

# The Politics of Slavery: Prelude to the Civil War: 1844 – 1860 \*

---

Moral absolutes and democratic politics are not easily reconciled. By its nature, politics is the practice of compromise, and for those given to moral absolutes, compromise means betrayal of principle. The issue of slavery in late antebellum politics reveals this gap in tragic proportions. For many southerners, owning slaves was a property right upheld by the Constitution. For northern abolitionists, slavery denied the principle that all men—including blacks—were endowed with natural rights of liberty and equality before God. Of course, God’s law was not easily determined by a majoritarian vote. In the 1850s, Abraham Lincoln, a principled and pragmatic Illinois politician, understood that a nation could not stand “half free and half slave.”

In the ten years following the 1844 election the entire political landscape changed, including the demise of the Whig party and the rise of a powerful new northern party, the Republican Party. The catalyst for this dramatic political upheaval came from a single issue: slavery. New territories acquired at the end of the Mexican-American War unleashed a political crisis. The slavery issue divided the North and the South over the proper role of government. Southerners demanded a constitutional right to hold slaves and to extend slavery into the newly acquired territories. Slaveholders wanted government neutrality in protecting slavery in the South, while insisting that the federal government use coercive powers to return escaped slaves in the North to bondage in the South. Thus behind this insistence on states’ right lay a contradictory notion of federal intervention in Northern states.

After Texas, the New Mexico territory, and California were acquired, the economy boomed. In this period of prosperity, large numbers of Irish and German immigrants poured into the country. The boom fostered the growth of manufacturing in cities in the North. At the same time cotton production soared in the South, which encouraged slavery. Ninety percent of the nation’s manufactured goods, measured in value, came from the North. While only 3 percent of the white population in the South owned the majority of slaves, and only a third of white families owned slaves at all, the slave system became more entrenched economically and ideologically in that region. Fears of slave revolts intensified following a failed insurrection planned by Charleston free black Denmark Vesey in 1822 and an actual rebellion organized by slave Nat Turner in 1831 in which seventy or so of his followers killed fifty-seven whites in a house-to-house rampage. In the hysterical reaction caused by Turner’s rebellion,

it became impossible in the South to discuss ending slavery. “Rimer’s rebellion,” as well as escaped slave memoirs such as Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* (1845), Solomon Northup’s *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853), and other accounts of slave resistance reinforced antislavery opinion in the North by expanding politics beyond simple party allegiance.

While slavery became entrenched in the South, antislavery sentiment in the North began to harden with a religious revival that swept the country in the 1830s. Believing that the millennium was approaching, evangelical Christians involved themselves in many areas of moral reform, including temperance, but slavery became the consuming issue for many by the late 1850s. The American Antislavery Society, organized in 1831 by religious abolitionists including William Lloyd Garrison and Theodore Weld and supported by the wealthy New York merchants Arthur and Lewis Tappan, claimed to have gained within a decade two hundred thousand members in two thousand local organizations across the North. Garrison’s newspaper *The Liberator* encouraged radical abolitionism by demanding the immediate end of slavery and full civil rights for blacks. Free blacks such as Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass also crusaded for black freedom. Disdaining both Democrats and Whigs, many abolitionists refused to get involved in party politics, but their activities had profound political impact.

As radical abolitionism attracted a small, militant following, the movement produced violent reaction in the North in the 1830s and 1840s from mobs who attacked antislavery newspapers and editors (including killing Elijah Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois). In Congress, southerners prevented abolitionist petitions from being read or entered into the record. This so-called gag rule reinforced a perception that a “slave power” conspiracy controlled politics in Washington.

The Missouri Compromise of 1820 appeared at first to have resolved the issue of slavery in the territories by outlawing slaves north of the 36° 30’ parallel. When Texas secured its independence from Mexico in 1836, the territorial slave issue once again became a flashpoint in American politics. John C. Calhoun, as President Tyler’s secretary of state in 1845 and U.S. senator from South Carolina, led a campaign for the annexation of Texas. He and proslavery supporters introduced the annexation into the 1844 presidential election.

After the death of Harrison, Whigs naturally turned to Henry Clay, a guiding force in the Senate and the most popular person in the party. He resigned his Senate seat to devote himself full time to the 1844 campaign. The Kentuckian’s nomination was a foregone conclusion. To balance the ticket regionally and ideologically with business-oriented Clay, the party selected a Christian evangelical, Theodore Frelinghuysen from New Jersey, as his running mate.

