

CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: The Election(s) of 1860

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Feature Essay

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Miller, Randall *CIVIL WAR SESQUICENTENNIAL: The Election(s) of 1860.*

By all accounts, the election of 1860 was what political scientists would later term a “critical election”—that is, an election that reflected and/or affected a significant shift in party alignments and/or brought about a significant shift in policies that reflected and/or affected political behavior thereafter, at least for a generation. Without benefit of political scientists’ methodology or terminology, the American people in 1860 understood that the election was critical and that they needed to stand up to be counted. Indeed, scholars have estimated that more than 81 percent of the eligible voters cast ballots in 1860, making it the second highest percentage turnout in American history. But what had the voters decided in 1860? That question beggared contemporaries and nagged scholars thereafter.

The most critical question about the election was not who won, but whether those who had lost would accept the result. And this, more than examinations of the election itself, has been the focus of new work on the meaning of 1860.

Many studies going back to Allen Nevins and continuing to recent publications have noted how threats of disunion coming from southern “fire-eaters” in the late 1850s into the 1860 election cycle disrupted ordinary political processes and then fractured the Democratic Party, leading to the Republican electoral victory. By some accounts, especially those focusing on southern honor that result almost demanded that southerners honor their threats that any Republican gain would mean secession, lest they lose face at home and credibility in history. Whether out of a crisis of fear after John Brown’s raid and “northern” triumph at the polls and/or anger and frustration at their diminishing political prospects in Washington, white southerners gave the day to the secessionists in the other elections of 1860—namely, those choosing delegates to the secession conventions in the deep South. In doing so, they in effect decided that they owed no loyalty to an electoral process that had sustained the republic since the first contested elections of Washington’s and Jefferson’s day. They set about “electing” a new government in forming a Confederate States of America

and urging other states to join them. All this is almost consensus among historians, though they sometimes differ over the details and daily dynamics of the secession process.

Scholars essaying the election also note two vital facts that undermined defeated southerners' willingness to accept Lincoln's "authority" as president-elect or even the legitimacy of his election. One fact was that Lincoln's election owed entirely to northern votes. Boding ill for acceptance of any Republican victory in the national election was the refusal of deep southern states even to have Republican electors on a ballot. Not surprisingly, Lincoln did not win a single slave state or even a majority in any congressional district in one. A second and related problem was that Lincoln "won" with less than 40 percent of the popular vote, and with not so much as one vote in many southern districts. As a minority president who gained the Electoral College victory on a regional vote, Lincoln hardly had a political claim to southern acceptance of his victory. He did have a constitutional one, which secessionists refused to respect. But it would be fears of a supposedly antislavery president and party more than the circumstances of Lincoln's election that caused secessionists to win their own elections to take their states out of the Union before Lincoln could be inaugurated and do any damage to their interests. Again, on that subject, scholars generally agree.

Less agreement comes when considering Lincoln's actions as president-elect to secure his election. The initiative came from seceding southern states that did not even wait on Lincoln's inauguration to reject the results of the election. As president-elect, Lincoln sought to arrest the process of secession by giving reassurances to the South that his administration posed no direct threat to slavery and southern interests. On December 22, 1860, he wrote as much in a private letter to his erstwhile friend and former Whig colleague Alexander Stephens of Georgia that "Do the people of the South really entertain the fears that a Republican administration would, directly or indirectly, interfere with their slaves, or with them, about their slaves? If they do, I wish to assure you, as once a friend, and still, I hope not an enemy, that there is no cause for such fears. The South would be in no more danger in this respect, than it was in the days of Washington." The letter was somewhat disingenuous for Lincoln surely knew that Republicans in power would try to confine slavery and otherwise limit its growth and power, as was their principal reason-for-being and the expectation of those northerners who had voted for them in 1860. But it was also an honest effort to convince supposedly non-radical southerners to let the political process

play out normally and thereby to buy time for unionism to reassert itself. Doing so would give the nation a chance to accept the result of the election rather than coming apart over it. Whether Lincoln bet too much on supposed southern unionists rallying to reverse the secession tide is an issue much debated among scholars. Just so in considering the extent to which Lincoln actually believed his words and actions—really non-actions—would work.

As efforts to bring the seceded states back into the Union failed during the “secession winter” and as a crisis loomed at Fort Sumter, Lincoln was sworn in as president and Republicans took their seats in a Congress that, with members of the seceded states now gone, gave them a party majority. How they managed such a transition to power is the subject of some debate among historians, though surprisingly little recent work has examined that process and its implications for translating an electoral “victory” into Republican policy. Seemingly, though, the Republicans had “won” the election.

