1856

James Buchanan vs John C. Frémont

A 20-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%

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1856

The Whig Party had broken apart. In its place a new political party started in 1854. It was called the Republican Party. The new party was against slavery spreading to new western territories. Many former Whigs joined the Republicans. So did former Free Soil Party members.

The Republicans picked John C. Frémont for president. Frémont was an explorer. He had mapped much of the West. People called him "the Pathfinder." His campaign slogan was "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Men, Frémont!"

Look at the picture. The man is James Buchanan. He was the Democrats' candidate. Buchanan had been a senator, a secretary of state, and an ambassador to Britain. He was 65 years old. He had not been in the country during the big Kansas-Nebraska fight. That made him acceptable to both Northern and Southern Democrats.

There was also a third party - the American Party, sometimes called the Know Nothings. They were against new immigrants from Catholic countries like Ireland. Former president Millard Fillmore was their candidate.

The election was close. Buchanan won 174 electoral votes. Fré



James Buchanan, the fifteenth U.S. president. He was the last president before the Civil War broke out.

MATHEW BRADY (1822-1896), VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Let's talk about the story

1.

Who became the fifteenth U.S. president after the 1856 election?

2.

What new political party ran a candidate for the first time in 1856?

3.

Even though Frémont lost the 1856 election, why was the Republican result important?

Warm-up (5 min)

In 1856 there was a brand-new political party for the first time in 20 years. It was called the Republican Party. It was made up of people who wanted to stop slavery from spreading to new places.

Answer key

1.

James Buchanan. He was a Pennsylvania Democrat who had been a senator, secretary of state, and ambassador to Britain. He won 174 electoral votes.

Buchanan is generally ranked among the worst U.S. presidents because of his inability to prevent secession.

2.

The Republican Party. The Republicans had formed in 1854 to oppose the Kansas-Nebraska Act's spread of slavery to new territories. They picked explorer John C. Frémont as their first presidential candidate in 1856.

The Republican Party would win in 1860 with Lincoln. The 1856 result was the founding electoral performance of the party that would govern the United States for most of the next 70 years.

3.

The Republican Party won every Northern state north of Indiana - all of New England, New York, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa. The result demonstrated that a new antislavery party could be electorally competitive in just two years after its founding. The pattern foreshadowed Lincoln's 1860 victory: if Republicans could add just a few more Northern states, they could win the presidency.

The 1856 Frémont coalition is the structural precursor to the 1860 Lincoln coalition. AP students should recognize the geographic foundation.