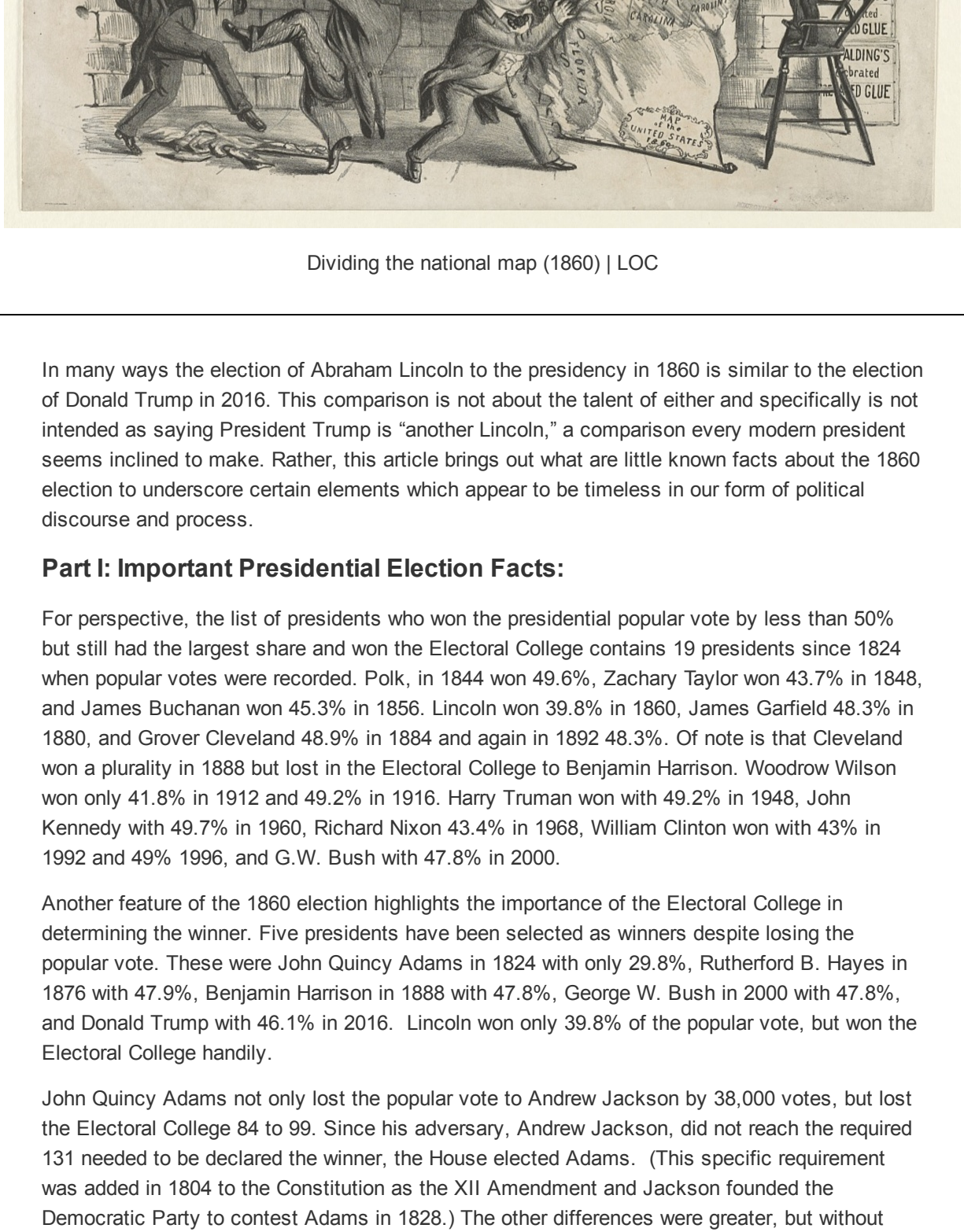




The Elections of 1860 and 2020

Michael Bogdasarian M.D., November 2, 2020
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Dividing the national map (1860) | LOC