Van Buren emerged as the front-runner for the Democratic Party nomination. Although opposed to Texas annexation, former president Van

---

\* Critchlow, Donald T. *American Political History: A Very Short Introduction*. (Chapter 4) New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Buren was the frontrunner. The pro-annexation Democrats, led by Calhoun, passed a new party rule requiring a nominee to get two-thirds of the delegates. This rule, repealed in 1936, gave the South veto over Democratic presidential candidates. At the convention, when it became clear Van Buren could never win two-thirds, delegates nominated dark horse James K. Polk, who enjoyed Andrew Jackson's support.

The 1844 election pitted Clay against Polk, but the abolitionist National Liberty Party nominated James G. Birney of Ohio. Clay hoped to avoid the Texas issue by focusing on his support for a high tariff. Polk promised to "reverse" the tariff, allowing his Pennsylvanian supporters to suggest an increase. While he pressed the Texas issue in the South, he proposed annexing all of Oregon in the North. As Clay's campaign sank in the South, he declared support for annexation and denounced abolition.

In an extremely tight race, Polk won the presidency. Clay lost the critical state of New York with thirty-six electoral votes by only five thousand votes. The Liberty Party received close to sixteen thousand votes, mostly from antislavery Whigs. If only a small number of these votes had gone to Clay, he would have won. Polk's dark-horse upset victory marked a major turning point in American political history.

On President Idler's last day in office, Texas joined the union, although Mexico still refused to recognize Texas's independence or its boundaries. As an enthusiastic proponent of Manifest Destiny—America's destiny to extend from coast to coast—President Polk used diplomacy to negotiate with Britain the acquisition of the Oregon/Washington territory at the 49th parallel. Texas remained a thornier issue. Faced with an intransigent Mexico, understandably unwilling to dismember itself, Polk ordered U.S. troops under Zachary Taylor to the north bank of the Rio Grande in the disputed territory between Texas and Mexico. The result was a military confrontation. Claiming that "American blood had been shed upon American soil," Polk persuaded Congress to declare war on May 13, 1846. By September of the following year, American forces stood outside the gates of Mexico City to force the conclusion of the war. In the peace treaty, Mexico recognized the Rio Grande as the Texas border and sold California and New Mexico to the United States. The Senate voted to ratify the treaty, despite objections from those who wanted to annex all of Mexico.

Fearing territorial expansion of slavery, northern Whigs were vociferous in opposing "Mr. Polk's War." At the beginning of the war, an obscure first-term Illinois congressman, Abraham Lincoln, having only recently arrived in Washington, proposed the "spot amendment" demanding that Polk show exactly where American blood had been shed on American soil. Northern Democrats divided on the issue. Some demanded that new territories should be opened to free white homesteaders. In June 1846, David Wilmot, a first-term congressman from Pennsylvania, introduced a proviso in Congress prohibiting slavery in any territory acquired in the war from Mexico. The measure passed

the House on three occasions, only to be defeated in the Senate, which had a proslavery majority. Wilmot's proviso severely divided both parties sectionally. Partisan divisions, manageable through politics, were being replaced by sectional divisions.

The slavery issue in the new territories became the center of the 1848 presidential election. Polk upheld his campaign promise not to run for a second term. Under southern influence, Democrats nominated Lewis Cass, a northerner willing to support the South on slavery. Van Buren, who had been isolated by the Polk administration, denounced Cass as a "dough-face" candidate, a northerner willing to serve southern interests. After his delegates walked out of the national convention, Van Buren accepted the nomination of the Free Soil Party. Opposing expansion of slavery in the West under the slogan "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men," the party selected Whig Charles Francis Adams, the son of the former president, as Van Buren's running mate, thus conjoining Jackson's former hand-picked successor and the son of his bitter enemy.

Remembering all too well the demise of the Federalists who had opposed the War of 1812, Whigs anxiously discarded their reputation as an antiwar party by nominating sixty-four-year-old "Rough and Ready" Zachary Taylor, a hero of the Mexican-American War. A career military officer, Taylor had never voted. Taylor ran with Millard Fillmore, a Buffalo lawyer who represented northern business interests. During the campaign, Taylor took no position on slavery in the territories. Northerners noted that his brother was an abolitionist in Ohio, while Southern Whigs observed that his wife had inherited slaves in Louisiana. Both parties tried to avoid the issue of slavery's extension and ignored Van Buren's Free Soil Party.

