1860

Abraham Lincoln vs John C. Breckinridge

A 50-minute lesson on the 1860 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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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3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1860: Abraham Lincoln vs John C. Breckinridge

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**	Before reading: list two issues that have divided modern countries enough to threaten civil war or breakup. For each, explain what made it hard to resolve peacefully.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1860 election was one of the most consequential in American history. It came at the peak of a political fight over slavery that had been building for decades — the practice of forcing African Americans to work for no pay and treating them as property. Roughly four million people were enslaved in the United States, and their labor produced the South's cotton wealth. The Democratic Party split that summer. Northern Democrats nominated Stephen Douglas, who supported popular sovereignty — letting the residents of each new western territory vote on whether to allow slavery. Southern Democrats walked out and nominated Vice President John C. Breckinridge, who insisted that the federal government must protect slavery in every territory. A fourth party, the Constitutional Union, nominated John Bell to draw moderate voters who wanted to avoid the question entirely. The fourth candidate was Abraham Lincoln, an Illinois lawyer who had argued in 1858 that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." Lincoln did not promise to abolish slavery, but he did promise that slavery would not expand into any territory. The Republican Party, founded in 1854, made that its central promise, alongside a protective tariff, a homestead law, and a Pacific railroad. Lincoln won with 180 electoral votes — well over the 152 needed to win — but with less than 40 percent of the popular vote in a four-way race. He won electoral votes in every Northern state but received no recorded votes in ten Southern states, where the Republican Party had no organization to hand out ballots. The contest was fought almost entirely along sectional lines. The Southern response was immediate. Six weeks after the election, on December 20, 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union. Within sixty days, six more states followed — Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. They formed the Confederate States of America before Lincoln was even inaugurated. Four more states joined the Confederacy after Lincoln took office and Fort

		Sumter was attacked in April 1861. The Civil War began about six weeks after his inauguration and lasted four years.
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

Sectionalism
Loyalty to a regional interest (the North, the South, the West) over national interest. By 1860 political loyalties had become increasingly divided along geographic lines.

Confederacy
The eleven Southern states that seceded between December 1860 and June 1861, forming the Confederate States of America with its capital first at Montgomery, then Richmond.

House divided
Lincoln's 1858 phrase, drawn from the Gospel of Mark, claiming the U.S. could not remain "half slave and half free" indefinitely.

Secession
A state's formal withdrawal from the federal Union. South Carolina seceded six weeks after the 1860 election; ten more Southern states followed by June 1861.

Popular sovereignty
The doctrine that residents of a U.S. territory should decide for themselves whether to allow slavery. A major fault line in the 1860 Democratic split.

Fort Sumter
The federal fort in Charleston Harbor, South Carolina. Confederate forces attacked it on April 12, 1861, starting the Civil War.

First Inaugural Address (closing passage)

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, MARCH 4, 1861

Seven Southern states had already seceded. Lincoln's inaugural was carefully calibrated to deny the legitimacy of secession while leaving open the possibility of avoiding war. The closing passage is the famous appeal to the "better angels."

> *"I am loath to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."*

Lincoln, "First Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1861). Public domain.

The 1860 Election

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

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

How many electoral votes did Lincoln receive in 1860?

( ) A. 72
( ) B. 139
( ) C. 180
( ) D. 212

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which state was the first to secede after Lincoln's election?

( ) A. Virginia
( ) B. South Carolina
( ) C. Mississippi
( ) D. Georgia

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Democratic Party split in 1860? Identify the specific issue that broke the party at its Charleston convention.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Lincoln won the election but received zero votes in ten Southern states. Explain how that was possible in two sentences.

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

In your own words, identify two phrases from the Lincoln excerpt that emphasize shared bonds rather than conflict.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1860 election map, identify the geographic line that divides Lincoln states from Breckinridge states. Which slave states did NOT vote for Breckinridge, and which candidate carried each?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

180.

Lincoln received 180 of 303 electoral votes. The threshold to win was 152. The remaining 123 split among Breckinridge (72), Bell (39), and Douglas (12).

QUESTION 2

South Carolina.

SC seceded on December 20, 1860 — six weeks after Election Day. Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas followed by February 1861.

QUESTION 3

The split was over slavery in the western territories. Northern Democrats supported "popular sovereignty" (letting territory residents vote). Southern Democrats demanded the federal government actively protect slavery in every territory. Southern delegates walked out of the Charleston convention, which adjourned without a nominee; when the party met again in Baltimore in June, Northern Democrats nominated Douglas and Southern Democrats nominated Breckinridge.

The Charleston convention in April 1860 was the immediate trigger. The deeper cause was the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and the 1857 Dred Scott decision, which had unsettled the Missouri Compromise.

QUESTION 4

The Republican Party was new (founded 1854) and had no real organization in most Southern states. In 1860 each party printed and handed out its own paper ballots, so where there was no Republican organization there were no Lincoln ballots, and very few voters wrote in his name.

The contests were fought along sectional lines: Lincoln and Douglas competed in the North, Breckinridge and Bell in the South.

QUESTION 5

Accept any two of: "We are not enemies, but friends"; "We must not be enemies"; "bonds of affection"; "mystic chords of memory"; "every battlefield and patriot grave"; "every living heart and hearthstone"; "the chorus of the Union"; "the better angels of our nature."

The closing passage stacks unity images so densely that students can find pairs easily. The exam expectation is verbatim quotation, not paraphrase.

QUESTION 6

The line is the boundary between free states and slave states. Missouri went to Stephen Douglas. Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee went to John Bell (Constitutional Union). Breckinridge carried the other eleven slave states, including the border states of Maryland and Delaware.

The 1860 map did not predict which states would secede: Virginia and Tennessee voted for Bell but later joined the Confederacy, while Maryland and Delaware voted for Breckinridge but stayed in the Union.