Road to Disunion

What political parties were involved in the presidential election of 1860, and who were their candidates?

- The Democrats' nominating convention broke up because they couldn't decide on a candidate. After meeting twice more, a majority of the convention delegates nominated Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois. However, the southern Democrats did not agree with this choice and broke away.

- The southern Democrats then nominated their own candidate, John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky, who supported extending slavery into new territories.

- The Republicans nominated Abraham Lincoln.

- Fearing that the South might leave the Union if an antislavery Republican won the election, some moderate pro-slavery, pro-Union southerners formed the Constitutional Union Party. Its platform and nominee John Bell of Tennessee favored maintaining the Union and the Constitution.

Who won the presidential election in 1860, and why?

The election was like two separate races, with Lincoln running against Douglas in the North and Breckinridge running against Bell in the South. With four candidates running, no one could hope to get a majority of the popular vote. It was possible, however, to gain a majority of the electoral votes. The election results were as follows:

- Lincoln narrowly won every free state except New Jersey, taking 180 electoral votes to Douglas's 12. Because there were only 303 electoral votes in the nation as a whole, Lincoln won the presidency. However, he won only 39 percent of the popular vote, and all of that was in the northern states. Lincoln not only didn't win any southern states, he wasn't even on the ballot in most of them. A state's population determines how many electoral votes it gets. Because the northern states had the majority of the population, they had the majority of electoral votes.

- In the less populated slave states, Breckinridge and Bell divided the vote. Breckinridge won 72 electoral votes and took all the states of the Lower South and some in the Upper South. Bell carried the border states of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia, winning 39 electoral votes. Neither candidate had enough electoral votes to pose a serious challenge to Lincoln.

How did the people of the South react to Lincoln's winning the election?

Although southerners recognized that Lincoln had been legally elected, they questioned the fairness of a system that allowed him to govern regions that had not chosen him. Southerners
began discussing how having an antislavery president would affect slavery, and they struggled with dual loyalties to the South and to the Union. Near the end of 1860 the legislature of South Carolina voted in a special convention to secede, or withdraw, from the Union. For more information, see the South Carolina’s Declaration Source Reading on the CD-ROM.

**How did southerners justify secession?**

- Southerners justified the legality of secession by pointing out the idea of states’ sovereignty. The original thirteen states had existed separately before they joined together to form the United States. The states then drafted and approved the U.S. Constitution. Because the states had once been independent, southerners argued, each state had the right to withdraw its allegiance to the Constitution if its citizens voted to do so.

- Many southerners wanted to leave the Union because of their loyalty to the South and to the system of slavery. They feared that their social and economic well-being would be threatened under Lincoln, who disapproved of slavery. In addition, their loyalty to the Union had been weakened by years being criticized in the national debate over slavery.

**What did northerners think about secession?**

Many northerners saw secession as a challenge to the basic principles of the Constitution. They argued that the Constitution bound all the states together by mutual consent, meaning the states had voluntarily recognized the Constitution as the supreme law of the land. The states had also agreed to accept not only federalism—the sharing of power by the national and state governments—but also the national government’s power to perform certain functions. The South’s proposal to reject the Constitution in favor of state sovereignty angered northerners.

1. Why did the Democratic Party select two candidates in the 1860 presidential election?

2. Why did southerners object to the fact that Lincoln had won the election?

3. What state was the first state to leave the Union?

4. Why did southerners believe they had the right to leave the Union?

5. Why did northerners think that the South had no right to secede?