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The Election of 1860

By **Christopher C. Meyers**, Valdosta State University

There was a growing sense of excitement on the convention hall floor. It was the seventh day of the 1860 Democratic Nominating Convention and the delegates were voting on the platform issue of slavery in the territories, a problem that had vexed the country's political leaders since Representative David Wilmot's proviso in 1846. Because of the divisive nature of the issue the platform committee presented the delegates with two options—protect slavery in the territories (the majority report) or popular sovereignty (the minority report). Some southern delegations had threatened to withdraw from the convention if slavery was not protected in the territories and some northern delegations made a similar threat if slavery was to be allowed.

The party was on the verge of an irreparable split, the absolute worst scenario on the eve of a presidential election.

The Democratic Party of 1860 could trace its lineage to the late 18th century political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and was, according to political historian Jules Witcover, the oldest existing party in the world in 2003. It survived the first and second party systems while competing parties, Federalists and Whigs, rose and fell. Despite its longevity and stability in the American political system, the Democratic Party had self-destructed in the 1850s over the contentious issue of slavery in the territories. That issue led to the demise of the Whigs, the creation of the Republican Party, and was the single most important issue in American politics on the eve of the 1860 presidential election.

The issue of slavery in the territories, which framed the 1860 presidential election, burst into American politics as a result of the Mexican War and David Wilmot's 1846 proviso. It was the catalyst behind the increasing sectionalization of American society and politics between 1846 and 1861 and led to the demise of the Second Party System and a realignment of voters in the mid-1850s. By the middle of the 1850s the party system of Democrats and Whigs had effectively handled national crises and sectional issues for about 25 years without resorting to military conflict. This system was disrupted when Stephen A. Douglas's Kansas-Nebraska Act passed in 1854; Douglas believed that party competition had disappeared and proposed his legislation, in part, as a test of Democratic Party orthodoxy. His bill led to, in his words, "a hell of a storm" that

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destroyed the party system, a realignment of voters, the creation of the Republican Party, and division in the Democratic Party.[1] The resulting realignment led to a more sectional political system of a northern Republican Party and a predominantly pro-southern Democratic Party, a system that could not contain the growing sectional conflict.

The 1860 presidential election was conducted amid a charged sectional atmosphere, as sectional tensions had been building for a decade and-a-half. A long succession of events from 1846 until the eve of the first nominating convention in 1860 created the most serious sectional tensions the country had experienced. These events had a cumulative effect upon the country, each exacerbating sectional tensions; a cursory list includes the Mexican War and Wilmot Proviso, the Compromise of 1850, filibustering, efforts to acquire Cuba, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Bleeding Kansas, the Brooks-Sumner affair in the U.S. Senate, John Brown’s Pottawatomie Massacre, the Dred Scott decision, the Panic of 1857, the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, John Brown’s Harper’s Ferry Raid and his subsequent execution, and the 1859-1860 Speakership battle in the U.S. House of Representatives. All of these events set the stage for the final act in this sectional drama, the 1860 election.

The Democratic Party held its nominating convention first, scheduled to open on April 23, 1860 in Charleston, South Carolina. Considering the sectional atmosphere and the division in the party, Charleston was uniquely unqualified to host the convention if the Democratic Party was to unite behind a platform and a candidate. The city was chosen in an attempt to smooth over the division in the party, but on that count it failed. Before the convention began there were indications that the party could break apart. In January 1860 the Alabama State Democratic Convention, led by William Lowndes Yancey, instructed the state’s delegation to withdraw from the Charleston convention if the platform did not specifically protect slave property in the territories (Four years earlier the Alabama delegation was similarly instructed.). A few days before the convention Georgia, Arkansas, and the Gulf states announced they would join Alabama. In addition, an Ohio delegate informed Stephen A. Douglas that his delegation was prepared to leave the convention if a slave code plank was added to the platform; seven Midwestern states would join Ohio. Even before the Charleston convention started it was threatened by disruption.

