1864

Abraham Lincoln vs George B. McClellan

A 50-minute lesson on the 1864 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, background reading with primary source, 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%

CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (50 min)
3. Background: key terms + source
4. Worksheet (6 questions)
5. Answer key

1864: Abraham Lincoln vs George B. McClellan

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**	List two political conditions that would make a wartime president's re-election uncertain. For each, identify the specific 1861-1864 development most responsible.
15 min	**Reading + vocab**	The 1864 election was the 20th U.S. presidential election. It was the first U.S. presidential election held during a major war (the 1812 and 1846-48 wars were on a much smaller 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 election's structural significance was the demonstration that constitutional democracy could survive civil war. 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 at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna, and Cold Harbor without breaking Lee's army. Public opinion in the North turned against the war's open-ended cost. The Petersburg siege began in mid-June 1864 and would last until April 1865; in the summer of 1864 it looked like another bloody stalemate. Lincoln himself doubted he could win re-election. On August 23, 1864, he wrote what became known as the "blind memorandum": "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, as he will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards." He sealed the memo and asked his Cabinet to sign it without reading - committing in advance to cooperating with his successor to maximize Union war efforts before the March 4, 1865 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 on the first ballot and replaced Vice President Hannibal Hamlin (a Maine Republican) with Andrew Johnson, a War Democrat from Tennessee who had remained loyal to the Union after Tennessee seceded. The strategic logic: a Lincoln-Johnson ticket could attract War Democrats and Border State voters. The decision would prove politically catastrophic after Lincoln's assassination - Johnson's opposition to Reconstruction would lead to his 1868 impeachment.

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 led by Clement Vallandigham of Ohio - declared the war "a failure" and called for "immediate efforts ... for a cessation of hostilities, with a view to an ultimate convention of the States, or other peaceable means, to the end that, at the earliest practicable moment, peace may be restored on the basis of the Federal Union of the States." 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 publicly repudiated the Peace plank of his own party's platform - producing an incoherent campaign. George H. Pendleton of Ohio (a Peace Democrat) was the Democratic vice presidential candidate.

The political environment transformed dramatically in late summer and fall 1864. The August 5, 1864 victory of Admiral David Farragut at Mobile Bay closed the Confederacy's last major Gulf port. The September 2, 1864 capture of Atlanta, Georgia by Union General William Tecumseh Sherman opened the deep South to Union invasion. General Philip Sheridan's October 1864 Shenandoah Valley campaign destroyed the Confederacy's last major food-producing region. The combined military successes made the McClellan-Pendleton "war is a failure" platform unsustainable. Lincoln's political position transformed from likely defeat in August to likely landslide in November.

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. Some states (Connecticut, Delaware, Indiana, New Jersey, Oregon, Illinois) required soldiers to return home to vote; others (Pennsylvania, New York, Ohio, Wisconsin, etc.) allowed field voting. The soldier vote went heavily to Lincoln - 78 percent of identified soldier ballots, despite McClellan having been their former commander.

Lincoln won 212 electoral votes to McClellan's 21. McClellan carried only Delaware (3 EV), Kentucky (11 EV), and New Jersey (7 EV). Lincoln won 55.0 percent of the popular vote: 2,218,388 to 1,812,807. Three Confederate states had Reconstruction governments by November 1864 - Louisiana, Tennessee, and Arkansas - but Congress refused to count their electoral votes. The eleven seceded states did not vote.

		Lincoln was inaugurated for his second term on March 4, 1865. His Second Inaugural Address - 698 words, the second-shortest after Washington's 1793 - 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. Lincoln died the next morning. Andrew Johnson became the 17th president and immediately pursued a Reconstruction policy that conflicted sharply with the Radical Republican congressional majority. The conflict would produce Johnson's 1868 impeachment (he survived removal by one Senate vote).
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

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.

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.

Blind memorandum

Lincoln's August 23, 1864 sealed memo to his Cabinet acknowledging he expected to lose re-election and committing to cooperate with his successor to maximize Union war efforts before the March 4 inauguration. He asked the Cabinet to sign without reading. One of the most-quoted Lincoln documents.

