AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1856

James Buchanan vs John C. Frémont

A 105-minute lesson on the 1856 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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 (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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7. Answer key + discussion

1856: James Buchanan vs John C. Frémont

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 features of 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 is the founding moment of the Third Party System. The Republican Party - just two years old, founded in direct response to the May 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act - won 114 electoral votes in its first presidential cycle. The Whig Party - which had competed for the presidency since 1836 - had dissolved by 1854. The American (Know Nothing) Party briefly emerged as a competitor for the post-Whig political space but collapsed after 1856 as the slavery question displaced anti-immigration as the salient cleavage. By 1860 the Republican-Democratic competition that would dominate American politics for the next 100 years was structurally established. 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's 36°30' line. 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 March 1855 elections produced fraudulent proslavery legislative majorities; antislavery settlers refused to accept the results and elected their own rival Topeka government in October 1855. Federal troops were deployed multiple times. The May 21, 1856 Sack of Lawrence (proslavery raiders destroying the antislavery town of Lawrence) was followed three days later by John Brown's May 24-25, 1856 Pottawatomie Massacre (Brown and his sons executing five proslavery settlers in retaliation). Approximately 56 documented deaths occurred in the 1854-1861 Kansas violence. On May 22, 1856, the day after the Sack of Lawrence and 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. Brooks said he was avenging insults Sumner had directed at his elderly cousin Senator Andrew Butler. Sumner suffered serious head injuries; he did not return to the Senate for three years (Massachusetts 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 in ways that abstract political debate could not: it demonstrated that Southern political violence could reach into Congress itself, and it positioned slavery defenders as enemies of democratic norms.

The Republican Party had formed in 1854 from four constituencies: the Free Soil Party (which had won 10.1% in 1848 and 4.9% in 1852); antislavery Whigs ("Conscience Whigs," including Salmon P. Chase, Charles Sumner, and William H. Seward); antislavery Democrats ("Barnburners," including Martin Van Buren); 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 (including the transcontinental railroad); 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 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, 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. 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 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. The structural ironies: the Democratic Party warned that a Frémont victory would produce secession - but the Republican coalition in 1856 had no Southern presence and could not threaten or reassure Southern states.

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 (27 EV), Indiana (13), and Illinois (11), they would have an electoral majority.

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 February 1857 correspondence with Chief Justice Taney and Justice Catron - and had referenced the "pending" decision in his inaugural address. 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. The 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates would feature Lincoln pressing Douglas on this contradiction ("the Freeport Question"). Douglas's response (the Freeport Doctrine - that territories could effectively ban slavery by refusing to pass laws protecting it) won him the 1858 Senate race but cost him Southern Democratic support, producing the 1860 Democratic Party split.

Buchanan's four-year term included Bleeding Kansas's continued violence, the August 1857 Panic, the failed 1858 Lecompton Constitution effort to admit Kansas as a slave state (which Douglas opposed, producing the breakdown of Buchanan-Douglas Democratic Party unity), John Brown's October 16-18, 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry (the failed attempt to spark a slave insurrection in Virginia, ending in Brown's December 2, 1859 execution), and the 1860 Democratic Party split that produced Lincoln's election and secession. Buchanan is generally ranked among the worst U.S. presidents because of his inability to prevent the Civil War.

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

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.

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 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.

Freeport Doctrine
Stephen Douglas's August 27, 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debate response to Lincoln's "Freeport Question." Douglas argued that despite the Dred Scott decision, territorial legislatures could effectively ban slavery by refusing to pass laws protecting it. Won Douglas the 1858 Senate race but cost him Southern Democratic support; contributed to the 1860 Democratic Party split.

Third Party System
The 1856-1894 period of competition between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. Founded in 1856 with the Republican Party's first presidential campaign. Defined the structure of American politics for nearly four decades until the 1896 realignment.

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; Buchanan supported it. The fight produced the breakdown of Democratic Party unity.

Harpers Ferry raid
John Brown's October 16-18, 1859 attempt to seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and spark a slave insurrection. Brown was captured by Robert E. Lee and federal marines, tried for treason, and executed December 2, 1859. The raid terrified the South and prepared the political ground for secession.

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 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 pre-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.

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

JAMES BUCHANAN, MARCH 4, 1857

“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.

SOURCE B

House Divided Speech

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, JUNE 16, 1858

“A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved - I do not expect the house to fall - but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become alike lawful in all the States, old as well as new - North as well as South.”

Lincoln, "House Divided Speech" (Springfield, IL, June 16, 1858). Public domain.

