AP EDITION · DBQ + LEQ · CLASSROOM

1860

Abraham Lincoln vs John C. Breckinridge

A 105-minute lesson on the 1860 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, DBQ pairing, 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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2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
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7. Answer key + discussion

1860: Abraham Lincoln vs John C. Breckinridge

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**	Before reading: identify two structural conditions in 1860 — political, economic, demographic, or constitutional — that you would expect to make peaceful secession impossible. Defend your choices with reference to the 1820–1860 sectional crisis.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1860 election did not merely change who occupied the White House; it broke a decades-long series of congressional compromises over slavery. The Missouri Compromise (1820), the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) had each tried to settle where slavery could expand. By 1860 none held: the Kansas-Nebraska Act had repealed the Missouri Compromise, and the Dred Scott decision (1857) declared it void. The Republican Party, formed in 1854 from the wreckage of the Whigs and the Free Soil party, refused to accept slavery's spread into any new territory. The Democratic Party split that summer along the same fault line, fielding two candidates. Lincoln won the presidency with 180 electoral votes — well above the threshold — but with less than 40 percent of the popular vote in a four-way race. He won electoral votes in every Northern state. He received no recorded votes in ten Southern states, where the Republican Party had no organization and therefore no party ballots to hand out (in 1860, parties printed their own ballots). The result demonstrated that the United States no longer possessed a single national electorate; it possessed two regional electorates capable of choosing presidents the other side considered illegitimate. South Carolina seceded six weeks after the election. Six more states followed before Lincoln was inaugurated. The Confederate States of America held its first congress in Montgomery, Alabama on February 4, 1861 — a month before Lincoln took the oath of office. The Civil War began about six weeks after his inauguration. Most political observers describe 1860 as a critical election: one that produced a lasting realignment of the coalitions supporting the major parties.
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

Critical realignment
An election that produces a lasting political realignment, reshaping the coalitions that support the major parties. 1860 is a standard example: Lincoln's victory established the Republican Party as a dominant political force in the North.

Kansas-Nebraska Act
The 1854 law repealing the Missouri Compromise by letting Kansas and Nebraska residents decide whether to allow slavery. Its opponents helped found the Republican Party that year.

Free Soil
The policy that slavery should not expand into new territories, even if it remained where already established. Former Free-Soil Party members joined former Whigs and Democrats to found the Republican Party in the 1850s.

Fugitive Slave Clause
Article IV Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution, requiring states to return escaped enslaved people. Strengthened by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act and central to South Carolina's secession grievance.

Wilmot Proviso
The 1846 congressional proposal to ban slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico. Never passed both houses of Congress, but it set off a bitter national debate over slavery in the territories.

Missouri Compromise
The 1820 law admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state, banning slavery in remaining Louisiana Purchase territory north of 36° 30'. Effectively repealed by the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act.

Popular sovereignty
The doctrine that residents of a U.S. territory should decide whether to permit slavery. Stephen Douglas's 1860 position and the fault line in the Democratic split.

Compact theory
The constitutional theory that the United States is a compact among states, each of which retained a right to withdraw. Used by South Carolina's secession declaration as the legal basis for leaving the Union.

Sectional crisis
A political conflict driven by regional interests rather than party platform. By 1860 political loyalties had become increasingly divided along geographic lines, North against South.

First Inaugural Address (closing passage)

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, MARCH 4, 1861

Seven Southern states had already seceded and the Confederacy had formed a provisional government a month before Lincoln took office. Lincoln built the closing passage from a paragraph suggested by William Seward.

> *"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.

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

First Inaugural Address (closing passage)

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, MARCH 4, 1861

"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.

SOURCE B

Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina

SOUTH CAROLINA CONVENTION, DECEMBER 24, 1860

"But an increasing hostility on the part of the non-slaveholding States to the institution of slavery, has led to a disregard of their obligations, and the laws of the General Government have ceased to effect the objects of the Constitution. The States of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa, have enacted laws which either nullify the Acts of Congress or render useless any attempt to execute them. In many of these States the fugitive is discharged from service or labor claimed, and in none of them has the State Government complied with the stipulation made in the Constitution."

South Carolina Convention, "Declaration of the Immediate Causes" (Charleston, SC, December 24, 1860). Public domain.

The 1860 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 (Lincoln) where Lincoln frames seceding Southerners as still being part of one national community. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify the key phrase in Source B (SC Declaration) that names the cause of secession most explicitly. Quote it verbatim.

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

Both sources invoke the U.S. Constitution but draw opposing conclusions. Identify one specific constitutional clause or principle that each speaker treats as central to their argument.

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

Source A was delivered AFTER Source B (Lincoln's inaugural was March 4, 1861; SC's Declaration was December 24, 1860). What does this temporal ordering tell you about what Lincoln was responding to?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Identify one historiographical interpretation of the 1860 secession crisis that Source A supports, and one that Source B supports. Briefly explain each.

