The Election of 1860: “A Campaign Fraught with Consequences”

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To call the Presidential Election of 1860 a ‘campaign fraught with consequences of the most momentous import’ as New York Republicans did at their state convention in April 1860, is to make a rhetorical molehill out of a mountain. The immediate result of Abraham Lincoln’s election to the Presidency that year was the secession of seven Deep South states followed by a Civil War that produced more than 750,000 deaths and the destruction of chattel slavery. And yet, this ‘momentous’ election is still shrouded in the fog of hindsight. Historians often treat the campaign’s inner details, rhetorical flourishes, issue matrices and electioneering strategies as mere precursors to the secession crisis and war that followed.

Four candidates contested the Presidential election of 1860, each representing a distinct political party (or party faction), platform, and organization. Though the victorious Republican Party of Abraham Lincoln garnered under 40 per cent of the national popular vote, it secured a majority in the Electoral College based on the votes of the free states alone. The Democratic Party split between two wings – Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois and Vice President John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky – nominally because of unbridgeable divisions over a Congressional slave code but really a culmination of Southern distrust of Stephen Douglas and his tepid commitment to prioritize the protection of slavery. Breckinridge won most slave states, except Missouri, which cast its votes for Douglas, and Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee, which went for the fourth candidate, John Bell. The Constitutional Union party of John Bell portrayed itself as the only truly national party in 1860, though it was fueled mostly by old Whigs from the Upper South and residual supporters of the anti-immigrant American or Know Nothing Party.

No historian is more qualified to approach the election of 1860 as a political event unto itself than Michael F. Holt. For decades Holt has served as the dean of the school of New Political History of antebellum America. While other 19th-century historians have emphasized political culture and social change, Holt has remained focused on political leaders, election results, roll call votes, and party allegiances for the decades surrounding the American Civil War. He is especially well-regarded for his work on the collapse of the Second Party System in the early 1850s. His mastery of both state and national politics was plenty evident in his 1999 tome on the American Whig Party, but all of his works on local, state and national antebellum politics have been considered essential reading.

Holt is a first-rate dialectician. He takes delight in identifying the tensions, rivalries and relationships of power that impel American politics through institutional changes barely comprehended by the participants themselves. As pols wrestled over the spoils of office or the minutiae of campaign platforms, they set in motion a political system that seemed to take on a life of its own. Holt brings this approach to his study of the 1860 election, a four-way contest whose result seemed both foreordained and contingent upon myriad twists and turns. But Holt is also motivated to respond to a newer ideological turn in the literature. In particular, Holt was influenced to write *The Election of 1860* as a reaction to James Oakes's *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1862-1865* (1), a book Holt finds 'profoundly wrongheaded about the intentions of most Republican voters in 1860' (p. 233). It is not that Holt denies the anti-slavery proclivities of Republican voters in 1860. Rather, it is the supposed determinism and singularity of Republican Party policy and ideology inscribed by the intentions of Republican voters that Holt finds so objectionable. And Holt is right to challenge Oakes on this score.

Holt makes three broad conclusions about the 1860 election. First, Republican voters were motivated, above all, by a desire to oust the Democratic Party of James Buchanan, an Administration rife with corruption and pro-Southern 'doughface-ism'. Second, the Breckinridge wing of the Democratic Party was most insistent upon discussing slavery, and was deeply motivated by a desire to stop Stephen Douglas at all costs. Third, the Douglas Democrats and the Constitutional Unionists of John Bell engaged in a national – not sectional – struggle that emphasized the threat of disunion in the event of a Republican victory.

The first chapter addressing Republican Party politics in the 1850s draws from Holt's earlier work on party building in Pittsburgh and on national and state party activity surrounding the Bleeding Kansas controversies. As contemporaries understood quite well, the Republican Party needed to build off its 1856 showing by taking Pennsylvania and then either Illinois or Indiana to win an Electoral College majority. The electoral math was clear. With 303 Electoral votes up for grabs in 1860, the winner needed to win 152. In 1856, the Republican nominee John C. Fremont won 114 electoral votes out of 296 possible votes; the seven electoral votes states from Oregon and Minnesota would first be contested in 1860. Alas, the Republicans needed to secure 38 more electoral votes, and 27 of them could be obtained in Pennsylvania alone. Either Illinois (11 EVs) or Indiana (13 EVs) could then put the Republican over the top. Party nomination strategy proceeded accordingly. Those electoral votes in Pennsylvania and either Illinois or Indiana could be secured either by luring Democrats to the Republicans, picking up Millard Fillmore's 1856 anti-immigrant American Party votes, or by enticing new voters to enter the fold. The victor, Abraham Lincoln, would accomplish all three objectives.

