3-5 EDITION · CLASSROOM

1864

Abraham Lincoln vs George B. McClellan

A 35-minute lesson on the 1864 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Civil War	ELECTORAL VOTES 233 total
WINNER Abraham Lincoln (Republican) · 212 EV	RUNNER-UP George B. McClellan (Democratic) · 21 EV
KEY ISSUE Continuation of the Civil War; emancipation; terms of Southern reconstruction	TURNOUT 76.3%

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

1864: Abraham Lincoln vs George B. McClellan

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	When a country is at war, the president has to lead the war effort. Voters then have to decide whether the war is going well or badly. What might make voters keep a wartime president? What might make them want to replace him?
15 min	**Reading**	The 1864 election was the 20th U.S. presidential election. It was the first U.S. presidential election held during a major war (the country had been at war during 1812 and 1846-48, but the Civil War was on a vastly larger scale). The result determined whether the United States would continue the war to defeat the Confederacy and end slavery, or negotiate a peace that might preserve both Southern independence and slavery. The political situation was grim by summer 1864. The Civil War had begun in April 1861 after eleven Southern states seceded from the Union following Lincoln's 1860 election. The first three years of fighting had cost an estimated 400,000 Union and Confederate dead with no clear end in sight. Confederate General Robert E. Lee's May-June 1864 campaign against Union General Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign had produced 65,000 Union casualties without breaking Lee's army. Public opinion in the North turned against the war's open-ended cost. Lincoln himself doubted he could win re-election. On August 23, 1864, he wrote a "blind memorandum" - sealed and to be opened after the election - acknowledging he expected to lose: "This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration." The Republican Party - facing potential defeat - rebranded as the "National Union Party" for the 1864 cycle, attempting to attract War Democrats who supported the war but might not vote Republican. The June 1864 National Union Convention in Baltimore renominated Lincoln and replaced Vice President Hannibal Hamlin with Andrew Johnson, a War Democrat from Tennessee. The strategic logic: a Lincoln-Johnson ticket could attract War Democrats and Border State voters. The Democratic Party met in Chicago in August 1864. The party split between War Democrats (who supported continued war until victory) and Peace Democrats (Copperheads, who wanted immediate negotiated peace with the Confederacy). The party platform - drafted by Peace Democrats - declared the war "a failure"

and called for "immediate efforts ... for a cessation of hostilities." The nominee was General George B. McClellan, who had commanded the Union Army of the Potomac from 1861-62 until Lincoln fired him for being too cautious. McClellan was a War Democrat who repudiated the Peace plank of his own party's platform - producing an incoherent campaign. George H. Pendleton of Ohio was the Democratic vice presidential candidate (a Peace Democrat).

The political environment transformed in September 1864. On September 2, 1864, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman's forces captured Atlanta, Georgia. The capture transformed Northern public opinion: the war was no longer stalemated; the Union was winning. Admiral David Farragut's August victory at Mobile Bay had been the first sign; Atlanta confirmed the trend.

The 1864 election was the first U.S. presidential election in which soldiers could vote in the field. Nineteen states passed special laws allowing soldier voting. The soldier vote went heavily to Lincoln (78 percent of identified soldier ballots).

Lincoln won 212 electoral votes to McClellan's 21. McClellan carried only Delaware, Kentucky, and New Jersey. Lincoln won 55.0 percent of the popular vote. Three Southern states had been admitted to the Union as Reconstruction governments by November 1864 - Louisiana, Tennessee, and Arkansas - but their electoral votes were not counted because Congress refused to recognize the Reconstruction state governments.

Lincoln was inaugurated for his second term on March 4, 1865. His Second Inaugural Address - one of the most-quoted speeches in American history - emphasized reconciliation: "With malice toward none, with charity for all." Five weeks later, on April 9, 1865, Confederate General Robert E. Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House. Five days after Appomattox, on April 14, 1865, John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC. Andrew Johnson became the 17th president.

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 1864 Election

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Key words

Civil War	The 1861-1865 war between the United States and the Confederate States of America (eleven Southern states that had seceded). Around 620,000 soldiers died - more than in any other American war. The war ended slavery in the United States.
National Union Party	The 1864 name for the Republican Party, used to attract War Democrats and Border State voters. The June 1864 National Union Convention renominated Lincoln and replaced VP Hannibal Hamlin with Andrew Johnson (a War Democrat from Tennessee).
Copperheads	The Northern Peace Democrats who wanted immediate negotiated peace with the Confederacy. They dominated the 1864 Democratic platform. The nickname came from copper Liberty-head coins worn as identifying badges.
Atlanta Campaign	The May-September 1864 Union military campaign under General William Tecumseh Sherman to capture Atlanta, Georgia. Atlanta fell September 2, 1864. The victory transformed Lincoln's re-election prospects from likely defeat to likely victory.
Appomattox surrender	The April 9, 1865 surrender of Confederate General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia to Union General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia. The de facto end of the Civil War.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE
How many electoral votes did Lincoln win in 1864?

( ) A. 180
( ) B. 197
( ) C. 212
( ) D. 231

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER
What did Lincoln write in his "blind memorandum" of August 23, 1864?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER
How did the September 2, 1864 Union capture of Atlanta change the 1864 election?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER
Why was the 1864 election structurally unique compared to previous U.S. presidential elections?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

212. Lincoln 212; McClellan 21. McClellan carried only Delaware, Kentucky, and New Jersey. Lincoln won 55.0% of the popular vote.

Lincoln's 212 EV was the largest Civil War-era electoral total. The 1864 result demonstrated that the Union political system could survive even during the war.

QUESTION 2

Lincoln wrote: "This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration." He sealed the memorandum and asked his Cabinet to sign it without reading - committing in advance to cooperating with his successor (likely McClellan) to maximize Union efforts before March 4, 1865.

The blind memorandum is one of the most-quoted Lincoln documents. AP-level students should recognize it as a deliberate constitutional commitment to peaceful transition even during war.

QUESTION 3

On September 2, 1864, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman's forces captured Atlanta, Georgia. The capture transformed Northern public opinion: the war was no longer stalemated; the Union was winning. Combined with Admiral David Farragut's August victory at Mobile Bay and General Philip Sheridan's subsequent Shenandoah Valley campaign, the military successes of late summer and fall 1864 made the McClellan-Pendleton "war is a failure" platform unsustainable. Lincoln's political position transformed from likely defeat in August to landslide victory in November.

The Atlanta campaign is widely considered one of the most consequential military operations in U.S. political history.

QUESTION 4

Three structural uniqueness factors: (1) First U.S. presidential election held during a major war (Civil War). (2) First U.S. presidential election in which soldiers could vote in the field - 19 states passed special soldier-voting laws. (3) First election decided by the relationship between military operations and civilian voting (Atlanta campaign rescued Lincoln). (4) Three Confederate states - Louisiana, Tennessee, Arkansas - had Reconstruction governments by election day but their electoral votes were not counted. (5) Lincoln formally rebranded the Republican Party as the National Union Party for the cycle. The structural uniqueness reflects the war's political consequences.

AP students should be able to identify multiple structural features that distinguished 1864 from prior elections.