

1860

Abraham Lincoln vs John C. Breckinridge

A 35-minute lesson on the 1860 U.S. presidential election. Includes lesson plan, student worksheet, answer key, and discussion prompts.

ERA Civil War	CYCLE 1860 of 303 total EV
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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1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (35 min)
3. Reading + key words
4. Worksheet (4 questions)
5. Answer key

1860: Abraham Lincoln vs John C. Breckinridge

Timing

5 min	Warm-up	Before reading: think of two big issues that might split a country into two groups. Which one do you think would be hardest to solve peacefully?
15 min	Reading	<p>The 1860 election was one of the most important moments in U.S. history. The country was split into two halves: the North and the South. They disagreed about slavery — the practice of forcing people to work for no pay and treating them as property.</p> <p>In the South, slavery was a big part of how farms made money. About four million enslaved African Americans lived in Southern states. Many Southern leaders wanted slavery to spread to new western states. They believed enslaving people was their right.</p> <p>In the North, slavery had mostly ended. Many Northern people thought slavery was wrong and should not spread. A new political party, the Republicans, agreed. The Republicans did not promise to end slavery in the South, but they did promise that no new state would allow slavery.</p> <p>The Republicans picked Abraham Lincoln, a lawyer from Illinois, as their candidate. Lincoln did not own enslaved people. He believed slavery was wrong, but he said he would protect it where it already existed if doing so could prevent a war.</p> <p>Four men ran for president in 1860. The Democratic Party split into two parts — one Northern, one Southern. A fourth candidate, John Bell, tried to be a peace candidate. Lincoln won the most electoral votes, even though his name was not on the ballot in most Southern states.</p> <p>When Lincoln won, many Southern states were furious. They believed Lincoln and the Republicans were going to destroy their way of life. Just six weeks after the election, South Carolina decided it would no longer be part of the United States. Ten more Southern states followed. A few weeks after Lincoln became president, the Civil War began. The war lasted four years. By 1865 more than 700,000 Americans had died, but slavery had ended.</p>
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 1860 Election

The 1860 election was one of the most important moments in U.S. history. The country was split into two halves: the North and the South. They disagreed about slavery — the practice of forcing people to work for no pay and treating them as property.

In the South, slavery was a big part of how farms made money. About four million enslaved African Americans lived in Southern states. Many Southern leaders wanted slavery to spread to new western states. They believed enslaving people was their right.

In the North, slavery had mostly ended. Many Northern people thought slavery was wrong and should not spread. A new political party, the Republicans, agreed. The Republicans did not promise to end slavery in the South, but they did promise that no new state would allow slavery.

The Republicans picked Abraham Lincoln, a lawyer from Illinois, as their candidate. Lincoln did not own enslaved people. He believed slavery was wrong, but he said he would protect it where it already existed if doing so could prevent a war.

Four men ran for president in 1860. The Democratic Party split into two parts — one Northern, one Southern. A fourth candidate, John Bell, tried to be a peace candidate. Lincoln won the most electoral votes, even though his name was not on the ballot in most Southern states.

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began. The war lasted four years. By 1865 more than 700,000 Americans had died, but slavery had ended.

Key words

Election	When adults vote to choose who will lead a country, a state, or a city. The U.S. picks a new president every four years.
Slavery	Forcing people to work for no pay and treating them as property. About four million enslaved people lived in the South in 1860.
Republican Party	A new political party founded in 1854 that wanted to stop slavery from spreading to new western states.
Secession	When a state formally leaves a country it had been part of. South Carolina seceded six weeks after the 1860 election.
Civil War	A war between people who live in the same country. The U.S. Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865 and ended slavery in America.

Four questions

QUESTION 1 · MULTIPLE-CHOICE

Which word below means “when a state formally leaves a country”?

- A. Election
- B. Secession
- C. Republican
- D. Civil War

QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER

Why did many Southern states not want Abraham Lincoln to be president?

QUESTION 3 · SHORT-ANSWER

How was the Democratic Party in 1860 different from the Democratic Party today?

QUESTION 4 · SHORT-ANSWER

What was the biggest result of the Civil War for enslaved people in the United States?

Answer key

QUESTION 1

Secession.

The vocab list defines this term explicitly. The other three options name an event, a political party, and a war.

QUESTION 2

Lincoln and the Republicans wanted to stop slavery from spreading to new western states. Many Southern leaders believed this was the first step toward ending slavery everywhere, which would destroy the way their farms made money and how their society was organized.

Lincoln himself did not promise to abolish slavery where it already existed, but Southern leaders did not trust that distinction. They treated the no-expansion promise as a slow-motion abolition policy.

QUESTION 3

In 1860 the Democratic Party split into two parts. Northern Democrats supported Stephen Douglas. Southern Democrats walked out and supported John Breckinridge. The split was about slavery in the new western territories. Today the Democratic Party is one party.

The Charleston convention in April 1860 broke up over slavery in the territories. The two Democratic factions never reunified that cycle, which made Lincoln's election almost certain.

QUESTION 4

About four million enslaved people were freed by the end of the Civil War. The Thirteenth Amendment, added to the Constitution in 1865, made slavery illegal everywhere in the United States.

Emancipation was incremental: the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 freed enslaved people in Confederate-held areas; the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865 made slavery illegal everywhere.