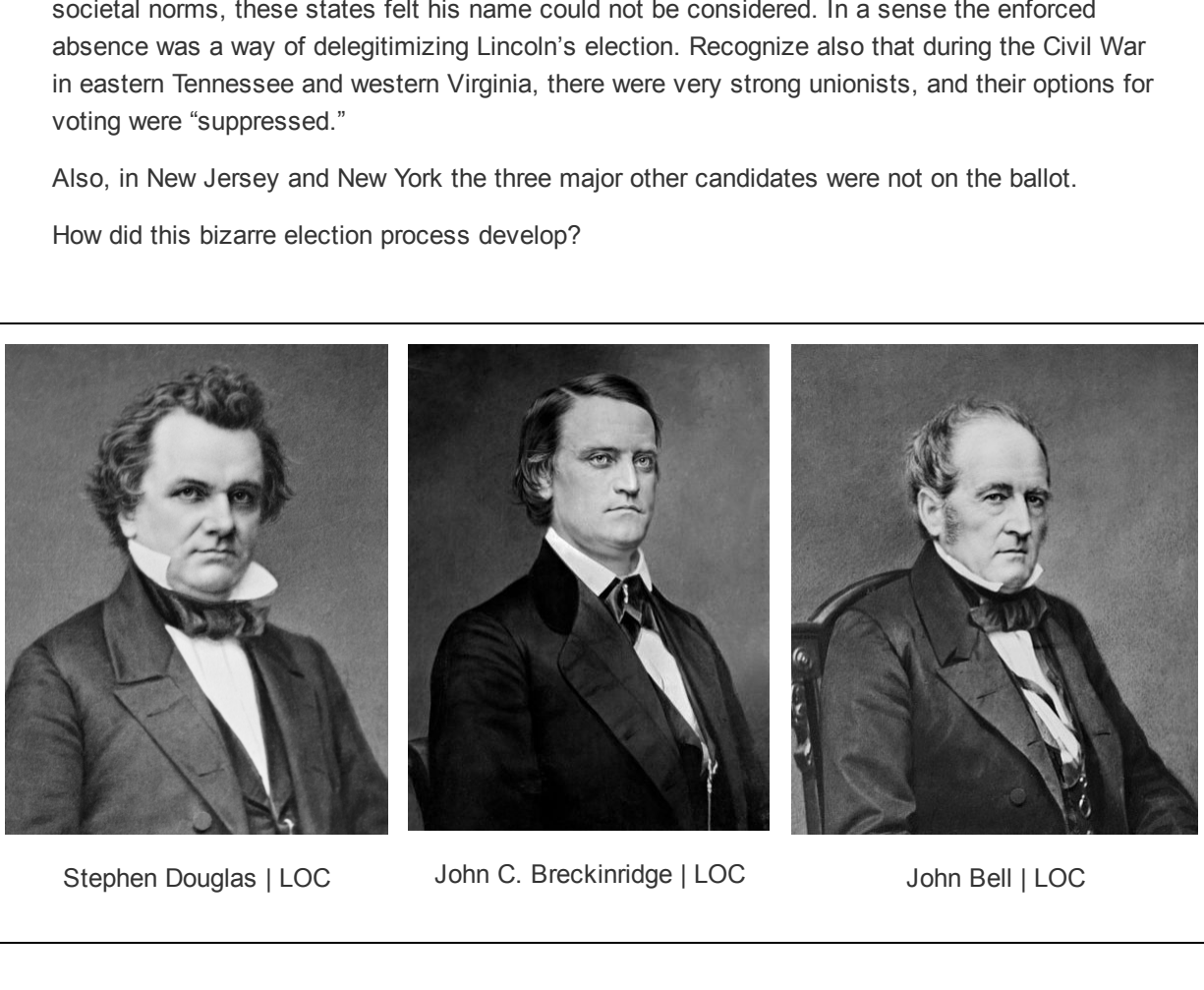
In many ways the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860 is similar to the election of Donald Trump in 2016. This comparison is not about the talent of either and specifically is not intended as saying President Trump is "another Lincoln," a comparison every modern president seems inclined to make. Rather, this article brings out what are little known facts about the 1860 election to underscore certain elements which appear to be timeless in our form of political discourse and process.

Part I: Important Presidential Election Facts:

For perspective, the list of presidents who won the presidential popular vote by less than 50% but still had the largest share and won the Electoral College contains 19 presidents since 1824 when popular votes were recorded. Polk, in 1844 won 49.6%, Zachary Taylor won 43.7% in 1848, and James Buchanan won 45.3% in 1856. Lincoln won 39.8% in 1860, James Garfield 48.3% in 1880, and Grover Cleveland 48.9% in 1884 and again in 1892 48.3%. Of note that Cleveland won a plurality in 1884 and lost in the Electoral College to Benjamin Harrison. Woodrow Wilson won only 41.8% in 1912 and 49.2% in 1916. Harry Truman won with 49.2% in 1948, John Kennedy with 49.7% in 1960, Richard Nixon 43.4% in 1968, William Clinton won with 43% in 1992 and 49% 1996, and G.W. Bush with 47.8% in 2000.

Another feature of the 1860 election highlights the importance of the Electoral College in determining the winner. Five presidents have been selected as winners despite losing the popular vote. These were John Quincy Adams in 1824 with only 29.8%, Rutherford B. Hayes in 1876 with 47.9%, Benjamin Harrison in 1888 with 47.8%, George W. Bush in 2000 with 47.8%, and Donald Trump with 46.1% in 2016. Lincoln won only 39.8% of the popular vote, but won the Electoral College handily.

John Quincy Adams not only lost the popular vote to Andrew Jackson by 38,000 votes, but lost the Electoral College 84 to 99. Since his adversary, Andrew Jackson, did not reach the required 131 needed to be declared the winner, the House elected Adams. (This specific requirement was added in 1804 to the Constitution as the XII Amendment and Jackson founded the Democratic Party to contest Adams in 1828). The other differences were greater, but without doing the calculations the percentages appear similar.



Electoral College map 1860 | Wikipedia

Many opinions have been expressed about the "unfairness" of the Electoral College, and while this article is not intended to be a defense of that institution, it should be emphasized that the framers of the Constitution thought long and hard about how each branch, and within the chambers of Congress itself, were to be selected.

(The only other significant change in the Constitution in this area was the passage of the XVII Amendment, which converted the election of senators to a popular vote by the people within a state, rather than by the state legislatures with input from the people and political parties of the state. Article I, Section 3, originally indicated senators were to be selected by state legislatures, not by popular vote within a state. The XVII Amendment was passed in 1913, making the election of senators a matter of winning the popular vote. Interestingly, the amendment does not stipulate winning "a majority" of the votes. Some states have established certain criteria on this issue. It appears many rely on plurality rather than majority. While one may argue the benefits or drawbacks to this process, it appears firmly established that the idea of "majority rules" influenced the outcome. There had been severe difficulties in a number of states of electing senators through legislatures.)

