1856

James Buchanan vs John C. Frémont

A 50-minute lesson on the 1856 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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%

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2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
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1856: James Buchanan vs John C. Frémont

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 1856 that would let a brand-new political party win 114 electoral votes in its first presidential election. For each, identify the specific 1854-1856 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	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 the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. 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 election's structural significance was the founding of the Third Party System (Republicans vs. Democrats) that would dominate American politics for the next 100 years. The political environment was dominated by Bleeding Kansas. The May 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act had organized the Kansas Territory on popular sovereignty principles, repealing the Missouri Compromise. Proslavery and antislavery settlers competed to establish voting majorities. The May 1854 Pottawatomie Massacre (John Brown's execution of five proslavery settlers) and the May 1856 Sack of Lawrence (proslavery raiders destroying the antislavery town of Lawrence, Kansas) had transformed Kansas into a national symbol of sectional violence. Approximately 56 documented deaths occurred in the 1854-1861 Kansas violence. On May 22, 1856, just days after the Sack of Lawrence, South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks beat Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner unconscious with a cane on the Senate floor after Sumner's "Crime Against Kansas" speech denouncing slavery extension. Sumner did not return to the Senate for three years; Brooks was celebrated in the South. The Brooks-Sumner caning crystallized Northern antislavery sentiment. The Republican Party had formed in 1854 from four constituencies: the Free Soil Party, 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. 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 17-19, 1856 Republican National Convention in Philadelphia nominated John C. Frémont of California for president and William L. Dayton of New Jersey for vice president on the first ballot. Frémont was 43 years old, a former U.S. Army explorer who had mapped much of the West, a former senator from California (1850-51), and an outspoken antislavery Republican. His wife Jessie Benton Frémont (daughter of Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton) was an active campaigner.

The Democratic National Convention met in Cincinnati on June 2-6, 1856 - the first national convention held west of the Appalachians. The leading candidates were incumbent President Franklin Pierce, Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois (the architect of the Kansas-Nebraska Act), and James Buchanan of Pennsylvania. The convention rejected Pierce (the first elected president denied his own party's renomination since John Tyler in 1844) and Douglas (the Kansas-Nebraska Act's architect was politically toxic in the North). On the 17th ballot, the convention nominated Buchanan. He was 65 years old, a former U.S. senator (1834-45), 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. John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky was the vice presidential candidate.

The American Party (Know Nothings) had 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 remaining Know Nothings ran Fillmore as a Southern-friendly alternative to both the antislavery Republicans and the doughface Democrats.

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 - Governor Henry Wise of Virginia, Representative Lawrence Keitt of South Carolina, and others publicly stated their states would secede. The campaign's sectional character was unprecedented in U.S. presidential politics.

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, 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 presidential cycle. The structural foundation for Lincoln's

		1860 victory was visible in the 1856 map: if Republicans could add Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Illinois (which Buchanan carried by close margins), they would win the presidency. Buchanan was inaugurated March 4, 1857. Two days later, on March 6, 1857, the Supreme Court issued the Dred Scott decision: ruling 7-2 that Black Americans (free or enslaved) 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 all along. The decision politically destroyed popular sovereignty as a workable framework. Buchanan's four-year term would include Bleeding Kansas's continued violence, the 1857 Panic, the failed Lecompton Constitution effort to admit Kansas as a slave state, John Brown's 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, and the 1860 Democratic Party split that produced Lincoln's election and secession.
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

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.

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. Symbol of the failed implementation of popular sovereignty.

Dred Scott decision

The March 6, 1857 Supreme Court ruling (7-2) that Black Americans (free or enslaved) 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.

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. Won 21.5% of the popular vote but only 8 electoral votes (Maryland). Collapsed after 1856.

Brooks-Sumner caning

The May 22, 1856 incident in which South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks beat Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner unconscious with a cane on the Senate floor after Sumner's "Crime Against Kansas" speech. Sumner did not return to the Senate for three years; Brooks was celebrated in the South. The incident crystallized Northern antislavery sentiment.

Doughface

A Northern Democrat who supported Southern slavery interests. Buchanan was the most prominent doughface president after Pierce. The 1856 election was the last presidential election won by a doughface coalition; by 1860 the Democratic Party would split North/South.

