

The Election of 1864

Primary Source Set

Teacher's Guide

The guide assists teachers in developing students' understanding of primary sources and skills in formulating their own thoughts using these sources.

Concepts Covered

Primary sources can be letters, diaries, newspapers, documents, maps, photographs, charts, oral histories, cartoons, 3-D objects, and more. Examining these sources grants students a wide range of skills from conducting research to understanding and fact-checking complex texts.

Primary source exploration can cover an array of Common Core State Standards including:

- Evaluating varied points of view
- Analyzing how specific word choices shape meaning
- Assessing the credibility of sources
- Conducting research projects based on focused questions
- Gathering evidence from literary and informational texts to support a claim

Language Arts Common Core Standards:

- Building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction
- Reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from the text, both literary and informational
- Regular practice with complex text and its academic language

The National Council for the Social Studies C3 Framework for Social Studies State Standards:

- Understanding historical perspectives and how those perspectives shaped historical themes and events
- Identifying, summarizing, comparing, and analyzing historical sources
- Finding helpful sources that can support an overarching argument
- Gathering and evaluating multiple sources to build context

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The Election of 1864 Background

By the fall of 1864, the United States had been entangled in the Civil War for three and a half years.

The 1864 presidential election became a referendum on whether to continue the war and was crucial to the future of the United States. It pitted Union Major General George B. McClellan against incumbent President Abraham Lincoln.

The 1864 Democratic National Convention nominated George H. Pendleton as McClellan's running mate. Pendleton, an Ohio Congressman, was an outspoken leader of the Copperheads, a group of Democrats who favored peace rather than war with the Confederacy.

The 1864 National Union Party Convention replaced Lincoln's first Vice-President Hannibal Hamlin with Andrew Johnson. Johnson, former senator, and Tennessee Governor, was a known "War Democrat," or Democrat who favored continuing the war until unconditional Confederate surrender.

The Democratic Party ran on a "peace platform" under McClellan, insisting that the war must come to an end. They demanded a resolution to the conflict without further bloodshed and did not support the emancipation of slaves.

In order to attract War Democrats (or Democrats that wanted the war to end by means of Confederate surrender), the Republican Party rebranded itself as The National Union Party. They held that it was the federal government's duty to preserve the Union by putting down the Southern rebellion.

The National Union Party called for the South's "unconditional surrender" as the only way to end the war. The Party's platform also called for the abolition of slavery. Due to the horrendous nature of the war, morale in the North was low and so was support for Lincoln. Many people, including Lincoln, thought that he would lose the election, but General William T. Sherman's capture of Atlanta in September turned the tide of the war and bolstered support for the it in the North.

After months of harsh criticism and bitter campaigning, Lincoln won the election on November 8, 1864, and was reelected by a landslide majority.

Meet the Candidates

The election of 1864 brought the nomination of General George B. McClellan and pitted him against the incumbent President Abraham Lincoln.

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Abraham Lincoln

The National Union Party candidate ran incumbent President Abraham Lincoln. Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) was born in a one-room log cabin in Hodgenville, Kentucky. His father moved the family to Spencer County, Indiana, in 1816. In 1830 the family once again moved, this time to Illinois. Before becoming a legislator in 1834, Lincoln worked numerous jobs: flatboatman, store clerk, surveyor, and postmaster. He also served as a captain of the 31st Regiment of Sangamon County, Illinois, during the Black Hawk War of 1832.

During his first term in the Illinois House of Representatives, a colleague encouraged Lincoln to take up the law as a career; Lincoln did and became an entirely self-taught lawyer. In Springfield, Illinois, he practiced law and launched his political career. Lincoln served a short stint in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1847 to 1849.

Lincoln's first election to the presidency in 1860 brought with it the beginning of the Civil War. Lincoln took his role as Commander-in-Chief very seriously, focusing on learning military tactics by reading. He would often write to generals and visit battlefields to check on the conditions and war effort. Lincoln would often move, promote, or demote soldiers based on their strengths and weaknesses. On January 1, 1863, he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which turned the war into one to end slavery as well as to restore the Union. As the election of 1864 approached, Lincoln believed that his reelection would not be an easy feat. The President wrote to many prominent figures asking for assistance in his campaign and looked forward to a Union victory and reconstruction of the country after the war.

George McClellan

The Democratic Party nominated Major General George B. McClellan. McClellan (1826-1885) was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to Dr. George and Elizabeth McClellan. His family was a part of the upper-class society in Philadelphia. George McClellan entered a private school at the age of 5 and continued into a prep school and finally entered the West Point Military Academy in 1842.

After his graduation, McClellan was appointed as brevet 2nd lieutenant in the Engineer Corps. During the Mexican-American War, he was promoted to brevet 1st lieutenant and then captain. While serving under General Winfield Scott, McClellan helped construct roads and bridges for the army. After the war, he served as an instructor at West Point, and later was a military observer in the

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Crimean War. He resigned from the military in 1857 and took up a position with the Illinois Central Railroad.