The framers divided up the manner in which those representing the "people" in the various branches in order to stifle the majority's ability to dominate the minority. By linking the election of the president to the Electoral College, a heavy concentration of voters for one party in one location is balanced by fewer voters in other locations. There still exists some controversy regarding the winner take all permitted in some states. In NYS, for example, Upstate has little chance of influencing the votes of its Electoral College to a Republican due to preponderance of Democrats in New York City. A similar situation exists in California. Some opinions are that each state's own Electoral College vote are assigned by district. This approach would give more influence to less well-populated areas within each state and have more effect on the ultimate outcome.

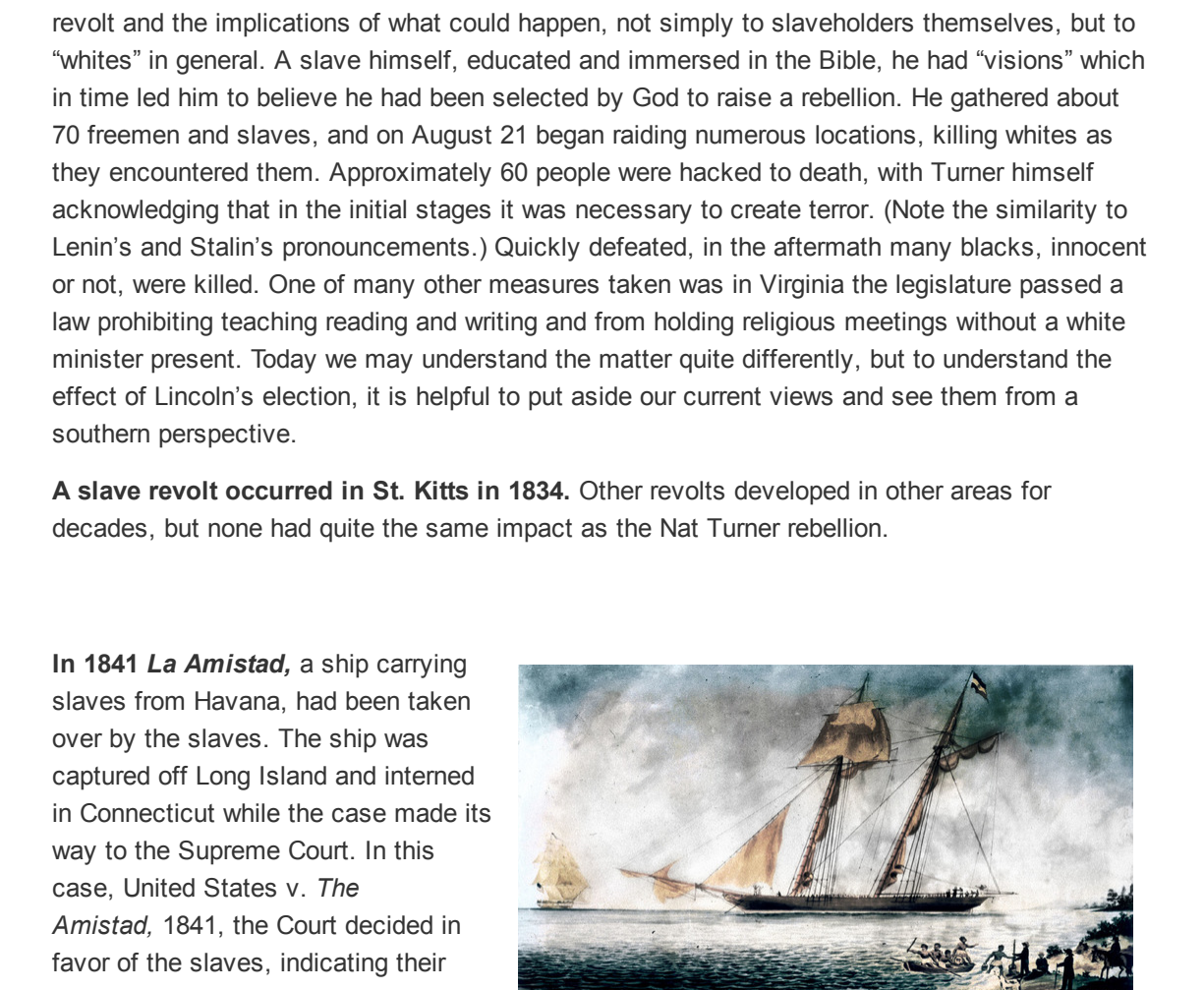
Back to the election of 1860:

Lincoln was not on the ballot in seven states, and no popular vote was recorded in South Carolina. Instead that legislature selected the Electoral College delegates and all votes were cast for Breckinridge.

So great was the concern that his statements on abolition of slavery would mean the death of that institution and the complete abrogation of the cultural, economic, theological, moral, and societal norms, these states felt his name could not be considered. In a sense the enforced absence was a way of delegitimizing Lincoln's election. Recognize also that during the Civil War in eastern Tennessee and western Virginia, there were very strong unionists, and their options for voting were "suppressed."

Also, in New Jersey and New York the three major other candidates were not on the ballot.

How did this bizarre election process develop?



