CLASSROOM EDITION · GRADES 9 — 12

1860

Abraham Lincoln vs John C. Breckinridge

A 75-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%

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

1860: Abraham Lincoln vs John C. Breckinridge

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 1860 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1860 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Before reading: list two issues you would expect to divide a country to the point of war. Then write one sentence about how an election could trigger that division.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1860 election was one of the most consequential in American history. Abraham Lincoln of the new Republican Party won 180 electoral votes with less than 40 percent of the popular vote in a four-way race. The Democratic Party had split that summer over slavery in the territories: Northern Democrats nominated Stephen Douglas; Southern Democrats walked out and nominated Vice President John C. Breckinridge; the Constitutional Union Party, led by John Bell, drew border-state voters who wanted to avoid the question entirely. Lincoln won electoral votes in every Northern state (New Jersey split its electors between Lincoln and Douglas) and received effectively zero votes across most of the South — in ten Southern states no Republican ballots were handed out and he received no recorded votes. South Carolina seceded six weeks after the result; six more Southern states followed before Lincoln's inauguration in March 1861, and four more after the war began in April. 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 1860 election tells you about the Civil War 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

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

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

Fugitive Slave Act
The 1850 federal law that required law enforcement in every state, free or slave, to arrest people accused of escaping slavery, and punished anyone who helped them.

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

Free Soil
The Republican policy that slavery should not expand into the western territories, even if it could remain where already established.

Border state
A U.S. slave state that did not secede in 1860–1861. The border states (Maryland, Delaware, Kentucky, Missouri, and later West Virginia) remained in the Union; both sides saw them as strategically important.

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 (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 Abraham Lincoln receive in 1860?

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

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Name the four major candidates in 1860 and the party each represented.

QUESTION 3 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which state seceded first after Lincoln's election?

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

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why was Lincoln effectively absent from the ballot in most Southern states? Cite one practical reason and one political reason.

QUESTION 5 · MAP-READ

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

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Lincoln says "We are not enemies, but friends." Identify two other phrases in the excerpt that reinforce his appeal to shared bonds rather than conflict, and quote them exactly.

QUESTION 7 · SHORT-ANSWER

Lincoln invokes "the mystic chords of memory" and "the better angels of our nature." What does each phrase mean, and what political work do these images do in the broader argument of the inaugural?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

180

Lincoln won 180 electoral votes; Breckinridge 72; Bell 39; Douglas 12. The total available was 303; the threshold was 152.

QUESTION 2

Abraham Lincoln (Republican), Stephen Douglas (Northern Democrat), John C. Breckinridge (Southern Democrat), John Bell (Constitutional Union).

The Democratic convention at Charleston broke up over slavery without choosing a candidate; when the party met again in Baltimore in June, it split into two separate Democratic tickets. The Constitutional Union party appealed to border-state voters who wanted to avoid the slavery question.

QUESTION 3

South Carolina

South Carolina seceded on December 20, 1860 — six weeks after the election. Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas followed by February 1861.

QUESTION 4

Practical: the Republican Party had no real organization in most Southern states, and in 1860 each party printed and handed out its own paper ballots, so there were no Lincoln ballots to cast. Political: secessionists viewed Lincoln's opposition to slavery's expansion as a threat to the slaveholding states.

Lincoln received no recorded votes in ten Southern states. In the other five slave states his share ranged from under 1 percent (Kentucky) to about 24 percent (Delaware).

QUESTION 5

The line is the boundary between free states and slave states: Lincoln won only free states, and Breckinridge won only slave states. Four slave states did not vote for Breckinridge: Missouri was carried by Stephen Douglas; Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee went to John Bell (Constitutional Union).

Breckinridge carried eleven of the fifteen slave states, including the border states of Maryland and Delaware. Missouri stayed in the Union even though its governor, Claiborne Fox Jackson, was pro-Southern.

QUESTION 6

Accept any two of: "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", or "the better angels of our nature". All evoke shared inheritance, geographic continuity, or moral kinship as counterweights to the secession crisis.

The closing passage stacks unity images so densely that students can find pairs easily. Q7 then moves to the analytical question of what these images do politically.

QUESTION 7

The "mystic chords of memory" evoke shared Revolutionary-era ancestors, battlefields, and constitutional founding moments. The "better angels of our nature" are an appeal to moral conscience and restraint. Together they reframe the secession crisis as a temporary lapse in fellow-citizenship rather than an irreconcilable conflict.

The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library calls it one of the most poetic presidential passages in history. Lincoln built it from a closing paragraph suggested by William Seward, rewriting it in his own words.

Discussion prompts

1. Lincoln won the presidency with less than 40 percent of the popular vote and zero support across most of the South. Was the election democratically legitimate by 1860 standards? By today's standards? Defend your answer.

2. The Democratic Party split into two regional factions before voting began. What does that tell you about how political parties manage internal disagreement, and what comparable splits have you observed in modern parties?

3. Secession began within weeks of Lincoln's victory. Identify two ways the election system itself contributed to a result the losing side felt it could not accept, and one way the system worked as designed.