The 1856 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 (Buchanan's Inaugural) that references the pending Dred Scott decision. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (Lincoln's House Divided speech) that articulates the structural unsustainability of the sectional crisis. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources address the political crisis of 1857-58 but they take incompatible diagnostic approaches. Identify the specific diagnostic approach each source takes.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A was delivered 15 months before Source B. What does the temporal gap tell you about how the political character of the sectional crisis evolved?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source B says the country must "become all one thing or all the other." Identify the two specific 1858-1861 developments that confirmed Lincoln's prediction.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The October 1859 attempt to seize the federal arsenal and spark a slave insurrection was led by:

( ) A. Frederick Douglass
( ) B. John Brown
( ) C. Nat Turner
( ) D. Denmark Vesey

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

The 1858 Senate race in Illinois between Lincoln and Douglas was decided by:

( ) A. Direct popular vote
( ) B. The Illinois state legislature
( ) C. A joint U.S. House and Senate vote
( ) D. The Supreme Court

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position: was the 1856-1860 crisis inevitable, contingent, or the outcome of Republican Party emergence? Identify one piece of evidence from each source you will use.

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Buchanan's 1857 Inaugural (Source A) presents the slavery-extension question as one that the Supreme Court would soon resolve "finally" - implying a constitutional framework that would settle the dispute. Lincoln's 1858 House Divided speech (Source B) diagnoses the same political situation as structurally unsustainable - a "house divided against itself cannot stand" and the country must become "all one thing or all the other." Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1854-1861 period, evaluate the extent to which the 1856-1860 political crisis was (a) a structural inevitability of the underlying sectional conflict over slavery that no political settlement could permanently resolve, (b) a contingent product of the Dred Scott decision and Buchanan administration's specific policy choices, or (c) the inevitable outcome of the Republican Party's 1854 emergence as a sectional party that could win the presidency without Southern electoral support. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the inevitable-vs-contingent-vs-outcome axis. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of Bleeding Kansas, the Brooks-Sumner caning, the Lecompton Constitution, Harpers Ferry, the 1860 Democratic Party split. 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: "this is, happily, a matter of but little practical importance", "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". The "now pending, and will, it is understood, be speedily and finally settled" phrase is the cleanest reference.

Buchanan's framing reveals his advance knowledge of the Dred Scott decision and his expectation that it would resolve the slavery-extension question.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: "a house divided against itself cannot stand", "I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free", "it will become all one thing or all the other", "the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it ... or its advocates will push it forward". The "house divided against itself cannot stand" phrase is the cleanest articulation.

Lincoln's framing is one of the most-quoted American political statements. AP students should recognize its structural claim.

QUESTION 3

Source A claims the slavery-extension dispute is a procedural question that the Supreme Court can resolve "finally" - implying a constitutional framework that will settle the dispute regardless of public sentiment. Source B claims the dispute is structurally unsustainable - the U.S. cannot continue indefinitely in its current half-slave half-free configuration, and the political system must produce a decisive resolution one way or the other. The two diagnostic approaches are politically incompatible: Source A treats the conflict as procedural and resolvable through legal authority; Source B treats it as substantive and resolvable only through political confrontation.

AP students should be able to identify the two diagnostic approaches as structurally distinct.

QUESTION 4

The 15-month gap covers the Dred Scott decision (March 6, 1857), the August 1857 Panic, the failed Lecompton Constitution fight (December 1857 - April 1858 in Congress; rejected by Kansas voters August 1858), Stephen Douglas's break with Buchanan over Lecompton, and the early Lincoln-Douglas debate cycle. The temporal gap tells you that the optimistic Buchanan framing (constitutional resolution via Dred Scott) had been falsified by political reality within 15 months. Buchanan had expected Dred Scott to settle the question; instead it had radicalized Northern opposition, split the Democratic Party (Buchanan vs. Douglas), and produced the Lincoln-Douglas debates that crystallized Republican-Democratic polarization. The 15-month gap reveals the structural failure of constitutional adjudication as a political settlement mechanism.

AP students should be able to identify the structural failure of legal resolution as a political settlement.

QUESTION 5

Accept any two of: (1) The November 1860 election produced Lincoln's victory on a purely Northern platform, demonstrating that the political system had decided to "arrest the further spread of slavery." (2) The December 1860 - February 1861 secession of seven Southern states demonstrated that the South was unwilling to remain in the Union under the conditions Lincoln's victory implied. (3) The April 1861 Confederate attack on Fort Sumter began the Civil War - the military resolution of the question that political resolution had failed to produce. (4) The September 1862 Emancipation Proclamation announced the war's antislavery character. (5) The 1865 Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery constitutionally - the "all one thing" resolution Lincoln had predicted. The 1860 election and the secession crisis are the strongest single confirmations.

AP students should be able to identify multiple specific developments confirming Lincoln's prediction.

QUESTION 6

John Brown. The October 16-18, 1859 attempt to seize the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, and spark a slave insurrection. Brown was captured by Robert E. Lee and federal marines, tried for treason, and executed December 2, 1859.

AP students should know the Harpers Ferry raid as the structural precursor to the secession crisis.

QUESTION 7

The Illinois state legislature. U.S. senators were elected by state legislatures until the 17th Amendment (1913). The 1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates were therefore campaigns to influence the Illinois state legislature's subsequent vote. Douglas won the legislature's vote 54-46 - despite the Republican candidates having won more popular votes for the state legislature than the Democratic candidates.

AP students should know that 19th-century U.S. senators were elected by state legislatures.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should: (1) state a clear position on the inevitable-vs-contingent-vs-outcome 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.