Stephen Douglas | LOC

John C. Breckinridge | LOC

John Bell | LOC

Part II: Major Events leading up to the Election:

Part A: The Split in the Democratic Party:

The Democratic Party had been experiencing significant internal strife over the issue of slavery. As a number of states passed legislation eliminating slavery within their borders, Northern Democrats were forced to consider the wishes of their electorate on many occasions, often in opposition to their fellow party members from the South (Kavanaugh?). When the Democratic National Convention was convened in Charleston, South Carolina, in April 1860, the dissension led to an open rift. Delegates from Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, South Carolina, Mississippi, Texas, three from Arkansas, and one from Delaware left the hall. Note that none from Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Missouri, Maryland, or Kentucky walked out. Of interest is that Jefferson Davis was among the nominees promoted by those remaining. Failing to select a candidate at this convention, a second one was called in Baltimore on June 18 and Stephen Douglas was selected.

It is important to understand Stephen Douglas's position on slavery. Called "popular sovereignty," he felt the voters in a state should determine if slavery was to be permitted there. The effect was to open the territories which would become states to their own will rather than be subject to federal legislation. Since 1850, the last time a national compromise on slavery had been reached, the creation of new states threatened the slave-holding states with a loss of political power particularly in the Senate.



South Carolina Institute, site of the Democratic National Convention and Democratic Secession Convention in 1860 | public domain

Another candidate was John Breckinridge, Vice President of the United States under President Buchanan. With the split in the Democratic Party, the Southern Democratic Wing again left the convention in Baltimore prior to Douglas's nomination and moved to a different location in the city. There they nominated Breckinridge for the presidency.

The fourth candidate, John Bell, Bell had been a supporter of Jackson but broke with his allies over several issues, taking over the Whig Party in Tennessee. Considerable to secession but a slave owner, he found considerable support in the Border States.

As the Whig Party collapsed, a new party, The Constitutional Party, formed and nominated Bell to be president with Edward Everett as Vice President. Unable to establish a firm platform or sway Northern or Southern voters, he received the electoral votes from Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee (13%). He had hoped to prevent any single candidate from winning enough votes in the Electoral College to shift the decision to the House where he believed he would be chosen as the compromise candidate.

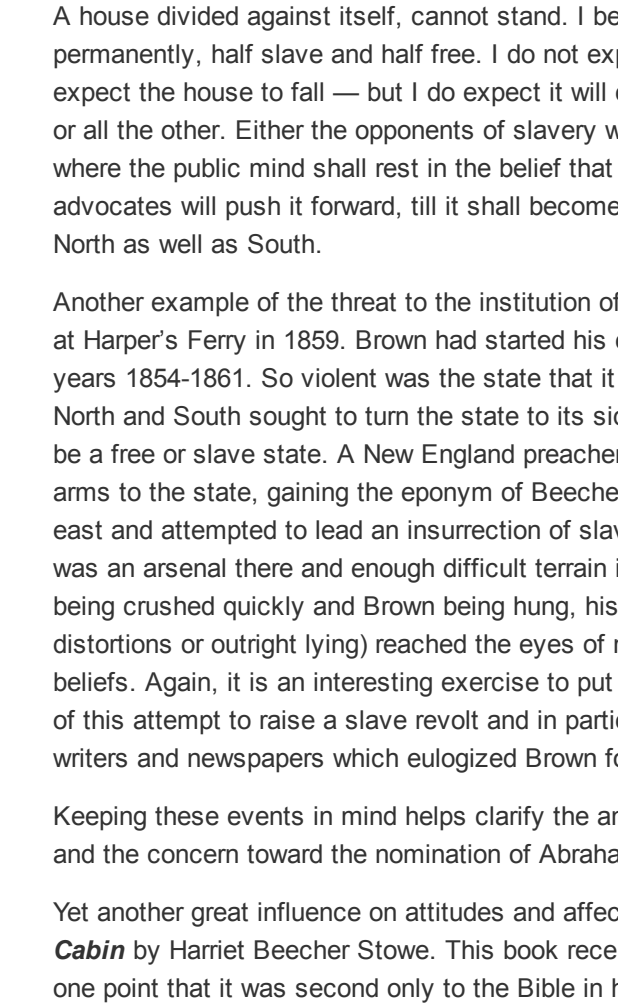
The Fusion Party was, as the name implies, a conglomerate of various splinter groups. It was not strong enough to bring forth a candidate, but may have listed people on various state ballots or had names written in.

What critical events had developed in the preceding years which affected the division between North and South, at least as regarding slavery? (It is my contention that without the existence of slavery there would not have been a civil war.)

The controversies revealed in the Republican convention were not as severe though political infighting, deal-making (which gave Lincoln the ability to deny agreeing to some of them), and packing the hall with people whose passes were fake, colored the event.

As the *New York Herald* wrote after the convention, May 19, 1860:

"The conduct of the republican party in this nomination is a remarkable indication of small intellect, growing smaller. They pass over...statesmen and able men, and they take up a fourth rate lecturer, who cannot speak good grammar."



