3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1856

James Buchanan vs John C. Frémont

A 35-minute lesson on the 1856 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Antebellum Crisis	ELECTORAL VOTES 296 total
WINNER James Buchanan (Democratic) · 174 EV	RUNNER-UP John C. Frémont (Republican) · 114 EV
KEY ISSUE Bleeding Kansas; slavery expansion; nativist immigration concerns	TURNOUT 79.4%

CONTENTS

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

1856: James Buchanan vs John C. Frémont

Timing

5 min **Warm-up**

When two political parties have been competing for many years and then one breaks apart, the new party that replaces it sometimes wins fast. Why might a new party have advantages over the old one it replaced?

15 min **Reading**

The 1856 election was the 18th U.S. presidential election. It was the first U.S. presidential election after the breakdown of the Second Party System. The Whig Party - which had competed for the presidency since 1836 - had dissolved by 1854. In its place two new parties competed: the Republican Party (founded 1854 to oppose slavery extension) and the American Party (a nativist anti-Catholic party also known as the Know Nothings).

The Republican Party was the most important political innovation of the 1850s. The party had formed in 1854 from the merger of: the Free Soil Party (which had won 10.1% in 1848 and 4.9% in 1852); antislavery Whigs ("Conscience Whigs"); antislavery Democrats ("Barnburners"); and former Liberty Party members. The party's founding moment was the May 1854 signing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise and allowed slavery to spread to territory that had been free since 1820. The party platform: oppose extension of slavery into territories; support federal funding for internal improvements; support free Western land for homesteaders. The party slogan: "Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, Frémont."

The June 1856 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia nominated John C. Frémont of California for president and William L. Dayton of New Jersey for vice president. Frémont was 43 years old, a former U.S. Army explorer who had mapped much of the West (his nickname was "the Pathfinder"), a former senator from California (1850-51), and an outspoken antislavery Republican. His wife Jessie Benton Frémont (daughter of Senator Thomas Hart Benton) was an active campaigner - the first significant role for a presidential candidate's wife in U.S. politics.

The Democratic National Convention in Cincinnati nominated James Buchanan of Pennsylvania on the 17th ballot. Buchanan was 65 years old, a former U.S. senator, Polk's Secretary of State (1845-49), and minister to Britain (1853-56). His central political asset: he had been in London during the Kansas-Nebraska Act controversy and could position himself as untainted by the legislation. The Democratic Party platform endorsed popular sovereignty and the Compromise of 1850. John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky was the vice presidential candidate.

The American Party (Know Nothings) emerged from the 1850s anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant movement. The party was secret in its early years; members would

		say "I know nothing" when asked about its activities. The February 1856 American Party National Convention nominated former President Millard Fillmore. The Know Nothing platform emphasized restricting immigration and excluding Catholics from public office. The party split over slavery at the 1856 convention - antislavery delegates walked out and joined the Republicans. The campaign was strongly sectional. Republican rallies in the North drew massive crowds. Democratic and Know Nothing campaigning emphasized the threat of disunion if Republicans won. Southern leaders openly threatened secession if Frémont won the presidency. The campaign's sectional character was unprecedented. Buchanan won 174 electoral votes to Frémont's 114 and Fillmore's 8 (Maryland only). Buchanan carried 19 states; Frémont carried 11 (all of New England plus New York, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa). Fillmore won only Maryland. The popular vote: Buchanan 1,836,072 (45.3%); Frémont 1,342,345 (33.1%); Fillmore 873,053 (21.5%). The Republican Party - just two years old - had won the second-most electoral votes in only its first cycle. Buchanan was inaugurated March 4, 1857. Two days later, the Supreme Court issued the Dred Scott decision: ruling that Black Americans could never be U.S. citizens, that Congress had no constitutional power to ban slavery in territories, and that the Missouri Compromise had been unconstitutional. The decision politically destroyed popular sovereignty as a workable framework. Buchanan's four-year term included Bleeding Kansas violence, the 1857 Panic, John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, and the 1860 Democratic Party split that produced Lincoln's election and secession.
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 1856 Election

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Key words

Republican Party	The American political party that formed in 1854 from antislavery factions of the Free Soil, Whig, Democratic, and Liberty parties. Founded to oppose the Kansas-Nebraska Act's extension of slavery to territories. Would win the 1860 election with Lincoln; remains one of the two major U.S. parties.
Know Nothing Party	The 1850s American Party. Originally secret; members would say "I know nothing" when asked about its meetings. Anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant. Nominated former President Millard Fillmore for president in 1856. Collapsed after 1856 as the slavery question displaced anti-immigration as the salient cleavage.
John C. Frémont	The Republican Party's first presidential candidate in 1856. A former U.S. Army explorer (nicknamed "the Pathfinder") who had mapped much of the American West. Former senator from California. Lost to Buchanan but won 114 electoral votes - a strong founding performance for a two-year-old party.
James Buchanan	The 15th U.S. president (1857-1861). A Pennsylvania Democrat, former senator, Polk's Secretary of State, and minister to Britain. Generally ranked among the worst U.S. presidents because of his inability to prevent secession.
Dred Scott decision	The March 6, 1857 Supreme Court ruling that Black Americans could never be U.S. citizens, that Congress had no constitutional power to ban slavery in territories, and that the Missouri Compromise had been unconstitutional. Politically destroyed popular sovereignty as a workable framework.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did James Buchanan win in 1856?

( ) A. 147
( ) B. 174
( ) C. 203
( ) D. 231

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

What four political factions merged in 1854 to form the Republican Party?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was John C. Frémont's political background, and why did Republicans select him as their first presidential nominee?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the 1857 Dred Scott decision destroy popular sovereignty as a workable framework for resolving the slavery-extension question?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

174. Buchanan 174; Frémont 114; Fillmore 8 (Maryland only). Buchanan carried 19 states.

Buchanan's 174 EV was decisive but the Republican Party - just two years old - had won the second-most electoral votes.

QUESTION 2

(1) The Free Soil Party (1848-1854). (2) Antislavery Whigs (Conscience Whigs). (3) Antislavery Democrats (Barnburners). (4) Former Liberty Party members. The party's founding moment was the May 1854 signing of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

AP students should be able to identify the four-faction Republican coalition.

QUESTION 3

Frémont was a former U.S. Army explorer who had mapped much of the West (his nickname was "the Pathfinder"). He had served as a senator from California (1850-51) and was an outspoken antislavery Republican. Republicans selected him for two reasons: (1) his Western exploration credentials gave him appeal in the free-soil West that the party needed to mobilize; (2) his antislavery credentials were unambiguous; (3) he was charismatic and married to Jessie Benton Frémont, a politically active wife whose campaigning extended the party's reach. The selection reflected the Republican coalition's identity as a Northern free-labor antislavery party.

AP students should be able to identify the political logic of Frémont's nomination.

QUESTION 4

The Dred Scott decision (March 6, 1857) ruled that Congress had no constitutional power to ban slavery in territories. Under popular sovereignty, territorial residents were supposed to decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. But under Dred Scott, even if territorial residents voted to ban slavery, Congress could not enforce the ban. The decision therefore made popular sovereignty constitutionally unworkable: a territorial vote against slavery could not produce a legally enforceable result. Stephen Douglas's entire popular-sovereignty framework collapsed. The 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates would feature Lincoln pressing Douglas on this contradiction (the "Freeport Doctrine"). The Dred Scott decision politically destroyed the Democratic Party's ability to maintain Northern Democrats by promising popular sovereignty would limit slavery extension.

AP students should be able to articulate the structural collapse of popular sovereignty.