settlers competing to determine whether Kansas would be admitted as slave or free under the Kansas-Nebraska Act's popular sovereignty framework. Approximately 56 documented deaths. The structural breakdown of popular sovereignty as a governance mechanism.

American (Know Nothing) Party

The 1854-1856 anti-Catholic anti-immigrant party that briefly competed for the structural opposition to the Democrats. Drew former Whig voters who could not accept the Republican Party's explicit antislavery commitment. Peaked at 21.5% in 1856; collapsed after 1856 as the

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." Leaked in March 1855; deeply embarrassed the Pierce administration; mobilized Northern antislavery sentiment.

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.

slavery question displaced anti-immigration as the salient cleavage.

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 death of Pierce's 11-year-old son Benjamin in a January 6, 1853 railway accident had profoundly affected the president-elect; some historians attribute his subsequent erratic decision-making to the depression following the loss.

> *"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.

Document-based question

Source A is on the Background page; Source B is below. Use both as evidence for the worksheet's source-analysis questions and the LEQ.

SOURCE A

Inaugural Address

FRANKLIN PIERCE, MARCH 4, 1853

“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.

SOURCE B

Appeal of the Independent Democrats

SALMON P. CHASE ET AL., JANUARY 19, 1854

“We arraign this bill as a gross violation of a sacred pledge; as a criminal betrayal of precious rights; as part and parcel of an atrocious plot to exclude from a vast unoccupied region, immigrants from the Old World and free laborers from our own States, and convert it into a dreary region of despotism, inhabited by masters and slaves. Take your maps, fellow-citizens, we entreat you, and see what country it is which this bill, gratuitously and recklessly, proposes to open to slavery. We point out to you the country, and the people inhabiting it, that we may show you what is to be sacrificed.”

Chase et al., "Appeal of the Independent Democrats" (Washington, DC, January 19, 1854). Public domain.

The 1852 Election

Answer the eight questions below. Source A is on the Background page; Source B is on the DBQ Pair page.

QUESTION 1 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source A (Pierce's Inaugural) that endorses the Compromise of 1850 settlement on slavery. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Appeal of the Independent Democrats) that denounces the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address slavery-extension policy in 1853-54, but they make incompatible claims about it. Identify the specific claim each source makes.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A was delivered in March 1853; Source B was published in January 1854. What does the ten-month gap tell you about how rapidly the political character of slavery extension transformed?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B was signed by Salmon P. Chase, Charles Sumner, and others who would become founding leaders of the Republican Party. Identify two specific ways the Appeal's framing established Republican Party ideology.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 1854-1861 violence in Kansas Territory between proslavery and antislavery settlers was called:

( ) A. Bleeding Kansas
( ) B. The Kansas War
( ) C. The Territorial Conflict
( ) D. The Sumner Affair

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 1854 federal law that repealed the Missouri Compromise was the:

( ) A. Kansas-Nebraska Act
( ) B. Compromise of 1850
( ) C. Fugitive Slave Act
( ) D. Wilmot Proviso

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1852 settlement illusion, contingent, or foundational? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Pierce's 1853 Inaugural (Source A) endorses the Compromise of 1850 as final settlement and frames Southern slavery rights as constitutionally protected. The 1854 Appeal of the Independent Democrats (Source B) denounces the Kansas-Nebraska Act as "a criminal betrayal of precious rights" and a plot to convert free territory into "a dreary region of despotism." Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1850-1860 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1852 election's political settlement was (a) a structural illusion that the underlying contradictions of the Compromise of 1850 made unsustainable regardless of which party held power, (b) a contingent product of the dark-horse Pierce nomination that produced a politically weak president unable to resist Southern pressure for the Kansas-Nebraska Act, or (c) the foundational moment of the Republican Party's emergence as a structural opposition force. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the illusion-vs-contingent-vs-foundational axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of the Compromise of 1850, the Fugitive Slave Act enforcement, Uncle Tom's Cabin, the Ostend Manifesto, Bleeding Kansas. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent rather than treating the three framings as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: "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", "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". The "cheerfully and according to the decisions" framing is the cleanest endorsement.

Pierce's framing positions Southern slavery as constitutionally protected and Northern resistance as illegitimate. The doughface framework.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "a gross violation of a sacred pledge", "a criminal betrayal of precious rights", "part and parcel of an atrocious plot to exclude from a vast unoccupied region, immigrants from the Old World and free laborers from our own States, and convert it into a dreary region of despotism". The "criminal betrayal of precious rights" phrase is the cleanest denunciation.

The Appeal's framing transformed the Kansas-Nebraska debate from a technical territorial-organization question into a moral and constitutional crisis.

QUESTION 3

Source A claims the Compromise of 1850 has settled slavery extension and that the federal government should enforce Southern slavery rights "cheerfully" as constitutional. Source B claims that the Compromise has been "criminally betrayed" by the Kansas-Nebraska Act's repeal of the Missouri Compromise, and that the proper political response is to mobilize against the Act and the Pierce administration. The two claims are structurally incompatible: Pierce's settlement framework assumed the Compromise of 1850 would hold; the Appeal's mobilization framework assumed it had already been destroyed.

AP students should recognize the two positions as ideologically and procedurally distinct.

QUESTION 4

The ten-month gap covers Pierce's 1853 cabinet selection (heavily Southern), the 1853 Gadsden Purchase negotiation, the December 1853 Stephen Douglas introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska bill, and the January 1854 organizing of antislavery opposition. The temporal gap reveals how rapidly the political situation transformed once the Kansas-Nebraska Act emerged as a concrete legislative proposal. In March 1853 Pierce could plausibly frame the Compromise of 1850 as final settlement; by January 1854 antislavery Northerners were organizing what would become the Republican Party. The structural lesson: political settlement that depends on suppressing underlying conflict can collapse rapidly when concrete legislation forces choices the settlement was designed to avoid.

AP students should be able to identify rapid political transformation as a structural feature of unresolved underlying conflict.

QUESTION 5

Accept any two of: (1) Framing slavery extension as a moral question ("a criminal betrayal of precious rights") rather than a procedural-territorial question. (2) Establishing the Republican Party as the inheritor of Northern free-labor ideology ("free laborers from our own States"). (3) Using the constitutional language of "sacred pledge" and "precious rights" to position antislavery as patriotic constitutionalism rather than abolitionist radicalism. (4) Mobilizing the Northern voter base around fear of Southern slavery expansion. (5) Establishing the rhetorical pattern of "free labor against slave despotism" that would dominate Republican Party messaging through 1860 and beyond. The "free labor" and "moral betrayal" framings are the strongest single contributions.

AP students should recognize the Appeal as a deliberate political document with long-term ideological consequences.

QUESTION 6

Bleeding Kansas. The 1854-1861 violence in Kansas Territory between proslavery and antislavery settlers competing to determine whether Kansas would be admitted as slave or free under popular sovereignty. Approximately 56 documented deaths.

AP students should know Bleeding Kansas as the structural breakdown of popular sovereignty.

QUESTION 7

Kansas-Nebraska Act. The 1854 federal law drafted by Stephen Douglas. Repealed the Missouri Compromise's 36°30' line. Triggered the breakdown of the Second Party System.

AP students should know the Kansas-Nebraska Act as the structural endpoint of the Second Party System.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the illusion-vs-contingent-vs-foundational axis, (2) avoid treating them as equivalent, (3) signal at least one piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory. The LEQ rubric evaluates the full essay.