The showdown over the platform came after several days of organizational issues and preliminary speeches. On April 30, the seventh day of the convention the platform committee, as divided as the party, produced two versions, one that included a slave code plank (the majority report) and one that pledged to abide by any rulings of the Supreme Court on the issue of slavery in the territories (the minority report; essentially popular sovereignty). The delegates were to choose one of the two. The practice at this time was for voting to be done geographically, not alphabetically. Voting started in New England, then down the east coast to the mid-Atlantic states, then to the South, back up to the Midwest, and then out to the far West. As the voting on the platform proceeded it was

[1] David M. Potter, The Impending Crisis, 1848-1861 (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 160.

obvious that the minority report would be accepted, and it was by a vote of 165-138. With that vote popular sovereignty became the party's official position on the signature issue in the election. The southern delegations were less than pleased and they began leaving the convention, beginning with Alabama. Seven other delegations, in whole or in part, also withdrew—the entire delegations from Alabama, Mississippi, Texas, and Florida, and parts of the delegations from Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, and Arkansas. All told, about fifty southern delegates bolted the convention and began deliberating in another part of the city. The platform also supported the construction of a transcontinental railroad to the Pacific; all other planks of the platform addressed issues of a sectional nature, which was clearly the party's focus.

With the platform drama and the withdrawal of the southern delegates over, the convention turned its attention to nominating a candidate. In this nomination process the Democratic Party had an unusual rule, which had been in place since the party's first convention in 1832. This rule required a candidate to receive two-thirds of the votes to be nominated, a practice that essentially gave the South a veto over presidential nominations. The withdrawal of the southern delegates raised a question however—two-thirds of what number was required for the nomination? Two-thirds of the total number of delegates or two-thirds of the number left after the defections? The convention determined that any candidate needed two-thirds of the total number of delegates in order to receive the nomination. The convention started with 303 delegates and after the withdrawals 253 remained; a candidate therefore needed 202 votes to be nominated, a virtual impossibility. Nonetheless, the convention balloted. In ordinary circumstances Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas would be the favorite to win the nomination, but this clearly was no ordinary convention. The delegates balloted 57 times and Douglas, still the favorite even after the southerners left, could not muster enough support. The closest he came was 152½ votes, more than 50 short of the nomination. So after 57 ballots over two days the Charleston convention adjourned on May 3 without nominating a candidate. The delegates agreed to reconvene in Baltimore on June 18; they had six weeks to heal the division in the party or suffer almost certain defeat.

Six days after the Democratic convention ended another group of delegates gathered in Baltimore for two days to nominate a candidate. These men can best be described as the remnants of the Whig and Know Nothing parties, but without the Know Nothing's nativism. The party, which styled itself the Constitutional Union Party, was formed in late 1859 and early 1860 in the midst of the bitter Speakership battle in the House, and in February announced the May nominating convention. Their defining political ideology was compromise and they can be considered the true heirs of Henry Clay, even though every candidate in 1860 claimed political lineage with the Great Compromiser. The leader of this new political organization was John Jordan Crittenden, who actually occupied Clay's old seat in the U.S. Senate.

When the Constitutional Union convention began Crittenden was the obvious favorite for the nomination, but at 74 years of age he was a little past his prime and he declined to be a candidate. Other possible nominees included Winfield Scott, Sam

Houston, Edward Bates, and John Bell; at 64 Bell was the youngest of this quartet. Ten men received votes on the first ballot with Bell in the lead, followed by Houston and Crittenden. On the second ballot Bell increased his lead and received enough votes to be nominated. A short time later Edward Everett was selected by acclimation as Bell's running mate. The platform Bell and Everett ran on was simple and to the point—it took no position on the great issues of the time. The party officially recognized no political principle except the Constitution, the Union, and the laws of the land. The platform accused other conventions of misleading and deceiving the American people and of encouraging sectional divisions, something Bell and Everett opposed. Though the Constitutional Union platform took no stance on slavery in the territories, as a compromise party it can be seen as rejecting extremist views, particularly of pro-secessionist southerners. The ticket of John Bell of Tennessee and Edward Everett of Massachusetts was widely disregarded for being too old and too bland to be taken seriously. The general sentiment was that there were two scenarios in which the Constitutional Union ticket could be influential in the election—fusion with another party or taking enough electoral votes to deny any other candidate a majority of electoral votes. In the second scenario the House would choose the president and the compromisers in Congress might be able to hammer out an agreement. When the convention adjourned on May 10 John Bell was the first candidate to be formally and officially nominated.

On May 16 the six-year-old Republican Party gathered in convention in Chicago to nominate its candidates for president and vice president. Created in the political upheaval of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 and the ensuing political realignment, the Republican Party was known as a one-issue party and was definitively sectional in nature. It was distinctly a northern organization and stood against the expansion of slavery into the territories; Republicans embraced the Wilmot Proviso. Four years earlier, in 1856, the party ran its first presidential candidate, John C. Frémont, and fared well enough, winning 114 electoral votes but losing the election to Democrat James Buchanan, 174-114. Since then the Republicans consolidated their northern base, picked up significant strength in the 1858 Congressional elections (enough to claim a plurality in the House of Representatives), and elected the party's first Speaker of the House in early 1860 (William Pennington of New Jersey), the highest placed Republican in the government.