Inaugural Address

JAMES BUCHANAN, MARCH 4, 1857

Buchanan took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1857 - two days before the Supreme Court announced the Dred Scott decision. Buchanan had advance knowledge of the decision through correspondence with Chief Justice Taney and Justice Catron. The inaugural's passage on the Kansas-Nebraska slavery question deliberately referenced the forthcoming Court ruling as the proper resolution of the political question. The reference is one of the most-criticized presidential acts of the antebellum era: Buchanan effectively used presidential authority to legitimate a decision he had improperly previewed.

> *"A difference of opinion has arisen in regard to the point of time when the people of a Territory shall decide this question for themselves. This is, happily, a matter of but little practical importance. Besides, it is a judicial question, which legitimately belongs to the Supreme Court of the United States, before whom it is now pending, and will, it is understood, be speedily and finally settled. To their decision, in common with all good citizens, I shall cheerfully submit, whatever this may be."*

Buchanan, "Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1857). Public domain.

The 1856 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Frémont win in his first Republican Party presidential campaign?

( ) A. 78
( ) B. 93
( ) C. 114
( ) D. 141

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which 1857 Supreme Court decision ruled that Congress had no constitutional power to ban slavery in territories?

( ) A. Marbury v. Madison
( ) B. McCulloch v. Maryland
( ) C. Dred Scott v. Sandford
( ) D. Ableman v. Booth

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the four political factions that merged in 1854 to form the Republican Party.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the May 22, 1856 Brooks-Sumner caning crystallize Northern antislavery sentiment?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Buchanan says in his inaugural that the slavery-in-territories question "legitimately belongs to the Supreme Court of the United States, before whom it is now pending, and will, it is understood, be speedily and finally settled." Identify the constitutional problem with this passage.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1856 election map, identify the 11 states Frémont carried. What does the pattern reveal about the geographic foundation for the Republican Party's 1860 victory?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

114. Frémont 114 EV; Buchanan 174 EV; Fillmore 8 EV. The Republican Party - just two years old - won the second-most electoral votes in only its first presidential cycle.

The 1856 Republican performance was the founding electoral evidence that the party could win the presidency. The 1860 Lincoln coalition would build directly on the 1856 Frémont coalition.

QUESTION 2

Dred Scott v. Sandford. The March 6, 1857 Supreme Court ruling (7-2). Ruled that Black Americans (free or enslaved) 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 all along.

AP students should know the Dred Scott decision and its three core holdings.

QUESTION 3

(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, which repealed the Missouri Compromise and allowed slavery to spread to territory free since 1820.

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

QUESTION 4

On May 22, 1856, two days after Sumner's "Crime Against Kansas" Senate speech denouncing slavery extension, South Carolina Representative Preston Brooks approached Sumner at his desk on the Senate floor and beat him unconscious with a heavy cane. Brooks said he was avenging insults Sumner had directed at his elderly cousin Senator Andrew Butler. Sumner did not return to the Senate for three years; the Massachusetts legislature kept his seat empty as a symbol. Brooks was celebrated in the South - canes were sent to him as gifts; he resigned, was re-elected, and returned to Congress. The incident crystallized Northern antislavery sentiment: it demonstrated that Southern political violence could reach into Congress itself, and it positioned slavery defenders as enemies of democratic norms. The Republican Party gained heavily from the political fallout.

AP students should be able to identify the Brooks-Sumner caning as one of the most-important political-violence events of the antebellum era.

QUESTION 5

The constitutional problem: Buchanan had advance knowledge of the Dred Scott decision through correspondence with Chief Justice Taney and Justice Catron in February 1857 - before he took the oath. By referencing the "pending" decision in his inaugural and pledging to "cheerfully submit" to it, Buchanan was effectively using presidential authority to pre-legitimate a ruling he had improperly previewed. The implication: Buchanan was coordinating with the Supreme Court to deliver a constitutional outcome that his administration would then implement. Modern historians treat the coordination as one of the most-criticized presidential acts of the antebellum era. The Lincoln-Douglas debates in 1858 would attack Buchanan, Taney, Pierce, and Douglas as a "house" of conspirators against free soil.

AP students should be able to identify the structural impropriety of Buchanan's pre-Inaugural communication with the Court.

QUESTION 6

Frémont states: all of New England (Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut - 6 states) plus New York, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa = 11 states. Pattern: Frémont swept the antislavery Northeast and Old Northwest plus the new Western free-soil states. The geographic foundation for 1860 Lincoln victory: if Republicans could add Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Illinois (which Buchanan carried by close margins in 1856 but which Lincoln would win in 1860), they would have the electoral majority. The 1856 map is the structural template for 1860.

AP students should be able to read the 1856 map as the structural precursor to the 1860 Lincoln coalition.