1852

Franklin Pierce vs Winfield Scott

A 20-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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1852

In 1852 the country was tired of fighting about slavery. The Compromise of 1850 had passed two years before. People hoped the slavery question was now settled. They wanted leaders who would not stir up trouble.

The Democrats met to pick their candidate. The most famous Democrats - Lewis Cass, Stephen Douglas, James Buchanan - all wanted the job. Their delegates fought back and forth for 49 ballots without picking anyone!

On the 49th ballot, the Democrats picked a surprise: Franklin Pierce. Look at the picture. Pierce was 47 years old. He had been a senator from New Hampshire. He had also been a general in the Mexican-American War. Almost nobody had thought of him as a presidential candidate. The Democrats picked him because he had no enemies on either side of the slavery question.

The Whig Party picked General Winfield Scott. Scott was another Mexican-American War hero. But he was unpopular in the South because he had refused to defend slavery in his statements.

Pierce won by a huge amount. He got 254 electoral votes to Scott's 42. The Free Soil Party that had been strong in 1848 collapsed to only 5 percent.



Franklin Pierce, the fourteenth U.S. president. The second dark horse candidate in U.S. history - he was nominated on the 49th ballot of the Democratic convention.
GEORGE PETER ALEXANDER HEALY (1813-1894), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the fourteenth U.S. president?

2.

How many ballots did the Democrats take to pick Franklin Pierce in 1852?

3.

Why did voters in 1852 want a leader who would not stir up trouble?

Warm-up (5 min)

Look at the picture. The man is Franklin Pierce. He was a senator and a Mexican-American War general. In 1852 the Democrats took 49 ballots to pick him - so far the most ever needed!

Answer key

1.

Franklin Pierce. He started his job on March 4, 1853. He had been a senator from New Hampshire and a Mexican-American War general.

Pierce won 254 EV to Scott's 42 - one of the biggest landslides of the 1850s.

2.

49 ballots. Almost nobody had thought of Pierce as a presidential candidate. The Democrats picked him because he had no enemies on either side of the slavery question.

The 49-ballot nomination is one of the longest in U.S. political history. Pierce's nomination is the second dark-horse case after Polk in 1844.

3.

The country was tired of fighting about slavery. The Compromise of 1850 had passed two years before. People hoped the slavery question was now settled. They wanted leaders who would not stir up trouble.

The 1852 election was the structural calm-before-the-storm. Within two years, the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act would shatter the calm.