Coming into the convention several men stood out as front-runners in the race for the Republican nomination. At the top of this list, and the clear favorite, was William Henry. Seward, who served in the U.S. Senate out of New York. Though he was the early favorite there were some drawbacks to his candidacy as a result of his "higher law" speech in 1850 and his irrepressible conflict statement in 1858, both of which gave him the label of extremist; his opposition to nativism did not help with former Know Nothing voters. Another leading candidate was Salmon Portland Chase, Governor of Ohio, who was also tagged with the extremist label for his antislavery sentiment. Senator Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania was also a consideration, but there were whispers of financial improprieties and blatant corruption. Missouri's Edward Bates was in this top tier even though he was not a member of the Republican Party. Other men who were considered favorite sons included Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, New Jersey's William Lewis Dayton,

and Cassius Marcellus Clay of Kentucky. And if the convention deadlocked there was John C. Fremont, the Republican candidate in 1856. One man who particularly concerned Lincoln was Stephen A. Douglas, whom Lincoln believed appealed to some segment of the Republican Party.

The Republican convention was held in a brand new building, the Wigwam, constructed specifically to host this event. There was great enthusiasm in Chicago as some 30,000 people descended on the Wigwam for the convention, making it the largest political gathering in America up to that time. Only 10,000 fit into the new building, so the other 20,000 milled around the convention hall listening to speakers and brass bands spreading the exuberance. Knowing that the Democrats did not nominate a candidate in Charleston and appeared headed for a fatal division, Republicans in Chicago were confident of success. Most knew that to win the party had to do two things: 1) nominate a moderate on the issue of slavery in the territories; and 2) turn around two of the battleground states of Pennsylvania, Illinois, Indiana, and New Jersey that the party lost in 1856 (ideally Pennsylvania and either Indiana or Illinois). If the Republicans could accomplish those two things they had a great chance to win the election, especially considering the probable division in the Democratic Party.

The first task at the Republican convention was writing the platform, which was fairly simple considering the level of harmony in the party. On the most important issue of the day the platform called the idea that the Constitution supported the expansion of slavery into the territories "a dangerous political heresy."[2] Though slavery expansion was the focus of the campaign, the Republican platform addressed other important issues. The party supported the passage of a homestead bill, favored internal improvements and an adequate tariff, supported a transcontinental railroad to the Pacific, and opposed any change in the nation's naturalization laws. The Republican Party was branded as a one issue party, but demonstrated otherwise in its platform.

The real drama at the convention was the nomination of a candidate. The clear favorite entering the convention was Seward, but he had some drawbacks, as did some of the other acknowledged leaders. The successful candidate had to meet the criteria that every Republican knew was necessary to win the election—the candidate had to be a moderate on the slavery expansion issue and be able to turn around the battleground states. Beyond those two requirements everything else was up in the air. One Iowa Republican explained it this way: "I am for the man who can carry Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and Indiana, with the reservation that I will not go into a cemetery or catacomb; the candidate must be alive, and able to walk at least from parlor to dining-room."[3] The strategy for all of the candidates except Seward was to prevent Seward's nomination on the first ballot; if that could be done then the nomination would open up on the second ballot. It should be noted that none of the candidates were in attendance at the

[2] Etling Morison, "Election of 1860" in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., ed. *History of Presidential Elections, 1789-1968,* 2 vols. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1971), 2:1126.
[3] Quoted in William E. Gienapp, "Who Voted for Lincoln," in John L. Thomas, ed., *Abraham Lincoln and the American Political Tradition* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 54.

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convention, as protocol called for them to stay away or risk being accused of seeking the office. All candidates had managers at the Wigwam to direct their campaigns.