The front-runner for the Republican nomination was the New Yorker, William Seward, known nationally for two famous anti-slavery orations known as the 'Irrepressible conflict' and 'Higher law' speeches. Those statements rendered Seward a lightning rod for criticism, convincing many Southerners that the party platform's commitment to stop the extension of slavery – but to leave slavery alone in the states – was likely a ruse for more radical plans to destroy slavery throughout the United States. But Holt stresses that Republicans rejected Seward at their Chicago convention not because of Seward's supposed anti-slavery extremism. Instead, it was immigration that prevented Seward's nomination. Seward had long expressed support and sympathy for immigrants, both for substantive and political reasons. In the key state of Pennsylvania, however, the Know Nothing Fillmore had won 18 per cent of the vote in 1856 while Fremont secured just 32 per cent. To win over Fillmore voters angry at the corrupt Buchanan Democratic Party, Republicans needed to reassure these anti-immigrant voters. A candidate mostly silent on immigration issues – like Lincoln – would suffice.

In Illinois and Indiana, supporters of Lincoln emphasized his 'honesty' in light of the revelations of Buchanan corruption brought to light by the Congressional Covode Committee. Threading the immigration needle, Republicans managed to install the 'German plank' in its platform, which protected the right to vote for newly naturalized immigrants. Lincoln also benefited from his stellar debate performance with Stephen Douglas in 1858 contest and his moral opposition of slavery as expressed in his February 1860 Cooper

Union speech. Lincoln was no less anti-slavery than Seward. But he was a fresh face in a world of corrupt politics, and he was 'solid' enough on immigration to garner support from both Pennsylvania Know Nothings and German Protestants.

The timing of the Republican Party nominating convention was critical because delegates had imagined that the Democrats meeting in Charleston in late April 1860 would nominate Douglas. As it turned out, the Charleston convention was a fiasco as Deep South delegates led by Alabaman William Lowndes Yancey walked out after the convention rejected his militant platform defending slavery in the territories. Unable to produce a nominee, the Democrats agreed to reconvene in Baltimore in June. When the Republicans met in May, they did know who the Democratic nominee would be, or that the Democratic Party would actually split in half. Alas, Lincoln's nomination must be viewed in light of the Illinoisan's strength vis-à-vis *any* challenger, not just Douglas.

For Democrats, there were divisions over political issues and there were divisions over political loyalties. Of the issues, none was more important than the question of Congressional authority on slavery in the territories. The 1856 Cincinnati Democratic platform defended the Kansas Nebraska Act's doctrine of popular sovereignty by prescribing 'non-interference by Congress with Slavery in State and Territory; or in the District of Columbia', while also allowing the people of the Territories to form a state constitution with or without slavery. (quoted p. 37) The Dred Scott decision in 1857, however, declared that slave property was to be protected by the Constitution everywhere that the Federal government extends. Congress could not ban slavery in the territories. Per a codicil from Justice Taney, territorial governments could not restrict slavery either.

Douglas, aware of Republican anger at this decision, tried to salvage popular sovereignty by averring at Freeport, Illinois in 1858 that residents of the territories could effectively bar slavery by refusing to pass a slave code.

Even more important, when the pro-slavery Lecompton Kansas territorial legislature, fraudulently elected by Missourians who never intended to settle in Kansas, refused to put the new constitution up for ratification by the free-soil majority, Douglas rejected the Lecompton constitution as a violation of popular sovereignty. Buchanan and pro-Southern Democrats saw Lecompton as their last chance to put Kansas on the road to statehood as a slave state and thus came to view Douglas as a traitor to the South. Buchanan put his Administration's weight behind the Lecompton plan, which was ultimately substituted for a compromise bill that delayed Kansas statehood until 1861. The Lecompton controversy in early 1858 soured Southern Democrats on Douglas. The Freeport Doctrine, later in 1858, finished Douglas off, especially when Deep South Democrats proposed a Congressional slave code that Douglas could never support if he hoped to win votes in the North. The Charleston Democratic convention in April 1860 would implode because of these divisions.

But as Holt stresses, the Kansas and territorial slave code issues were not the only points of difference between Douglas and Buchanan. Another was corruption. Buchanan was tarred with accusations of vote-buying in 1856 and with all kinds of corrupt government printing practices and territorial expenditures in the years following. The Covode Committee investigated allegations that Democrats had been paid off to support the Lecompton constitution, a point that linked the Kansas troubles to the larger matter of corruption. Douglas happily flogged the Buchanan Administration, confident that he could secure victory in 1860 by beating the Republicans (and the Constitutional Unionists) to the punch. But first he would have to secure the Democratic nomination, and the bolters at Charleston, led by Yancey, made sure that that would not happen.