Discovery of Nat Turner | Bettman Archive

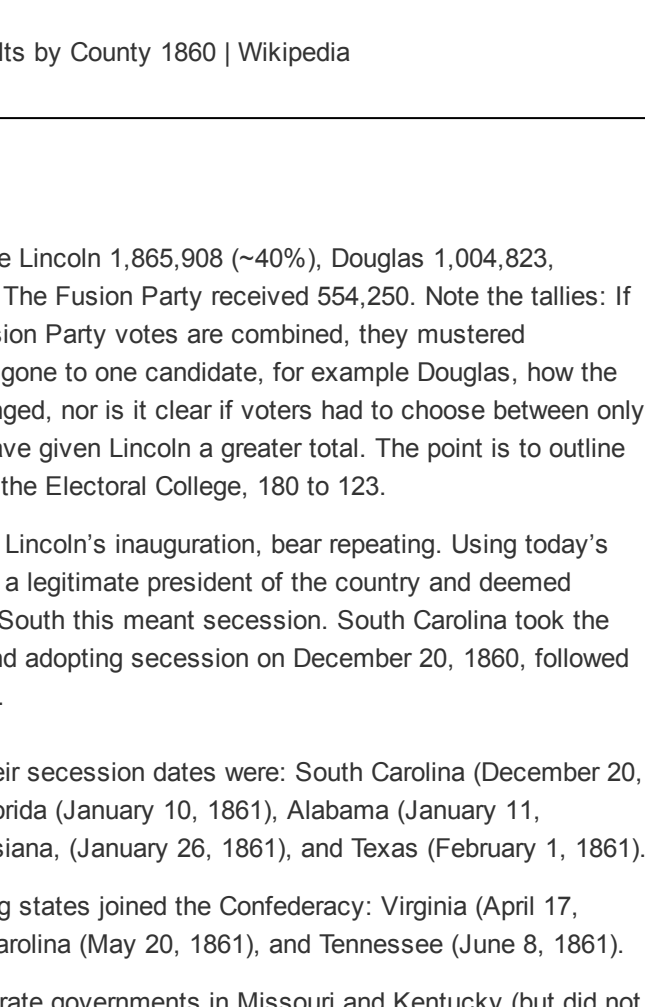
Part B: Major Events Involving Slavery:

Many were aware of slave revolts in the Western Hemisphere. In 1791 Haitian slaves revolted. The fighting was intense and eventually the self-free slaves won independence in 1804. Indeed, throughout the known and Western World, the intensity of feeling about slavery was rising markedly. In a sense, the South saw itself as increasingly isolated and threatened at its very foundations. Remember, the matter of slavery was not simply the moral aspects of human bondage, but of an entire culture, economic, political, and social, all in play.

The Nate Turner rebellion (there is a movie on the subject, which I have not seen) in 1831 raised the specter of a major slave revolt and the implications of what could happen, not simply to slaveholders themselves, but to "whites" in general. A slave himself, educated and immersed in the Bible, he had "visions" which in time led him to believe he had been selected by God to raise a rebellion. He gathered about 70 freed men and slaves, and on August 21 began raiding numerous locations, killing whites as they encountered them. Approximately 60 people were hacked to death, with Turner himself acknowledging that in the initial stages it was necessary to create terror. (Note the similarity to Lenin's and Stalin's pronouncements.) Quickly defeated, in the aftermath many blacks, innocent or not, were killed. One of many other measures taken was in Virginia the legislature passed a law prohibiting teaching reading and writing and from holding religious meetings without a white minister present. Today we may understand the matter quite differently, but to understand the effect of Lincoln's election, it is helpful to put aside our current views and see them from a southern perspective.

A slave revolt occurred in St. Kitts in 1834. Other revolts developed in other areas for decades, but none had quite the same impact as the Nat Turner rebellion.

In 1841 *La Amistad*, a ship carrying slaves from Havana, had been taken over by the slaves. The ship was captured off Long Island and interned in Connecticut while the case made its way to the Supreme Court. In this case, *United States v. The Amistad*, 1841, the Court decided in favor of the slaves, indicating their transportation as slaves was illegal and the mutiny performed in self-defense. Recall that only the United States and Western European countries had declared international slave trade illegal or abolished slavery in all holdings. While the matter was decided on relatively narrow grounds, that of an illegal act of transporting slaves, those in the South could not help but feel the door had been cracked to judge all slavery "illegal" and hand over the "right to freedom" to insurrection as a matter of self-defense.

