1856

James Buchanan vs John C. Frémont

A 75-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%

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

1856: James Buchanan vs John C. Frémont

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 1856 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1856 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1856 that would let a brand-new political party win the second-most electoral votes in its first presidential cycle. 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 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. Proslavery "Border Ruffians" from Missouri voted illegally in Kansas elections; antislavery settlers from the New England Emigrant Aid Company moved into Kansas to establish free-soil voting majorities. The 1855 elections produced fraudulent proslavery legislative majorities; antislavery settlers refused to accept the results and elected their own rival Topeka government. Federal troops were deployed multiple times. The May 1856 Sack of Lawrence (proslavery raiders destroying the antislavery town) was followed three days later by John Brown's Pottawatomie Massacre (executing five proslavery settlers in retaliation). Approximately 56 documented deaths occurred in the 1854-1861 Kansas violence. On May 22, 1856, two days after Massachusetts Senator Charles 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. 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 Brooks-Sumner caning crystallized Northern antislavery sentiment: it demonstrated that Southern political violence could reach into Congress itself.

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 (his nickname was "the Pathfinder"), 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 first significant role for a presidential candidate's wife in U.S. politics.

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, 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. Buchanan was 65, 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.

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 publicly threatened secession if Frémont won - 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. 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. Buchanan had advance knowledge of the decision through correspondence with Chief Justice Taney and Justice Catron - and had referenced the "pending" decision in his inaugural. The Dred Scott decision politically destroyed popular sovereignty as a workable framework: even if territorial residents voted to ban slavery, Congress could not enforce the ban. Stephen Douglas's entire popular-sovereignty framework collapsed. Buchanan's four-year term would include Bleeding Kansas's continued violence, the 1857 Panic (the second major U.S. financial crisis of the 19th century), the failed 1858 Lecompton Constitution effort to admit Kansas as a slave state (which Stephen Douglas opposed, producing the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates and the breakdown of Buchanan-Douglas Democratic Party unity), John Brown's October 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry, and the 1860 Democratic Party split that produced Lincoln's election and secession. 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 1856 election tells you about the Antebellum Crisis 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

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.

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.

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. 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. Sumner did not return for three years; Brooks was celebrated in the South. Crystallized Northern antislavery sentiment.

Lecompton Constitution

The proslavery Kansas constitution drafted in late 1857 by the proslavery territorial legislature. Submitted to Congress for Kansas statehood admission. Stephen Douglas opposed it on popular sovereignty grounds (the constitution had been fraudulently ratified); Buchanan supported it. The fight produced the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates and the breakdown of Democratic Party unity.

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 in February 1857. The inaugural's passage on the Kansas-Nebraska slavery question deliberately referenced the forthcoming Court ruling. The reference is one of the most-criticized presidential acts of the antebellum era.

> *"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 (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 Frémont win in his first Republican presidential campaign?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which 1857 Supreme Court decision ruled the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional?

( ) 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 "is now pending" before the Supreme Court. Identify the constitutional problem with this passage and the specific 1857 correspondence that produced it.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Dred Scott decision destroy popular sovereignty as a workable framework even though it did not explicitly address popular sovereignty?

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1856 election map, identify the 11 states Frémont carried and identify the three Buchanan-won swing states that Lincoln would flip in 1860. What does the pattern reveal?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

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

The 1856 Republican performance was the founding electoral evidence that the party could win the presidency.

QUESTION 2

Dred Scott v. Sandford. March 6, 1857. 7-2 Supreme Court ruling. Three core holdings: Black Americans (free or enslaved) could never be U.S. citizens; Congress had no constitutional power to ban slavery in territories; the Missouri Compromise had been unconstitutional all along.

AP students should know all three Dred Scott 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.

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" speech denouncing slavery extension, Brooks beat him unconscious with a heavy cane at his Senate desk. Sumner did not return to the Senate for three years; the Massachusetts legislature kept his seat empty as a symbol of Southern political violence. 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 for three reasons: (1) it demonstrated that Southern political violence could reach into Congress itself; (2) it positioned slavery defenders as enemies of democratic norms (since Brooks attacked an unarmed senator at his Senate desk); (3) it produced a martyred symbol (Sumner) whose empty Senate seat became a constant visual reminder. 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 February 1857 correspondence with Chief Justice Taney and Justice Catron. 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 specific correspondence: Justice Catron wrote to Buchanan in February 1857 asking him to use his inaugural address to support whatever the Court decided, knowing the Court was about to rule against the constitutionality of the Missouri Compromise. 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 (the famous "House Divided" framing extended to Buchanan-Taney coordination).

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

QUESTION 6

Under popular sovereignty (Stephen Douglas's framework), territorial residents were supposed to decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. The Dred Scott decision ruled that Congress had no constitutional power to ban slavery in territories - which meant that 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, because Congress lacked the constitutional authority to honor the vote's outcome. Stephen Douglas's entire popular-sovereignty framework collapsed. The 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates would feature Lincoln pressing Douglas on this contradiction. Douglas's response (the "Freeport Doctrine" - that territories could effectively ban slavery by refusing to pass laws protecting it) won the 1858 Senate race but cost him Southern Democratic support, producing the 1860 Democratic Party split.

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

QUESTION 7

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. Buchanan-won swing states that Lincoln would flip in 1860: Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois (plus California and Oregon). Pattern: the 1856 Republican coalition (Frémont states) plus three close Buchanan-won states equaled the 1860 Lincoln victory. The 1856 map is the structural template for 1860. The political lesson: a brand-new party that could win 11 states in its first cycle could plausibly win the presidency in its second cycle.

AP students should be able to read the 1856 map as the direct precursor to 1860.

Discussion prompts

1 The Republican Party won 114 electoral votes in its first presidential cycle, just two years after founding. Identify three structural reasons for the rapid emergence, and explain whether the trajectory would have been possible without the Kansas-Nebraska Act's political effects.

2 Buchanan referenced the "pending" Dred Scott decision in his inaugural address - which he had received advance knowledge of through correspondence with Chief Justice Taney. Identify two specific ways this pre-Inaugural coordination violated 19th-century norms of constitutional separation of powers.