The voting for the nomination was done on the third day of the convention, May 18. The Wigwam was packed to the rafters with 10,000 delegates and spectators, including several thousand Lincoln supporters in the gallery who gained entry with counterfeit tickets. When the balloting began it was widely known that there were 465 delegates at the convention, so 233 was the magic number necessary to win the nomination. Anticipation grew as the delegates cast their votes on the first ballot. Seward led on the first ballot with 173½ votes, not enough for the nomination; Lincoln was a strong second with 102 votes. A number of delegations went to the convention instructed to vote for a certain candidate on the first ballot, but after that they were free to vote for any candidate. At this point, with nobody nominated on the first ballot the campaign managers could potentially begin negotiating with delegations for their support. These managers could promise cabinet offices in return for delegate votes; this was a fairly common practice. As the second ballot was taken there was the potential that deals were being made. On the second ballot Seward's vote increased to 184½ while Lincoln's jumped to 181. Momentum had clearly swung in Lincoln's favor as the third ballot was taken. Lincoln took the lead on the third ballot with 231½ while Seward dropped slightly to 180. After a short pause an Ohio delegate stood up and switched four votes to Lincoln giving him the nomination; the delegates then voted to make the nomination unanimous. After a short dinner break the convention reconvened and nominated Hannibal Hamlin of Maine as the vice presidential candidate. The Lincoln-Hamlin pairing was a good ticket, balanced politically and geographically. Lincoln was a former Whig from the Midwest while Hamlin was a former Democrat from the East.

How did Abraham Lincoln, who was considered only a favorite son when the convention started, win the nomination? There are several explanations for Lincoln's nomination: 1) He was the one candidate who met the preconvention requirements of being a moderate and having the ability to win the battleground states—he was more available; 2) He was more in line with the party platform than the other candidates; 3) His humble, rags-to-riches background was more appealing to voters and delegates; 4) Lincoln made a speaking tour of the Northeast in early 1860 and was not quite the unknown the other candidates believed; and 5) There is the question of whether his managers in Chicago made deals with other managers and delegations. The last reason has sparked a fair amount of debate among historians. Lincoln certainly knew that deals could be negotiated at nominating conventions, but he did not want to be held to any agreements. He therefore sent a message to his managers in Chicago to make no deals, to which David Davis, one of his floor managers, is said to have replied, "Lincoln ain't here."[4] While there is no concrete evidence of deals, circumstantial evidence may suggest the appearance that arrangements were made. Lincoln's cabinet included all of the favorites at the Chicago convention—Seward, Chase, Cameron, and Bates. On the

[4] Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln: Prologue to the Civil War, 1859-1860,* 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 2:256.

other hand, as the most prominent Republicans they probably would have been part of any Republican president's cabinet. In the end, we really do not know if deals were struck in Chicago.

After the Democratic debacle in Charleston the party had a month to heal the divisions and work on unifying itself before reconvening in Baltimore on June 18. There were two important questions leading up to the Baltimore convention: First, would the delegates who withdrew from the Charleston convention return; and second, if so, would they be seated? Upper South newspapers were willing to compromise and suggested keeping the platform and pairing it with a southern candidate. Deep South newspapers were not willing to budge and demanded a slave code plank in the platform and a pro-slave code candidate. The convention could be troublesome. All southern states but one, South Carolina, sent delegations to Baltimore, and this created a credentials issue. For four days the convention tried to address what to do with the returning delegations. On the fifth day of the convention, June 22, the decision was made to not seat several southern delegations, and following this several other southern delegations withdrew from the convention. The party had divided again, and this time the division would not be repaired. The remaining delegates determined that a 2/3 vote of the delegates in attendance was required for the nomination. With that decision Stephen A. Douglas was duly nominated on the second ballot, to run on the platform written and accepted at Charleston. As a running mate the convention chose Herschel Vespasian Johnson of Georgia, which brought geographical balance to the ticket. The convention adjourned on June 23 with the party hopelessly divided.

To formalize the split in the Democratic Party, those delegates who left the Baltimore convention met elsewhere in the city on June 23 and held a separate one-day convention, the third Democratic convention for this election. The delegates adopted the 2/3 rule for the nomination and then moved to write a platform. This southern Democratic platform also focused on sectional issues and differed from the northern Democratic platform only with the inclusion of a slave code plank. The voting on a nominee was a one ballot affair with John Cabell Breckinridge, the sitting vice president, being nominated after one ballot. The delegates chose Joseph Lane, U.S. Senator from Oregon, as the vice presidential candidate bringing a measure of geographical balance to the ticket.

One office, four major candidates. There was a tremendous amount of political experience on these combined four tickets; between the four presidential and four vice presidential candidates in 1860 there was 106 years of experience in major political offices (major political office here is defined as national-level office or state governor). Perhaps not surprisingly, Lincoln had less experience than any of the other seven. Lincoln's national office experience was limited to one two-year term in the U.S. House of Representatives in the 1840s. Conversely, John Bell had the most years in office, 26, having served in both U.S. House and U.S. Senate. Stephen A. Douglas, Hannibal Hamlin, and Edward Everett were next with 18, 17, and 16 years respectively. Joseph

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Lane had 13 years, John C. Breckinridge had 9, and Herschel Johnson had 5. Ironically, the man with the least number of years in office won the election.