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.

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 landslide 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.

Second Inaugural Address

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, MARCH 4, 1865

Lincoln took the oath at the East Portico of the U.S. Capitol on March 4, 1865, four months after the November 1864 landslide and five weeks before his assassination. The address was 698 words - the second-shortest in U.S. history after Washington's 1793 Second Inaugural. The closing passage on reconciliation is one of the most-quoted in American political rhetoric. The address combined theological reflection on the war as divine punishment for slavery with a practical call for postwar reconciliation.

> *"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations. Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.""*

Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC, March 4, 1865). Public domain.

The 1864 Election

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

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

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE
Which September 1864 Union victory transformed Lincoln's re-election prospects?

( ) A. Antietam
( ) B. Atlanta
( ) C. Mobile Bay
( ) D. Gettysburg

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER
What did Lincoln write in his August 23, 1864 "blind memorandum"?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER
How did the 1864 election demonstrate that constitutional democracy could survive civil war?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Lincoln says in his Second Inaugural "With malice toward none, with charity for all." Identify the political message and the postwar policy context he was addressing.

QUESTION 6 · MAP-READ

On the 1864 election map, identify the three states McClellan carried. What pattern do they share, and what does it tell you about Northern political geography during the war?

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.

QUESTION 2

Atlanta. Union General William Tecumseh Sherman captured Atlanta, Georgia on September 2, 1864. The capture transformed Northern public opinion: the war was no longer stalemated; the Union was winning. The Atlanta capture is widely considered one of the most consequential military operations in U.S. political history.

AP students should know the Atlanta-1864 election connection.

QUESTION 3

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, as he will have secured his election on such ground that he can not possibly save it afterwards." He sealed the memo and asked his Cabinet to sign it without reading - committing in advance to cooperating with his successor (likely McClellan) to maximize Union war efforts before the March 4 inauguration.

The blind memorandum is one of the most-quoted Lincoln documents.

QUESTION 4

The 1864 election was held during active civil war with eleven states in armed rebellion. Despite the wartime context, the Union government conducted a regular constitutional election: parties held conventions; candidates campaigned; voters cast ballots; results were counted; the loser conceded; the winner was inaugurated. Soldiers in the field were allowed to vote (the first U.S. election with field voting). Lincoln won a clear majority and was inaugurated peacefully. The election demonstrated that constitutional democracy could function under conditions that might have produced dictatorship or election cancellation in other systems. The structural lesson became part of American political identity: elections are held on schedule regardless of crisis. No subsequent U.S. president (even during World War II) has postponed a presidential election.

AP students should be able to identify the 1864 election as a structural test of constitutional democracy under war conditions.

QUESTION 5

Lincoln was signaling that the postwar Reconstruction policy would emphasize national reconciliation rather than punitive measures against the South. The political message was directed at three audiences: (1) Northern Republicans (some of whom wanted harsher Reconstruction); (2) Southern Confederates (who needed to believe surrender would not produce mass punishment); (3) the international community (which had been watching the war's outcome and needed reassurance that postwar America would be stable). The policy context: Reconstruction was the central political question of 1865-77. Lincoln's framing - "malice toward none, charity for all" - became the rhetorical baseline for moderate Reconstruction. His April 14, 1865 assassination cut short whatever specific Reconstruction policy he would have pursued.

AP students should be able to identify the inaugural's political function in the postwar context.

QUESTION 6

Delaware (3 EV), Kentucky (11 EV), New Jersey (7 EV). Pattern: two Border States (Delaware, Kentucky) and one Northern state (New Jersey). Border States were politically distinct from both the Confederacy and the Union: they had remained in the Union but had significant proslavery populations and were therefore most likely to support a Peace Democrat. New Jersey was the only fully Northern state to vote against Lincoln - reflecting the strength of New York City-area Copperhead politics that spilled into northern New Jersey. The pattern tells you that Northern wartime politics was not uniform: cities with large Catholic immigrant populations and commercial ties to the South tended to support Peace Democrats.

AP students should be able to read the 1864 map as evidence of wartime political variation within the North.