But, to judge by recent work on Lincoln taking office, Lincoln knew he had to make a case for the necessity of recognizing and respecting the result of the election in a way that did not emphasize Republican triumph. In his March 4, 1861, inaugural address he sought again to allay southern fears about Republican intentions by insisting that they would respect the Constitution and make no aggressive moves against the South, while also declaring the illegality and impracticality of secession and promising that the Union would defend its fundamental interest in self-preservation. More important, he explained why it was necessary for southerners to accept the result of the election when he observed that “Plainly, the central idea of secession, is the essence of anarchy.” Once begun, it can have no end, and the great experiment in self-government that God anointed and history required would collapse. The election of 1860 thus was about the validity, credibility, and sustainability of the electoral process itself.

Circumstances and events ended any prospect of secessionists honoring the election result. The seceded states had no interest in returning to a Union that they believed fundamentally had rejected their interests in protecting slavery, and the necessity of legitimating their own new government soon drove them to seize federal property and then to attack Fort Sumter. And the war came.

For contemporaries and many historians, the ordeal by fire that came in 1861 defined the meaning of the election(s) of 1860. Many historians have

focused on the causes and consequences of southern fears about an “impending crisis” over slavery and explained the election(s) in terms of southern preoccupations more than northern concerns. Also, many studies have taken the long view of the election, examining, for example, the rise and fall of the second American party system, the emergence of a distinctly (and increasingly abrasive) sectional politics in the 1850s, and the simultaneous groundswell of anti-partyism among fire-eating southerners and antislavery northerners that made political compromise anathema. Such studies showed the structural failures in an American party system designed to keep the divisive slavery issue out of public discourse and electoral considerations and a culture of politics that thrived on pugnacious electioneering, conspiracy theories, and personality over principle.

Although scholars have disagreed on any “inevitability” about the crack-up as occurred in 1860-1861 or about the extent to which non-party or anti-party radicals disrupted the political system to the point where it was incapable of righting itself amid a decade of sectional rancor, those scholars generally have framed discussion of the election(s) of 1860 in dialectics, with the initiatives principally coming from southern demands for slavery’s expansion and protection and the reactions from northerners increasingly adamant to assert their own “free soil” and other interests by the late 1840s (David Goldfield in *America Aflame* almost alone places the onus on a northern evangelical moralism starting and impelling distrust and disunion). Doing so has made understanding southern fears seemingly more important than northern ones. And it has left the focus on the election(s) of 1860 largely a matter of explaining how the war came rather than how contemporaries understood and acted on their interests in those elections. It also has discounted the importance of intraparty differences and internal struggles within the states, especially northern ones, in explaining the successes of particular Republicans and Democrats at the polls and southern secession afterward.

To be sure, scholars such as Eric Foner, William Gienapp, Tyler Anbinder, and others re-oriented the focus on politics toward considerations of northern political identities and interests. They did so by showing that northerners pushed their own initiatives in trying to contain a “slave power” and defined themselves in terms of the “free soil” principles that created and held together a Republican party in the 1850s and even informed northern Democratic politics at the same time. In their telling, the North-South dialectic derived its energy from northern as much as southern imperatives and impulses. And the stakes were so high that

“the people” turned out to vote for their interest in record numbers. Such interest carried with it ever greater expectations that the men who sought their votes would act on them, with manly courage and without hesitation or equivocation. They expected elections to bring results. This was as true for northerners as for southerners.

What is needed now is a fuller exploration of those northern interests and imperatives. Recent work by Adam Goodheart, Harold Holzer, Douglas Egerton, and especially Russell McClintock has emphasized the energy and anger of northerners, who organized as Wide-Awakes and other political clubs to press for Republican victory and then to demand that Republicans make no concessions to southerners refusing to respect that victory. Scholars remind us that the election of 1860 was in fact many elections—the presidential one conducted in the South between a split Democratic party, with Stephen A. Douglas and John C. Breckinridge pitted against one another, the one in the border states where the Union party sought to keep a peace by beating Republicans and Democrats of all stripes, and the one in the northern states between the Douglas Democrats and the Republicans. We know much about those particular contests, but what is not so well understood is how the elections worked out, on the ground, in the northern states and how the expectations coming from the many state and local elections defined and directed what people demanded of winner and loser alike. It was not only southerners who viewed the election as a test of union and honor.

Thinking about the election(s) of 1860 in more local terms will help make sense of its national significance and will enlarge the scope of inquiry to give northern ideas and interests equal consideration in explaining how and why the consequences of the election(s) of 1860 proved so difficult to contain within traditional political categories. It also will take the focus of the election(s) of 1860 from preoccupations with political elites to examinations of the people on the ground. Doing so will provide the kind of people’s history for the politics of the day that will help make sense of what people wanted and expected the election to realize, whether on the winning or losing side.

Randall Miller is Professor of History at Saint Joseph’s University, has written on various aspects of slavery, the Civil War, and Reconstruction. Among his many books, he has forthcoming, co-edited with Paul Cimbala, a collection of essays on the “unfinished” Civil War.