Whigs were jubilant when Taylor won the election. They now faced, though, the slave extension issue. Politically inept, Taylor satisfied no one when he proposed admitting both New Mexico and California to the union as states, while arguing that slavery in the territories should be left to the voters there. Ignoring Taylor, Henry Clay sought a grand bargain in Congress. His Omnibus Bill admitted California as a free state, which was consistent with public opinion there. New Mexico would be divided into Utah and New Mexico, with the expectation that Mormons in Utah would probably ban slavery, and New Mexico with its large Texas influence would adopt slavery. The United States would take over the Republic of Texas debt. Slavery would remain in the District of Columbia, but the slave trade would end. Most controversial was Clay's proposal to include a Fugitive Slave Law, which would require all free citizens to help recover runaway slaves. Asking Northerners to recover runaway slaves revealed a coercive state at its worst.

Clay's attempt at a compromise produced one of the greatest debates in Senate history. Daniel Webster of Massachusetts endorsed the bill, declaring he

spoke not as a “northern man, but as an American.” A dying John C. Calhoun denounced Clay’s bill.

In early July 1850, Taylor suddenly died. His successor, Millard Fillmore, endorsed the compromise. At this point a young Democratic representative from Illinois, Stephen A. Douglas, stepped forward to break Clay’s legislation into five separate bills that were enacted into law. Few members voted for the total package. The Compromise of 1850 proved to be the last and greatest contribution of Henry Clay and his generation. Calhoun died even before the debate concluded, and both Clay and Webster died two years later.

The Compromise of 1850 reflected a pragmatic balance of interests. Yet for all its careful construction it solved nothing, contrary to the expectations of most political leaders at the time who believed that the slavery issue had been put to rest. The Fugitive Slave Act angered many in the North, while the South was repulsed by northern denunciations of slavery.

With Fillmore too unpopular to be nominated in 1852, Whigs tried the old ploy of nominating a war hero, General Winfield Scott, to carry their banner. Whigs divided along sectional lines. The platform endorsed the Compromise of 1850, but Scott did not, a politically untenable position for a party’s nominee. A fierce fight within the Democratic Party gave the nomination to New Hampshire politician Franklin Pierce, who won the nomination when an exhausted convention after forty-nine ballots finally settled on him as a compromise. His party managers convinced various delegates that he was “sound” on the compromise and would distribute patronage fairly (that is, not ignoring the South).

Scott, whose oldest daughter had converted to Catholicism, had hoped to court the Irish Catholic vote. His blatant catering to the immigrant vote stimulated anti-Catholicism and alienated growing nativist party members. Immigrant political opposition to temperance, a strong force in many Whig states, kept Irish and Germans loyal to the Democrats. Pierce crushed Scott, who carried only four states.

The magnitude of the defeat left the Whigs stunned. The Whig-party began to break apart under the pressure of sectional differences, dissatisfaction of temperance and antislavery reformers, and anti-Catholic nativists who had become alienated from both existing parties. Democrats experienced these tensions as well, but having won the White House and control of Congress, the party felt a confidence their rivals lacked.

Party hubris bore its own seeds of destruction, however. Pierce, an alcoholic, proved to be politically incompetent. He angered supporters in New York by siding with the anti-Van Buren wing of the party. His pro-southern policies won him some support in the South but alienated others within the party. His greatest mistake was to support Stephen Douglas’s Kansas-Nebraska Act in May 1854, one of the most fateful measures ever approved by Congress.

The measure promoted Douglas’s concept of “popular sovereignty,” which allowed the citizens of two new territories—Kansas and Nebraska—to vote to accept or reject slavery. Deferring to popular sovereignty expressed a democratic sentiment that voters within the states should decide the slave issue. The concept implied congressional neutrality on the slave issue in the territories, while making territories and states into laboratories of democratic governance. At the same time, the law repealed the provision in the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that no territory north or west of Missouri would ever have slavery.

Even before final passage the bill unleashed a firestorm of opposition in the North, opponents accused Douglas of serving the interests of the Slave Power—a label condemning southern influence in Washington. No doubt Douglas sought to win southern support in his bid to win the Democratic presidential nomination, but his main concern was to organize western territories to promote Chicago railroad interests that wanted to build a northern transcontinental railroad linking the East to the West.

