1864

Abraham Lincoln vs George B. McClellan

A 75-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 + overview
2. Lesson plan (instructor, 75 min)
3. Background: key terms + primary source
4. Student worksheet (7 questions)
5. Answer key + discussion prompts

1864: Abraham Lincoln vs George B. McClellan

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 1864 map at theamericanvote.com/elections/-1864 projected, or printed as a handout.

Timing

5 min	**Warm-up**	Identify two structural conditions in U.S. politics by 1864 that would make Lincoln's re-election structurally 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 and the first election in U.S. history to feature voting by deployed soldiers in the field. 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 - a precedent that has governed every subsequent wartime election in U.S. history. 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. 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 (May 5-7), Spotsylvania (May 8-21), North Anna (May 23-26), and Cold Harbor (May 31-June 12) without breaking Lee's army. The Petersburg siege began June 15, 1864 and would last 292 days. Public opinion in the North turned against the war's open-ended cost. The July 30, 1864 Battle of the Crater (a Union assault on Petersburg that failed catastrophically with 5,300 Union casualties) deepened the despondency. Lincoln himself doubted he could win re-election. On August 23, 1864, he wrote 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 memorandum is one of the most-quoted Lincoln documents and one of the founding examples of constitutional commitment to peaceful transition.

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 7-8, 1864 National Union Convention in Baltimore renominated Lincoln on the first ballot (with one dissenting vote from Missouri) 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 (he survived removal by one Senate vote).

The Democratic Party met in Chicago on August 29-31, 1864. The party split between War Democrats (who supported continued war until victory) and Peace Democrats (Copperheads, led by Clement Vallandigham of Ohio, who wanted immediate negotiated peace with the Confederacy). The party platform - drafted by Vallandigham - 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 in his September 8 acceptance letter - 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 ("Damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead!") 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 (including the October 19, 1864 Battle of Cedar Creek) 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 in U.S. history after Washington's 1793 Second Inaugural - 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 (Good Friday), John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC. Lincoln died the next morning at 7:22 a.m. 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. 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 1864 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

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. The most prominent Copperhead was Clement Vallandigham of Ohio.

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. He asked the Cabinet to sign without reading.

Lincoln assassination

The April 14, 1865 (Good Friday) shooting of President Lincoln by John Wilkes Booth at Ford's Theatre in Washington, DC. Lincoln died the next morning. Andrew Johnson became the 17th president. Booth was killed by federal forces twelve days later in Virginia.

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).

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 (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 Lincoln win in 1864?

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

QUESTION 2 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which Confederate general surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865?

( ) A. Stonewall Jackson
( ) B. James Longstreet
( ) C. Robert E. Lee
( ) D. Joseph E. Johnston

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

What did Lincoln write in his August 23, 1864 "blind memorandum," and what does it tell you about his commitment to constitutional democracy under war conditions?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

How did the 1864 Democratic platform's "war is a failure" plank backfire politically after September 2, 1864?

QUESTION 5 · SHORT-ANSWER

Lincoln says in his Second Inaugural that the war may continue "until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword." Explain the theological argument Lincoln was making about the relationship between slavery and the war.

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

QUESTION 6 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did the Republican Party rebrand as the "National Union Party" for the 1864 cycle, and how did the Andrew Johnson VP selection prove politically catastrophic after Lincoln's assassination?

QUESTION 7 · MAP-READ

On the 1864 election map, identify the three states McClellan carried. What does the pattern tell you about Northern wartime political geography?

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

Robert E. Lee. The April 9, 1865 surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia to Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia. The de facto end of the Civil War.

AP students should know the Appomattox surrender as the structural endpoint of the Civil War's major military operations.

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. The memorandum tells you that Lincoln treated democratic election outcomes as binding even when the outcome would likely produce policies he considered politically and militarily disastrous. The commitment to peaceful transition between hostile administrations during active civil war is one of the founding examples of American constitutional democracy under stress. No subsequent U.S. president has faced equivalent conditions.

AP students should be able to identify the structural commitment to constitutional democracy.

QUESTION 4

The August 1864 Democratic platform declared the war "a failure" and called for "immediate efforts ... for a cessation of hostilities." The platform was drafted by Peace Democrats led by Clement Vallandigham and was politically reasonable when written in late August 1864, given the Petersburg stalemate and Grant's Overland Campaign casualties. But Atlanta fell on September 2 - 4 days before McClellan accepted the nomination. Once Atlanta fell, the "war is a failure" framing was clearly false. McClellan publicly repudiated the Peace plank on September 8, but the damage was done: voters could see that the Democratic Party platform did not align with the candidate's position, and the "war is a failure" framing was now politically catastrophic. The platform's timing - too late to influence convention, too early to anticipate Atlanta - became one of the most-cited political miscalculations of the 19th century.

AP students should be able to articulate how a political platform can be made obsolete by intervening military events.

QUESTION 5

Lincoln was making a theological argument that the war's extraordinary duration and cost were divine punishment for the 250 years of American slavery. The "every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword" framing positioned the war's violence as proportionate retribution for slavery's violence. The theological argument served several political functions: (1) it located moral responsibility for the war's cost in slavery itself rather than in either side's war policy; (2) it justified continued prosecution of the war as God's will rather than as political choice; (3) it offered a unifying framework that could accommodate both Northern victory and Southern suffering as part of a single divine plan. The argument is one of the most-quoted theological-political statements in American history.

AP students should be able to identify the theological argument and its political functions.

QUESTION 6

The Republican Party rebranded as the "National Union Party" for the 1864 cycle to attract War Democrats and Border State voters who supported the war but might not vote Republican. The June 1864 National Union Convention replaced VP Hannibal Hamlin (a Maine Republican) with Andrew Johnson, a War Democrat from Tennessee who had remained loyal to the Union after Tennessee seceded. The decision was strategic: Johnson could attract War Democrats and Border State voters. The decision proved catastrophic after Lincoln's April 1865 assassination because Johnson - despite being a Unionist - was a white-supremacist Democrat fundamentally opposed to Black civil rights. His vetoes of Reconstruction legislation, his lenient pardon policy for Confederate leaders, and his 1866 fight with Congress over the 14th Amendment produced his 1868 impeachment. Johnson's vice presidential selection - made for short-term campaign reasons during an emergency - shaped Reconstruction policy in ways the 1864 strategic calculation had not anticipated.

AP students should be able to identify the strategic-vs-structural tradeoff in vice presidential selections.

QUESTION 7

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. The eleven Confederate states did not vote in 1864; three Confederate states with Reconstruction governments (Louisiana, Tennessee, Arkansas) had their electoral votes rejected by Congress.

AP students should be able to read the 1864 map analytically.

Discussion prompts

1. Lincoln's "blind memorandum" of August 23, 1864 committed him to cooperating with his successor (likely McClellan) to maximize Union war efforts. Identify two structural reasons a wartime president would make such a commitment, and explain whether the memorandum reflects a Whig theory of executive restraint or a Lincoln-specific theory of constitutional commitment.

2. The 1864 election was the first U.S. presidential election in which soldiers could vote in the field. Identify two reasons soldier voting was politically consequential, and explain how the practice has evolved across subsequent U.S. wars.