3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1860

Abraham Lincoln vs John C. Breckinridge

A 35-minute lesson on the 1860 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Civil War	ELECTORAL VOTES 303 total
WINNER Abraham Lincoln (Republican) · 180 EV	RUNNER-UP John C. Breckinridge (Southern Democratic) · 72 EV
KEY ISSUE Slavery in the territories; Southern secession threats; preservation of the Union	TURNOUT 81.8%

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

1860: Abraham Lincoln vs John C. Breckinridge

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: think of two big issues that might split a country into two groups. Which one do you think would be hardest to solve peacefully?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1860 election was one of the most important moments in U.S. history. The country was split into two halves: the North and the South. They disagreed about slavery — the practice of forcing people to work for no pay and treating them as property. In the South, slavery was a big part of how farms made money. About four million African Americans were enslaved in 1860. Many Southern leaders wanted slavery to be allowed in the new western territories. They said the Constitution gave slaveholders that right. The Northern states were free states. Many Northern people thought slavery was wrong and should not spread. A new political party, the Republicans, agreed. The Republicans did not promise to end slavery in the South, but they did promise to keep slavery out of the western territories. The Republicans picked Abraham Lincoln, a lawyer from Illinois, as their candidate. He believed slavery was wrong, but he said he would not interfere with slavery in the states where it already existed. Four men ran for president in 1860. The Democratic Party split into two parts — one Northern, one Southern. A fourth candidate, John Bell, tried to hold the country together by focusing on the Constitution and the Union instead of slavery. Lincoln won the most electoral votes, even though almost no one in the South voted for him. When Lincoln won, many Southern states were furious. Many white Southerners saw Lincoln's election as a threat to their way of life. Just six weeks after the election, South Carolina decided it would no longer be part of the United States. Ten more Southern states followed. A few weeks after Lincoln became president, the Civil War began. The war lasted four years. More than 600,000 Americans died, and by the end of 1865 slavery had been abolished.
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 1860 Election

The 1860 election was one of the most important moments in U.S. history. The country was split into two halves: the North and the South. They disagreed about slavery — the practice of forcing people to work for no pay and treating them as property.

In the South, slavery was a big part of how farms made money. About four million African Americans were enslaved in 1860. Many Southern leaders wanted slavery to be allowed in the new western territories. They said the Constitution gave slaveholders that right.

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Key words

Election	When adults vote to choose who will lead a country, a state, or a city. The U.S. picks a new president every four years.
Slavery	Forcing people to work for no pay and treating them as property. About four million enslaved people lived in the South in 1860.
Republican Party	A new political party founded in 1854 that wanted to stop slavery from spreading into the western territories.
Secession	When a state formally leaves a country it had been part of. South Carolina seceded six weeks after the 1860 election.
Civil War	A war between people who live in the same country. The U.S. Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865. Slavery was abolished at the end of 1865.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which word below means “when a state formally leaves a country”?

( ) A. Election
( ) B. Secession
( ) C. Republican
( ) D. Civil War

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did many Southern states not want Abraham Lincoln to be president?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How was the Democratic Party in 1860 different from the Democratic Party today?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the biggest result of the Civil War for enslaved people in the United States?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Secession.

The vocab list defines this term explicitly. The other three options name an event, a political party, and a war.

QUESTION 2

Lincoln and the Republicans wanted to stop slavery from spreading into the western territories. Many Southern leaders saw this as a threat to slavery, to the power of the slaveholding states, and to their way of life.

Lincoln pledged not to interfere with slavery where it already existed, but secessionists viewed his opposition to its expansion as a threat to the long-term security and political power of slaveholding states.

QUESTION 3

In 1860 the Democratic Party split into two parts. Northern Democrats supported Stephen Douglas. Southern Democrats walked out and supported John Breckinridge. The split was about slavery in the new western territories. Today the Democratic Party is one party.

The Charleston convention in April 1860 broke up over slavery in the territories, and the two factions nominated separate candidates in June. Even so, the Miller Center notes that a united Democratic Party would have won the popular vote but still lost in the Electoral College.

QUESTION 4

About four million enslaved people gained their freedom. The Thirteenth Amendment, ratified in December 1865, ended slavery everywhere in the United States.

Emancipation was incremental: the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 declared enslaved people in the rebelling states free; the Thirteenth Amendment, ratified in December 1865, abolished slavery everywhere.