

The Democratic Collapse: How Gender Politics Broke a Party and a Nation, 1856-1861

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Review

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Haumesser, Lauren N. *The Democratic Collapse: How Gender Politics Broke a Party and a Nation, 1856-1861*. University of North Carolina Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$99.00. ISBN 9781469671420 pp. 230. PAPERBACK. \$27.95 ISBN 9781469671437 pp. 230

In this engaging and succinct work, Lauren N. Haumesser complicates our understanding of the unraveling of the two-party system in the 1850s, shedding new light on the coming of the Civil War through a careful examination of the gendered rhetoric of Republicans, Democrats, and, ultimately, Constitutional Unionists. In the introduction to her dissertation-turned-monograph, Haumesser carefully defines her twofold understanding of “gender politics”: the use of images of masculinity and femininity to make political arguments and the use of gender “to make powerful arguments about slavery” (3). Her work interrogates how political parties in the five years leading up to the Civil War made use of both imagery and gendered arguments and how this contributed to disunionism and the collapse of the Democratic Party.

Following a brisk and historiographically rich introduction, *The Democratic Collapse* unfolds in five chapters that survey gendered rhetoric and growing division in the Civil War era. In each chapter, Haumesser uses lively anecdotes and carefully curated evidence to deepen her readers’ understanding of the political tumult that led to sectional collapse, including the election of 1856, debates about ‘domestic relations’ in territorial Utah and Kansas, the responses to John Brown’s raid, the 1860 presidential campaign, and, finally, the Secession Winter that followed. She is a keen analyst of visual as well as written evidence from partisan newspapers.

In 1856, Democrat strategy was to associate Republicans with all forms of radicalism. Democratic newspapers portrayed Republican candidate John C. Fremont as foppish and fundamentally emasculated in his relationship with his wife Jessie, who—scandalously—spoke in public. The political followed the personal, as Democrats portrayed Fremont as the head of a party that favored abolitionism and gender radicalism, twin threats to social stability in a world in which the Democrat dogma of white male independence hinged also upon a belief in political dependence and inequality for all others. John Brown’s raid at Harpers Ferry heightened

Democrat fear and the erroneous assumption that Republicanism inspired Brown's audacity and threatened all so-called "domestic institutions."

That Democrats vilified Republicans as radicals is, as Haumesser notes in her introduction, covered in other works, most notably Michael Pierson's *Free Hearts and Free Homes* (UNC, 2003). *The Democratic Collapse* carefully builds on this historiographical foundation and then digs deeper, showing the ways in which growing divisions among Democrats were predicated upon gendered understandings and rhetoric; the "democratic" in her title is about the collapse of the Democrats as much as that of democracy. The first challenge to party unity came in response to the Lecompton Constitution, which northern Democrats rightly identified as anti-democratic. Northern Democrats (most notably, Stephen Douglas) disappointed Southern counterparts who had come to believe in the need for a vigorous proslavery government in Kansas. Northern Democrats were wedded to the idea that white manhood itself was implicated in upholding their right to a fair vote on the issue of slavery. This, Haumesser shows, proved problematic when Republicans cleverly claimed that Mormon polygamy in Utah was also protected under popular sovereignty.

Intra-party turmoil intensified in 1859, as the Border South feared that the enslaved population would follow Brown's model, rebel, and endanger Southern women and homes. Douglas and other Northern Democrats discovered too late that they had miscalculated in their failure "to attend to the racialized and sexualized anxieties of Democrats in the Border and Upper South" (p. 99). Though northern Democrats tried to garner votes through race-baiting stories of white women leaving Republican husbands for Black men in 1860, they failed to appeal to even the moderate Southern contingent who no longer trusted them to protect slavery alongside patriarchy. These fears led them to "take the manly action of splitting the Union to secure slavery" (127). In the end, it was not just that gender politics failed to smooth over sectional divisions among Democrats but that their differences *about gender itself* contributed to the schism, especially as Southern Democrats started to promote a new nationalism "symbolized by an idealized white southern womanhood" (130). By the 1860 presidential campaign, Haumesser demonstrates compellingly that northern and southern Democrats were not just in disagreement upon a candidate but that their worldviews had become incompatible.

When we teach the 1850s, we often talk about the multiple ways to understand and explain this pivotal decade—the increasing divide over the morality and fate of slavery in the

United States, growing polarization between North and South, and the breakdown of the two-party system, in part due to the collapse of the Democratic Party which had once, Haumesser reminds us, comprised more than half the electorate. This book increases understanding of all these explanations while also offering great examples of visual evidence to use with students. Haumesser has her eye on the present as well as this past, offering a “sober warning” in her conclusion that, as they did in the past, both political rhetoric and the concessions it allows “can lead to disaster for party and country” (159). At what point the antebellum partisan newspaper editors, writers, and politicians understood themselves to be hyperbolic and at what point the members of their audience were true believers, captive to their racist beliefs and fears of a world turned upside down, is not always clear, though her note that to many, “accuracy mattered less than shock value” feels like a warning for our times as well (111).

Bonnie Laughlin-Schultz is Professor of History at Eastern Illinois University. The author of The Tie That Bound Us: The Women of John Brown’s Family and the Legacy of Radical Abolitionism (Cornell, 2013), she is currently at work on a book about abolitionist understandings and debates about American history.