Shocked by the reaction of northern public opinion against the act, party leaders were further jolted by the explosion of anti-Catholic, anti-foreign hysteria that manifested itself in the summer of 1854 with the formation of the American Party. An outgrowth of a secret nativist party whose members refused to declare themselves in the open, the party was dubbed the Know-Nothings because when a member was asked about the party he was required to answer, “I know nothing.” The party reflected the deep anxiety American Protestants felt with the largest influx of immigrants relative to the overall population in American history. Many of these immigrants were Irish and German Catholics. As a result, antislavery vied with nativism as the main issues before the American electorate. Both shattered old political alignments.

Antislavery leaders in the North sought to mobilize anti-Kansas-Nebraska Act voters through the formation of the new Republican Party, but the nativist movement complicated this plan. Events in Kansas, however, caused the American party itself to divide along sectional lines. In far-off Kansas, violence erupted as pro- and antislavery forces vied for control of the state government. In the first state election in 1855, proslavery forces gained control of the legislature through fraudulent voting. The proslavery legislature enacted draconian measures making it a felony to maintain that slavery did not legally exist in the territory, or even to print antislavery material. Further outrages in Kansas, fanned by the abolitionist press, spurred antislavery opinion in the North.

The establishment of the Republican Party came in fits and starts. It coalesced around a heterogeneous coalition of Christians and free-thinking Germans, temperance supporters and anti-prohibitionists, Free Soil Democrats and former Whigs, Yankee business leaders, farmers, and urban workingmen fearful of competition from slave labor.

Events in Kansas fostered the growth of the sectionally based Republican Party. Douglas's concept of popular sovereignty in Kansas turned into a bloody nightmare, a failed experiment for states as a laboratory for democracy. As the election of 1856 approached, the antislavery forces in Kansas organized the free-state government in Topeka. In response, the proslavery chief justice of the state ordered the arrest of free slavery leaders and the closing of two free-state newspapers in Lawrence. A proslavery sheriff and posse, against the advice of even many proslavery men, entered the free-state town of Lawrence, arrested many antislavery leaders, destroyed two newspaper presses, and burned the Free State Hotel. Only one person was killed in the attack, but press reports of the "sacking of Lawrence" inflamed northern opinion. When abolitionist and religious fanatic John Brown retaliated for the Lawrence raid by killing a family of alleged proslavery men living in Pottawatomie, he was greeted as a hero in some northern circles.

In the Senate, abolitionist Charles Sumner rose to deliver an attack on the administration in a speech entitled "The Crime against Kansas." Shortly after that May 1856 speech, a South Carolina congressman, Preston S. Brooks, entered the Senate chamber and beat the seated Sumner over the head with a cane until he was unconscious. Brooks believed southern honor was at stake in Sumner's verbal abuse of the venerated senator from South Carolina, Andrew P. Butler, who was Brooks's uncle. The attack on Sumner, in the very halls of the Senate, electrified northern opinion, who heard of the Sack of Lawrence the next day. Brooks resigned his seat, only to be triumphantly reelected. The ladies of Charleston presented Brooks with a silver-headed cane inscribed, "Hit him again."

Almost overnight the presidential campaign had been transformed. The events of May wrecked any chance Pierce might have had for a second term. When the faction-ridden Democratic Party met, it picked James Buchanan as standard-bearer. As ambassador to England during the Pierce presidency, Buchanan had avoided the controversy over the Kansas-Nebraska Act. An old Federalist who had switched to the Democratic Party, Buchanan, a bachelor whose brief marriage had ended in an annulment, brought stately appeal to party factions. The American (Know-Nothing) party went with former president Millard Fillmore, who tried to temper the party's anti-foreign rhetoric. (Many Know-Nothing candidates lower on the ballot declared themselves antislavery men.) Republicans turned to forty-three-year-old John C. Fremont, a political unknown, who had gained national fame as a western explorer. He was also the son-in-law of Thomas Hart Benton, who endorsed Buchanan. During the campaign, Democrats attacked Fremont as having secretly converted to Roman Catholicism, his wife's faith. Fremont was an Episcopalian, but Republicans found themselves unable to deal successfully with this attack.