QUESTION 6 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Source B argues that South Carolina is released from her constitutional obligation because Northern states have broken the compact. What constitutional theory underpins this claim?

( ) A. Federalism
( ) B. Compact theory
( ) C. Popular sovereignty
( ) D. Judicial review

QUESTION 7 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Source A's appeal to "the better angels of our nature" appeals to a tradition in classical rhetoric known as:

( ) A. Logos
( ) B. Pathos
( ) C. Ethos
( ) D. Kairos

QUESTION 8 · SHORT-ANSWER

Sketch your thesis sentence for the LEQ (next page). State your position clearly: was the 1860 crisis primarily constitutional, primarily about slavery, or both equally?

Long-essay-question

LEQ PROMPT

Lincoln’s First Inaugural Address and South Carolina’s Declaration of the Immediate Causes both invoke the U.S. Constitution as central to their arguments, but they draw opposing conclusions about what the Constitution requires. Using BOTH sources and your knowledge of the 1854–1861 sectional crisis, evaluate the extent to which the 1860 secession crisis was a dispute over constitutional interpretation versus a dispute over slavery itself. Defend a clear thesis.

GRADING RUBRIC

Thesis (1 pt): must take a defensible position on the constitutional-vs-slavery question, not summarize. Contextualization (1 pt): mention at least two of Kansas-Nebraska Act, Dred Scott decision, Lincoln-Douglas debates, John Brown’s raid, the Charleston convention. Evidence (2 pts): must quote at least one phrase from each source. Analysis (1 pt): must explicitly evaluate the extent — constitutional vs. slavery itself — rather than treating them as equivalent. Total 5 points.

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Accept any of: “We are not enemies, but friends”; “We must not be enemies”; “bonds of affection”; “mystic chords of memory”; “the chorus of the Union”; “the better angels of our nature.” Award credit for any verbatim quote that affirms shared national identity.

Lincoln stacks unity images deliberately. The exam expectation at AP level is to quote precisely.

QUESTION 2

Accept any of: “increasing hostility on the part of the non-slaveholding States to the institution of slavery” (the single most explicit phrase); “enacted laws which either nullify the Acts of Congress” (constitutional grievance framing); “in none of them has the State Government complied with the stipulation made in the Constitution” (specific failure named). The strongest single phrase names slavery.

The SC Declaration names slavery openly. As the National Park Service puts it, the testimony of Confederate leaders “makes it clear that slavery was central to the motivation for secession and war.”

QUESTION 3

Source A: Lincoln treats the Constitution as creating a perpetual Union (“the Union of these States is perpetual”), citing the Preamble’s “to form a more perfect Union” and arguing earlier in the address that “the Union is much older than the Constitution.” Source B: SC treats the Constitution as a compact among states and argues that because the compact was broken, “South Carolina is released from her obligation.” The Fugitive Slave Clause (Art. IV Sec. 2) is the specific clause SC names.

Both arguments are textually defensible, which is part of why the dispute could not be resolved by appeal to the Constitution alone.

QUESTION 4

Lincoln knew at minimum seven states had already seceded and that the Confederacy had formed a provisional government a month before he took office. The inaugural is responsive, not proactive. The “better angels” rhetoric was an attempt both to leave open the possibility of reunion and to lay the moral burden of initiating war on the seceding side. Lincoln’s later decision to resupply Fort Sumter (rather than attack) followed the same strategy.

The temporal ordering is structurally important. Lincoln was constrained by what SC had already done; his rhetorical options were narrow.

QUESTION 5

Source A supports reading the crisis as a dispute over the meaning of the Constitution and the permanence of the Union, in which reconciliation was still rhetorically possible. Source B supports the “irrepressible conflict” view (William Seward’s 1858 phrase): the issue was slavery itself. A strong response will also note that SC’s explicit naming of slavery undercuts claims that secession was about states’ rights in the abstract.

AP-level historiographical literacy expects students to recognize that primary sources speak to scholarly debates about interpretation, not just to events.

QUESTION 6

Compact theory.

The SC Declaration grounds its right to secede in the theory that the Union is a compact among states: “the constituted compact has been deliberately broken and disregarded by the non-slaveholding States, and the consequence follows that South Carolina is released from her obligation.”

QUESTION 7

Pathos.

In rhetoric, pathos is the emotion the speaker or writer hopes to induce in the audience; ethos is the character of the speaker expressed in the attempt to persuade. Lincoln’s appeal to memory, battlefields, and affection aims to stir the audience’s feelings.

QUESTION 8

Open-ended thesis sketch. Acceptable answers should (1) state a clear position on the constitutional-vs-slavery axis, (2) avoid treating the two as equivalent or interchangeable, (3) signal at least one specific piece of evidence from each source. Award credit for any defensible thesis that meets these three conditions.

The thesis sketch is preparatory; full credit at the worksheet level requires only a clear position. The LEQ rubric (next page) is where the full essay is evaluated.