The election can be described as a sectional election, meaning where one lived greatly influenced for whom one cast his vote. Lincoln, for example, was not even on the ballot in ten southern states. The 1860 campaign is often described as being two campaigns, one in the North between Lincoln and Douglas and one in the South between Breckinridge and Bell. The strategy for the Lincoln campaign was fairly simple—hold the states Fremont won in 1856 (114 electoral votes) and add Pennsylvania (27) and either Illinois (11) or Indiana (13). If that could be done Lincoln would capture enough electoral votes to win the election (303 electoral votes were available, so it took 152 to win). For the other candidates the best chance to stop the Republican ticket was probably fusion, combining their efforts in specific states to create one opposition ticket. Their best chances for success were in New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, which would be enough electoral votes to deny Lincoln a majority. In that scenario the House of Representatives would choose the president, as it had done in 1800 and 1824. To continue this hypothetical, if the House failed to select the president, a distinct possibility, the Senate would choose the vice president who would then succeed to the presidency on inauguration day. In the end, though, fusion failed.

The campaign protocol in the mid-19th century was that candidates did not actively campaign on their own behalf. It was unbecoming to seek the office, rather the office called the candidate. Therefore, candidates traditionally stayed at home and did not take an active role in the campaign, lest they incur the wrath of an angry electorate. In 1860, three of the four candidates followed precedent and stayed home, while one, Douglas, hit the campaign trail. In July and August Douglas, under the guise of visiting his mother in New York, campaigned through New England and into New Jersey. Then in late August he spoke in Virginia and North Carolina. In his speech at Norfolk Douglas answered two questions that became the highlight of his speaking tour. When asked if the southern states would be justified in seceding if Lincoln won the election, he answered emphatically no. If the southern states seceded upon the inauguration of Lincoln, Douglas was asked if he would advise the president to resist secession by force. He stated that the president had the duty to enforce the laws of the United States. His responses were stunning in that they repudiated secession. After the state elections in October it was fairly clear that Lincoln would win in November, which made secession more of a reality. In response to the state election results Douglas again embarked on a speaking tour of the South, to Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee, but this time he was not campaigning for his election, but rather against secession. It certainly says something about the man who campaigns against a national calamity rather than for himself.

The election was characterized by the creation of groups of supporters who actively campaigned for their candidate. The most well-known of these bands was the "Wide Awakes," a group that supported Lincoln; they marched, paraded, spoke, and generally supported Lincoln while keeping aware of their opposition. The "Wide Awakes" played a significant part in the campaign. Other groups existed but were not as

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conspicuous, such as the "Rail Splitters" for Lincoln, the "Little Giants," "Hickory Clubs," and "Chloroformers" for Douglas, the "National Democratic Volunteers" for Breckinridge, and the "Bell Ringers," "Bell-Everetters," "Union Sentinels," and "Minute Men" for John Bell. Supporters also carried or wore campaign tokens, badges, ribbons, and ferrotypes to show their support for one of the candidates. On Election Day 81.2% of the eligible voters cast their vote, the highest percentage up to that time (only 1876, with 81.8%, had a higher percentage). The campaign did not lack interest, drama, or excitement.

The results were a foregone conclusion after the state elections in October. Lincoln captured the North (except New Jersey, which he split with Douglas), Midwest, West, and 180 electoral votes, enough to win outright; Breckinridge carried the South and 72 electoral votes; Bell won 39 electoral votes from three upper South states; Douglas, the only truly national candidate, received 12 electoral votes (Missouri and half of New Jersey). Lincoln captured 1,865,908 popular votes, 39.9% of the total; Douglas received 1,380,019 popular votes, 29.5%; Breckinridge got 848,019 popular votes, 18.1% (South Carolina did not choose electors via popular vote in 1860); and Bell received 590,901 popular votes, 12.6% of the total. Lincoln and Douglas combined received 3,246,110 popular votes, 69.4% of the total. Breckinridge received the majority of the vote in only five of the future Confederate states (Alabama, Florida Mississippi, North Carolina, and Texas), which means that a large number of southerners cast their vote for Bell or Douglas, and effectively against secession. With less than 40% of the popular vote Lincoln's victory was perhaps not the powerful message all presidential candidates want, but the voters in 1860 decisively chose to contain slavery, saying that the institution should not expand into the territories. The southern states, which had been threatening secession for a decade, had an important decision to make.

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