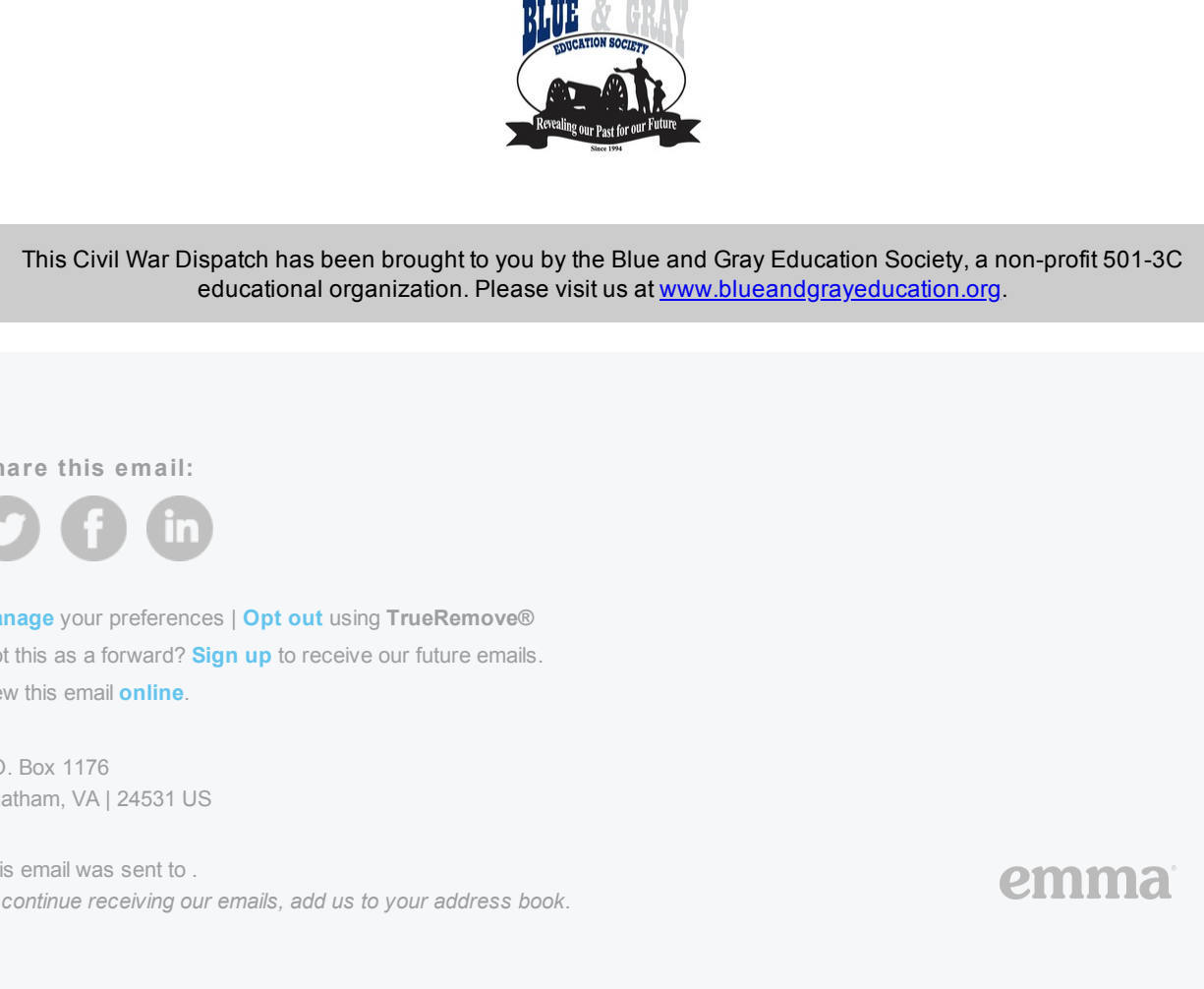


La Amistad | public domain

The Caning of Charles Sumner: After the compromise of 1850, the language and vicious attacks even in Congress mounted. One historian indicated as many as 70 physical attacks occurred, causing many to arm themselves! In 1856 Charles Sumner, senator from Massachusetts, delivered a scathing speech particularly targeting two colleagues on the matter of allowing Kansas into the Union either as a free or slave state.

He characterized Douglas to his face as a "noise, some, equal, and nameless animal...not a proper model for an American senator." Andrew Butler, who was not present, received more elaborate treatment. Mocking the South Carolina senator's stance as a man of chivalry, the Massachusetts senator charged him with taking "a mistress...who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; whose polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his sight—I mean," added Sumner, "the harlot, Slavery."

Representative and Professor Brooks, a relative of Butler, decided that since Sumner "was no gentleman," and therefore not entitled to a duel, chose to treat him as a dog. He went into the Senate chamber and beat Sumner over the head repeatedly with a cane, leading to that man's long absence from the Senate while he recovered. (The Senate and Massachusetts kept Sumner's seat empty until his return a couple years later.) He hailed as a hero in the South, for defending not only his family's honor but indirectly that of the entire South. Brooks received numerous canes at his office with wishes to use them on others! Brooks survived a censure by the House but resigned, only to be reelected immediately. (Think of the comments by Illinois State Representative Kifowit about Representative Breen, Nov. 2018.)



Dred Scott | Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis

Matters became even more confused and threatening a year later. In 1857 the **Dred Scott case** raised hackles for those on the abolitionist side of the question. Dred Scott was a slave who had been taken into free territory by his owner. To shorten a lengthy story, Scott sued to be released from bondage. The case made its way to the Supreme Court, presided over by Chief Justice Roger Taney. In a 7-2 decision, Taney indicated that Scott was not a citizen and therefore had no standing and therefore could not sue. This decision alone would have rendered Scott's suit meaningless and ended the matter. However, Taney went further, perhaps at the encouragement of President Buchanan, ruling that the Missouri Compromise of 1820 itself was unconstitutional and that the Ordinance of 1787 did not confirm freedom or citizenship to non-whites within the Northwest Territories. He wrote the following as part of the justification of the decision:

"[Black Africans imported as slaves] had for more than a century before been regarded as beings of an inferior order, and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. He was bought and sold, and treated as an ordinary article of merchandise and traffic, whenever a profit could be made by it. This opinion was at that time fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race. It was regarded as an axiom in morals as well as in politics, which no one thought of disputing, or supposed to be open to dispute; and men in every grade and position in society daily and habitually acted upon it in their private pursuits, as well as in matters of public concern, without doubting for a moment the correctness of this opinion."