When the Civil War began McClellan was living in Ohio and was appointed Major General of Ohio Volunteers. At the urging of Ohio Governor William Dennison, President Lincoln appointed McClellan as a Major General in the regular army, making him the second-highest-ranking individual, after General Winfield Scott. Throughout 1861 McClellan showed his military resolve and was promoted to General of the Army of the Potomac. He then rose to become General-in-Chief of all Federal armies after the retirement of General Scott. Following the Battle of Antietam (which had no clear victor), Lincoln fired McClellan for not pursuing Confederate General Robert E. Lee's retreating army.

Party Platforms

National Union Party

In order to emphasize the goal of the war and attract the votes of War Democrats who refused to support a Republican candidate, the Republican Party renamed itself the National Union Party for the election of 1864. Their platform focused on preserving the Union. The Party believed that it was the duty of the United States government to end the rebellion in the South and reunite the country. It called for the South's "unconditional surrender" as the only means of ending the war. The Party's platform also demanded the abolition of slavery throughout the entire country.

National Democratic Party

The Democratic Party ran on a "peace platform." The war had raged for nearly four years, and the Party asserted that war had raged for so long without a clear victory and that hostilities between the North and South must end. While it did not condone the rebellion, the Party demanded a resolution of the conflict without further bloodshed or requirement of Confederate surrender. They opposed freeing slaves and emancipation as a war aim.

Election Day

The eleven rebelling states did not participate in the election of 1864, which meant that only the twenty-five loyal states participated. On the day of the election, Lincoln believed that his reelection was not likely, while McClellan was so sure of his victory that he resigned from his military duty. When all the votes

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were tallied, Abraham Lincoln won by a landslide, defeating McClellan by over 500,000 popular votes and 191 electoral votes. Prior to the tally, Lincoln was worried that Union soldiers would not vote for him since many believed that his first election to the presidency was the cause of the war. Lincoln was mistaken--an estimated 78 percent of Union troops voted for his reelection.

Primary Sources

Click the link or enter the item number in the search bar on lincolncollection.org, then click the "Volume" link to access the item on Internet Archive.

- **Books and Pamphlets**
 - *The Life, Campaigns, and Public Service of General McClellan* [71.2009.084.06483](#)
 - "Campaign Songs" [71.2009.084.00024](#)
 - "Lincoln Campaign Songster" [71.2009.084.00023](#)
 - *The Life of Abraham Lincoln* [71.2009.084.03802](#)
- **Photographs**
 - Abraham Lincoln [LFA-0034](#)
 - Abraham Lincoln, A. Johnson [LN-2701](#)
 - Andrew Johnson [LFA-0282](#)
 - George B. McClellan [OC-1553](#)
 - Gen. McClellan, Geo. H. Pendleton [LN-2702](#)
 - George H. Pendleton [LN-2216](#)
- **Newspapers**
 - [Father Abraham](#)
 - [The World](#)
- **Manuscripts, Speeches, & Documents**
 - Letter from A. Lincoln to Gen. Sherman [71.2009.083.00100](#)
 - Letter from Solomon M. Barnes to Elizabeth Barnes [71.2009.083.1009](#)
 - McClellan and Pendleton Ticket [71.2009.085.00012](#)
 - National Union Ticket [71.2009.085.00008](#)
 - Regiment Election Tally [71.2009.083.00870](#)
 - Letter from Jacob O. Wilson to Samuel Thomas [71.2015.101.0006](#)
- **3-D Objects**
 - Abraham Lincoln Campaign Token [71.2009.082.0282](#)
 - George B. McClellan Token [71.2009.082.0374](#)
 - Abraham Lincoln 1864 Campaign Button [71.2009.082.0269](#)
 - George B. McClellan button [71.2009.082.0255](#)
 - Abraham Lincoln Campaign Ribbon [71.2009.082.0186](#)
- **Political Cartoons**
 - *The True Issue or "That's What's the Matter"* [71.2009.081.0242](#)
 - *The Old Bull Dog on the Right Track* [71.2009.081.0054](#)
 - *The Political "Siamese" Twins* [71.2009.081.0134](#)
 - *The Commander-in-Chief Conciliating the Soldier's Votes on the Battle Field* [71.2009.081.0241](#)
 - *Little Mac, in his Great Two Horse Act, in the Presidential Canvass of 1864* [71.2009.081.0246](#)

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Further Reading

Children's Resources

George McClellan: Union General by Brent P. Kelly

If You Were a Kid During the Civil War by Wil Mara

Abraham Lincoln by Caroline Gilpin

The Civil War Visual Encyclopedia by Philip Parker

Adult Resources

Reelecting Lincoln: The Battle for the 1864 Presidency by John C. Waugh

Lincoln & the Party Divided by William Frank Zornow

George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon by Stephen W. Sears

Decided on the Battlefield: Grant, Sherman, Lincoln, and the Election of 1864 by David Johnson