Why exactly did the bolters oppose Douglas so much? As Holt rightfully notes, the territorial issue was essentially moot by 1860 as Kansas was already on the path to statehood as a free state by that point and there were no more obvious territories to organize. Surely these issues were mostly symbolic by 1860, though a future acquisition of Cuba was certainly in the cards. Was it mere loyalty to Buchanan, then, that

encouraged Yancey and his Deep South delegations to deny Douglas the nomination at all costs? Yancey certainly knew that Douglas would never accept a nomination committed to a Congressional slave code. In fact, Holt argues that ‘many Southern Democrats stressed the territorial question primarily because they now so despised Douglas that they were determined to renounce and repudiate his cherished doctrine of congressional noninterference. In other words, many southern Democrats’ hatred of Douglas injected slavery extension into the 1860 race’ (p. 49).

This is not very convincing. Yes, Southerners were still seething at Douglas over Lecompton and his rejection of a Congressional slave code – two issues that *should* have been rendered moot by April 1860. However, that the walkout was led by Yancey and the Deep South delegation – and only validated by regular anti-Douglas Buchananites – shows something much more serious afoot than mere anger at Douglas. Yancey, as Holt acknowledges, was a genuine secessionist. He aimed to break up the Democratic Party en route to breaking up the Union. His fellow Southern maximalists felt they must either control the party nominee and platform – as they did with Buchanan – or face inevitable demographic oblivion. William Freehling’s *Road to Disunion, Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant* and Douglas Egerton’s *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War* [\(2\)](#) accurately depict a man hell-bent on manipulating convention rules to effectuate secession. Even more importantly, Yancey was backed by several state delegations (unlike Calhoun’s South Carolinians in 1833 or the Nashville Convention of 1850). What motivated them was genuine concern that slaveholders’ total control of the Federal government and even their own state governments was in jeopardy, and that the only realistic bulwark of defense against the ‘black Republicans’ was a Southern-dominated Democratic Party. National anti-Douglas sentiment may have given procedural cover to the Yanceyites, but the ultimate motive was ideological, laden as it was with honor-based rhetoric of ‘no submission’ to Douglas.

The Democrats attempted to reconvene in Baltimore in June, but ended up ratifying the split, with one ticket backing Douglas and popular sovereignty and the other backing John C. Breckinridge and a platform supporting a Congressional slave code if deemed necessary. Meanwhile, ex-Whigs, Americans/Know Nothings and various other conservative anti-Democrats and non-Republicans also gathered at Baltimore and nominated John Bell for the Constitutional Union ticket. Holt rightly notes the irony of this aged ticket. It needed to prevent Republican triumph in the North, but it ran strongest in the Upper South, where its anti-corruption campaign and Unionist message caught on as a midpoint between anti-slavery Republicans and dis-unionist Breckinridge Democrats. Indeed, Holt is at his best as he surveys the efforts of anti-Breckinridge forces in the South (including Douglasites in Alabama and Georgia) and anti-Republican elements in the North (including fusion movements), struggling to forestall the inevitable Lincoln victory. And it was indeed inevitable as revealed in state elections in the key states of Indiana and Pennsylvania in October 1860, where Republicans emerged in force and ready to capture the Electoral College the next month.

Holt’s chapter on ‘variegated campaigns’ is the most promising for historians to explore in greater depth because it bridges the gap between formal electioneering and grassroots political culture. Paramilitary Republican Wide Awakes and their many imitators invigorated public spaces across America in the fall of 1860. The chief effect was to encourage younger men to enter politics for the first time, as evidenced by the boost in turnout (for all parties) between 1856 and 1860. That the result was largely foreordained by October, and yet more than 80 per cent of eligible American voters participated, shows how essential the enactment of democratic prerogative was for Americans at this moment of national peril.

Holt’s slender, nuanced and highly readable account of this ‘campaign fraught with consequences’ makes for an excellent introduction into the election of 1860. It is also useful for specialists long accustomed to Holt’s mastery of state and national politics. His emphasis on corruption as a key motivator of voter behavior is a necessary corrective to pure ideological studies or for those who view the election as a mere stepping stone to civil war. The election of 1860 was an event unto itself, a grand democratic exercise unlike anything witnessed on that scale in the world. That Americans had essentially elected a President, the dismemberment of the Union, and a civil war means historians must come to grips with what democracy even meant, and

what Americans felt was worth fighting to protect in 1860 and the years to follow.

Notes

1. James Oakes, *Freedom National: The Destruction of Slavery in the United States, 1862-1865* (New York, NY, 2013).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. William Freehling, *Road to Disunion, Volume II: Secessionists Triumphant* (Oxford, 2008); Douglas Egerton, *Year of Meteors: Stephen Douglas, Abraham Lincoln, and the Election that Brought on the Civil War* (London, 2013).[Back to \(2\)](#)

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