While one may regret the language used, it is worth recognizing that slavery had been part of human activity everywhere in the world for thousands of years. It only was in the late 1700s that Western philosophy shifted in attitude, while slavery persisted (and in some forms persists to this day) nearly everywhere else. Largely through the efforts of the British to interrupt the slave trade, attitudes in the North were aligned with destroying this institution. An argument could be made that the North, which had divested itself of slavery only relatively recently, took this position on moral grounds only because its economy no longer needed slaves. I believe this argument narrows the matter too much, particularly as the Industrial Revolution did not hit the United States until the mid-1800s. The vast majority of the population was rural and dependent upon farming and small businesses.

(As of 2013, 99 countries have signed or otherwise committed to participation in the 1926 Slavery Convention and its subsequent Protocol. There are 193 countries in the United Nations, with the Holy See and State of Palestine as non-member observers.)

U.S. Postage, 1958 issue, commemorating the Lincoln-Douglas debates | U.S. Government, Post Office Department

In 1858, as one may recall, the **Lincoln-Douglas debates** again brought the issue of slavery front and center. Despite Lincoln's statements that he was not in favor of abolishing slavery where it existed, he did state that at some point the matter would have to be addressed nationally. His speech at Springfield, Illinois, when he received the Republican nomination for the Senate, said in part:

A house divided against itself, cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently, half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved — I do not expect the house to fall — but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other. Either the opponents of slavery will arrest the further spread of it, and place it where the public mind shall rest in the belief that it is in the course of ultimate extinction; or its advocates will push it forward, till it shall become lawful in all the States, old as well as new — North as well as South.

Another example of the threat to the institution of slavery was embodied in **John Brown's raid** at Harper's Ferry in 1859. Brown had started his campaign in Kansas against slavery during the years 1854-1861. So violent was the state that it came to be known as "Bleeding Kansas." Both North and South sought to turn the state to its side by choosing under "popular sovereignty" to be a free or slave state. A New England preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, arranged shipments of arms to the state, gaining the eponym of Beecher's Bibles. Brown carried his messianic zeal east and attempted to lead an insurrection of slaves. He targeted Harper's Ferry because there was an arsenal there and enough difficult terrain in which he could hide. Despite the insurrection being crushed quickly and Brown being hung, his final statements at his trial (putting aside the distortions or outright lying) reached the eyes of millions and pushed them deeper into their beliefs. Again, it is an interesting exercise to put oneself in the position of a southerner learning of this attempt to raise a slave revolt and in particular witness the reaction among northern writers and newspapers which eulogized Brown for his zeal in overturning the "evil" of slavery.

Keeping these events in mind helps clarify the antipathy toward the Republican Party in general and the concern toward the nomination of Abraham Lincoln particularly.

Yet another great influence on attitudes and affecting voting was the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. This book received enormous numbers of people, claiming at one point that it was second only to the Bible in households. It is alleged Lincoln said on meeting her in 1862, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war." Whether this decision actually occurred is of little consequence. The book was adapted to theaters and received widespread applause throughout the North, and opprobrium in the South.

Results by county, with darker shades indicating larger percentages for the winning candidate. Red is for Lincoln (Republican), blue is for Douglas (Northern Democratic), green is for Breckinridge (Southern Democratic), yellow is for Bell (Constitutional Union), and purple is for "Fusion" (Non-Republican/Democratic Fusion). South Carolina had no popular vote.
Election Results by County 1860 | Wikipedia

Part III: The Election Results:

The election results by popular vote gave Lincoln 1,865,908 (~40%), Douglas 1,004,823, Breckinridge 689,148, and Bell 590,901. The Fusion Party received 554,250. Note the tallies: If Douglas, Breckinridge, Bell's, and Fusion Party votes are combined, they mustered 2,488,270. It is not clear if all votes had gone to one candidate, for example Douglas's, how the Electoral College votes would have changed, nor is it clear if voters had to choose between only two candidates if that limitation would have given Lincoln a greater total. The point is to outline the dominance of Lincoln's tally through the Electoral College, 180 to 123.

The events after the election, but before Lincoln's inauguration, bear repeating. Using today's language, the South felt Lincoln was not a legitimate president of the country and deemed resistance the only proper path. For the South this meant secession. South Carolina took the first step in calling a state convention and adopting secession on December 20, 1860, followed by the others in rather quick succession.

