

# 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.

<p><b>ERA</b> Civil War</p>	<p><b>CYCLE</b> 1860 of 303 total EV</p>
<p><b>WINNER</b> Abraham Lincoln (Republican) · 180 EV</p>	<p><b>RUNNER-UP</b> John C. Breckinridge (Southern Democratic) · 72 EV</p>
<p><b>KEY ISSUE</b> Slavery in the territories; Southern secession threats; preservation of the Union</p>	<p><b>TURNOUT</b> 81.8%</p>

### CONTENTS

1. Cover
2. Lesson plan (105 min) + framework alignment
3. Background: vocabulary + primary source A
4. Primary source B (DBQ pair)
5. Worksheet (8 questions)
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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

<b>5 min</b>	<b>Warm-up</b>	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.
<b>15 min</b>	<b>Reading + vocab</b>	<p>The 1860 election did not merely change who occupied the White House; it broke a thirty-year political settlement that had managed slavery through congressional compromise. The Missouri Compromise (1820), the Compromise of 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) had each been attempts to draw geographic lines around slavery's expansion. By 1860 none held. 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 and forfeiting any plausible national majority.</p> <p>Lincoln won the presidency with 180 electoral votes — well above the threshold — but with only 39.65 percent of the popular vote in a four-way race. He carried every Northern state. He received no votes in ten Southern states, where the Republican Party had no organization and where local officials in many cases refused to print Republican 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.</p> <p>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 six weeks after his inauguration. Historians describe 1860 as a critical realignment: the moment a national political system fragmented along the issue it had been built to manage.</p>
<b>20 min</b>	<b>Source A</b>	Read aloud once; students annotate individually for tone, evidence, and audience.
<b>20 min</b>	<b>Source B</b>	Compare/contrast against Source A. Pair-share on the DBQ comparison question.
<b>20 min</b>	<b>Worksheet</b>	Eight questions: 5 short-answer, 2 stimulus-based MCQ, 1 long-essay framing.

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**20 min**      **LEQ planning**      Students sketch a thesis + outline for the LEQ comparison prompt. Submit for next-day full essay.

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**5 min**      **Closure**      Exit ticket: one sentence summarizing the comparison.

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# 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

A presidential election that produces a durable shift in partisan coalitions, lasting one or more generations. 1860 is the textbook example: it built the Republican coalition that would dominate the next forty years.

### Kansas-Nebraska Act

The 1854 law repealing the Missouri Compromise by letting Kansas and Nebraska residents decide whether to allow slavery. Triggered the formation of the Republican Party that summer.

### Free Soil

The policy that slavery should not expand into new territories, even if it remained where already established. The Republican Party absorbed the Free Soil movement in 1854.

### Fugitive Slave Clause

Article IV Section 2 of the U.S. Constitution, requiring states to return escaped enslaved people. Enforced by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, deeply unpopular in the North and central to the SC secession grievance.

### Wilmot Proviso

The 1846 congressional proposal to ban slavery in any territory acquired from Mexico. Never became law but defined the political fault line for the next fifteen years.

### 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 every major national issue (tariffs, banking, internal improvements, currency) had been recoded as a North-vs-South question.

## 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. The closing passage is widely cited as Lincoln's most successful rhetorical writing.*

*"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.

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**QUESTION 2 · SHORT-ANSWER**

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

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**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.

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**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?

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**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.

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**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

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**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 (logic-based persuasion)
- B. Pathos (emotion-based persuasion)
- C. Ethos (character-based persuasion)
- D. Kairos (timing-based persuasion)

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**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?

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## 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 is notable for naming slavery openly as the cause, contradicting later Lost Cause historiography that emphasized states rights in the abstract.

## QUESTION 3

Source A: Lincoln treats the Constitution as creating a perpetual Union, citing the Preamble and arguing earlier in the address that the Union is older than the states. Source B: SC treats the Constitution as a compact among states, each retaining a right to withdraw when the compact is broken. The Fugitive Slave Clause (Art. IV Sec. 2) is the specific clause SC names; Lincoln implicitly leans on Article VI (Supremacy Clause) and the Preamble.

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 the constitutional-consensus interpretation: the conflict was fundamentally about how to apply a shared founding document, and reconciliation was rhetorically possible. Source B supports the irrepressible-conflict interpretation (William Seward, 1858): the issue was slavery itself, and constitutional framing was a wrapper around an inherent collision of two incompatible social systems. A strong response will also note that SC's explicit naming of slavery undermines the Lost Cause states-rights reading common in later historiography.

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

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**QUESTION 6**

Compact theory.

The SC declaration explicitly grounds the legal right to secede in the theory that the Union is a compact among states. This was the dominant Southern constitutional theory in 1860 and remains the basis of states-rights historiography about the war.

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**QUESTION 7**

Pathos.

Pathos is emotion-based persuasion. Lincoln's appeal to memory, battlefields, and affection is emotional rather than logical (logos), character-based (ethos), or timing-based (kairos).

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**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.

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