The 1856 presidential campaign swept northern voters into delirious excitement, leading one veteran Indiana politician to observe that "Men,

Women & Children seemed to be out with a kind of fervor." Especially notable were young voters who rallied to the Republican cause. An estimated 83 percent of the northern electorate went to the polls in 1856. In the end, Buchanan was an easy victor in the Electoral College, although he failed to win the majority of the popular vote with 45.3 percent compared to Fremont's 33.1 percent and 21.6 percent for Fillmore. Buchanan's sweep of the Southern vote proved crucial to his election. This confirmed his opponents' view of him as at heart a southern man dressed in northern garb.

Further events assured that slavery became the dominant issue in American politics, which played to the strength of the nascent Republican Party. The critical question facing it was selection of a viable presidential candidate. The party found that man in a former Whig congressman, Abraham Lincoln. In 1858 few in the East knew Lincoln, but Illinoisans found in this small-town successful lawyer a gifted politician who combined principle and pragmatism, eloquence and humility, and intelligence without pretense. He gained national attention when he challenged Stephen Douglas for reelection to his Senate seat in 1858.

In a series of debates that took the candidates throughout the state, covered by the national press, the two men squared off in one of the most engaging contests in American history. Lincoln challenged Douglas's concept of popular sovereignty by maintaining that blacks possessed natural rights set down in the Declaration of Independence that made them equal as men. Lincoln believed government should protect natural rights by serving as a referee of sectional interests. Douglas ably defended his views, although he played to the racist sentiments of the tens of thousands who turned out for the debates by accusing Lincoln of believing in racial intermarriage. He accused Lincoln of refusing to recognize the legality of the Dred Scott decision. The case involved a freedom suit by a former slave, Dred Scott, whose owner had brought him into free federal territory in Iowa. Instead of ruling on the narrow merits of the case, Chief Justice Roger Taney, a Jackson appointee, ruled that slave ownership was a constitutional right based on property rights. This decision opened the possibility of establishing slavery in every federal territory and state. After it, many in the North concluded that Supreme Court failed in its role as a fair referee.

Lincoln won the popular vote, but he lost the Senate seat because Democrats held a narrow margin in the malapportioned legislature that actually picked the senator. The campaign brought Lincoln, shown on the next page in a campaign banner from his 1860 presidential bid, to national attention. In other states, Republicans made huge gains in Congress.

Emotions ran high in both the North and South by the time of the 1860 election. Passions had been inflamed by an unsuccessful attempt a year earlier when John Brown, already notorious for his Kansas killings, conspired with a small group of northern abolitionists to launch a slave uprising by raiding

a federal armory in Harpers' Ferry, Virginia. Brown was captured, tried by Virginia for treason, and executed in front of a howling Southern mob. Although the raid was denounced by leading politicians, including Lincoln, Brown was made into a martyr by northern abolitionists, which reinforced southern fears of the North. By this time, firebrands in the South and North called for force to protect what they saw as fundamental rights—states' rights versus human rights.

At the Chicago Republican convention in 1860, backers of Abraham Lincoln skillfully won the nomination of their candidate over New York's William Seward. The party platform stressed antislavery and free labor, acceptance of slavery in the South, but not the territories, a high tariff to benefit manufacturers and urban workers, the building of a transcontinental railroad, and a homestead act giving farmers free federal land.

The Democrats, the remaining national party, divided at their convention in Charleston, South Carolina. After 57 ballots the convention adjourned without nominating a candidate. Northern Democrats met to nominate Stephen Douglas. A few days later southern Democrats picked John Breckinridge of Kentucky. Meanwhile, a third group, the Constitutional Union Party, composed of conservative southern Whigs and Know-Nothings, nominated John Bell of Tennessee. While the election had four candidates, the race came down to two sectional contests, Lincoln and Douglas in the North and Breckinridge and Bell in the South. Douglas broke precedent by traveling the country to campaign.

On Election Day, Lincoln swept the North, where he gained 55 percent of the vote. He won the Electoral College. Douglas's only victory came in the border state of Missouri. Lincoln's campaign reflected a well-organized Republican Party on the state and local levels, which brought many new voters to the polls. In the South, Constitution Party nominee Breckinridge, defending the right of slaveholders to take slave property any place in the United States, defeated Bell. The election of an antislavery Republican president outraged the South. On December 20, 1860, South Carolina seceded from the Union. A lame duck Congress debated how to solve the crisis with a compromise. Meanwhile, a powerless Lincoln waited to be inaugurated. He would soon be tested by the worst crisis ever faced by the young nation.