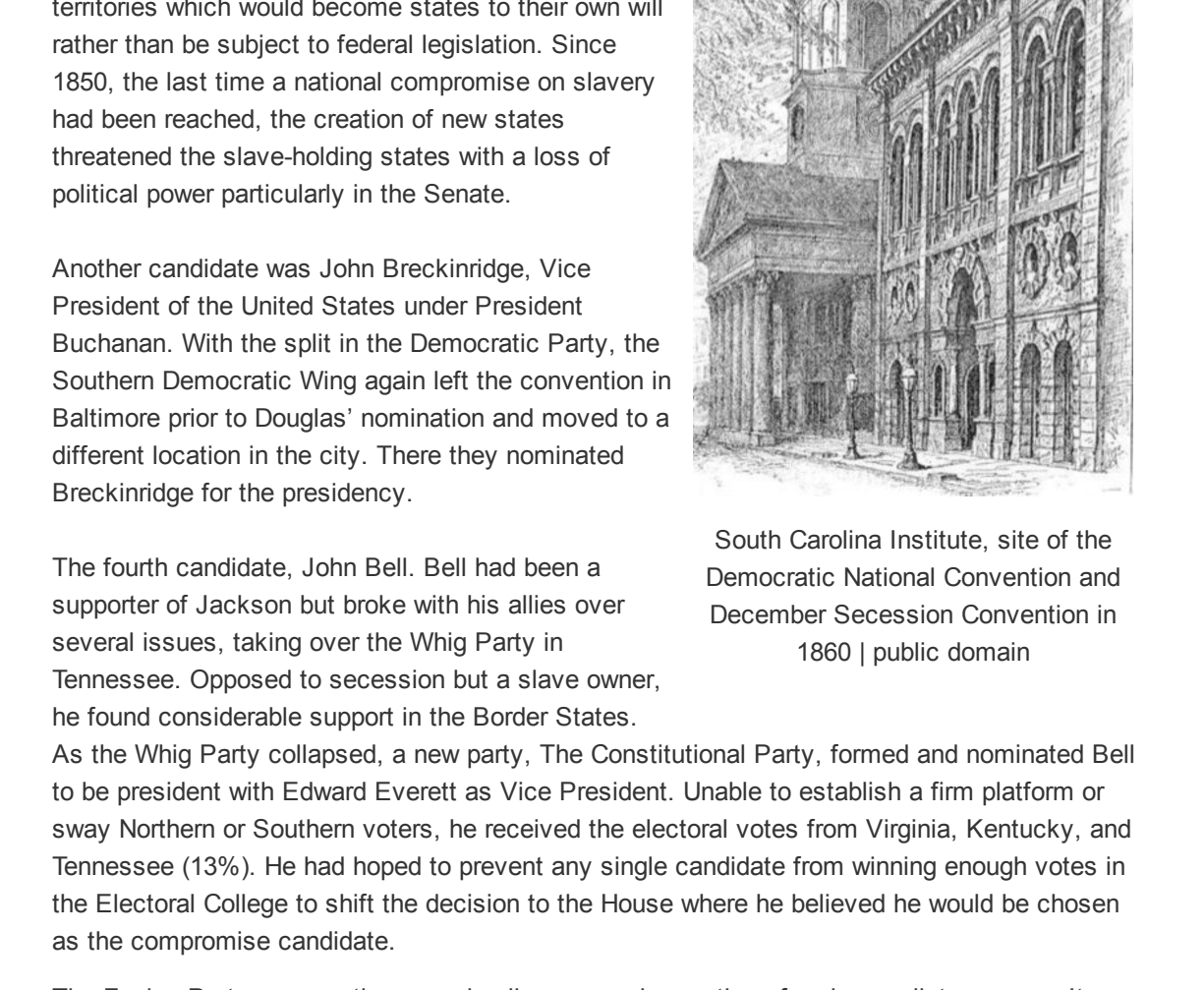
The 11 states of the CSA, in order of their secession dates were: South Carolina (December 20, 1860), Mississippi (January 9, 1861), Florida (January 10, 1861), Alabama (January 11, 1861), Georgia (January 19, 1861), Louisiana (January 26, 1861), and Texas (February 1, 1861).

After the fall of Fort Sumter, the following states joined the Confederacy: Virginia (April 17, 1861), Arkansas (May 6, 1861), North Carolina (May 20, 1861), and Tennessee (June 8, 1861). Secession was declared by pro-Confederate governments in Missouri and Kentucky (but did not become effective as it was opposed by their pro-Union state governments). When Kentucky was invaded by the Confederate army under Leonidas Polk, the state joined the Union. Missouri, in effect, was "conquered" by the Union even after the defeat at Wilson's Creek. It remained a battleground of what we call today guerilla war.

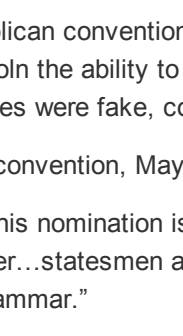
Note that even before Lincoln officially took office, the split had occurred. A terrible war would be fought to resolve the matter, with a legacy still with us today.

I end this article with a short summary of the 1864 election. The Civil War was only turning a bit in favor of the North in the run-up to the election. Indeed, Lincoln had written a letter and sealed it in an envelope, signed by his Cabinet, in which he indicated that he was likely to lose the upcoming election and in the interim between the election and inauguration the administration should do all they could to win the war. Of particular note is that his previous secretary of the treasury, Salmon Chase, had worked to undermine the possibility of Lincoln being nominated and Lincoln's Democrat opponent was Gen. George Brinton McClellan, the soldier who led the northern armies until he was fired in late 1862. Furthermore, Lincoln by this time had suspended the writ of habeas corpus in 1861 and continued to ignore the ruling of the Supreme Court in that matter and in the suppression of the press and political opponents such as Clement Vallandigham. He also issued the Emancipation Proclamation as an Executive Order. It wasn't until December 1865, that the XIII Amendment was passed.

Most of us will acknowledge that Lincoln was one of our greatest presidents, but we should not let that judgment impede our ability to understand the fullness and complexity of the state of the nation prior to his 1860 election. By reviewing basic elements which influenced the outcome, I believe we all gain a better footing for understanding the issues we face currently.



Lincoln's inauguration 1861 | LOC



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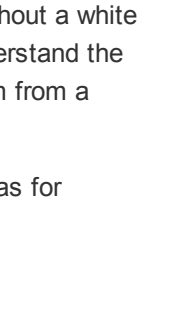
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