

CHAPTER 3

Beyond the Realignment Synthesis: The 1860 Election Reconsidered

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The Limits of the Realignment Synthesis

To the “New Political Historians” of the 1960s and 1970s, realignment theory seemed to describe the circumstances of the 1850s particularly well.¹ The election of 1860 (along with those of 1828, 1896, and 1932) became a paradigmatic “critical election,” not so much, ironically, because it triggered the Civil War (which surely makes 1860 by far the most critical election in U.S. history in a non-jargon-laden use of the term), but because it brought to power the Republican Party for the first time and supposedly locked in the new political order, defined by a different set of issues than the one that had preceded it and with a differently constituted alignment of social and ethnocultural groups on each side.² The realignment synthesis reinforced the working assumption of the New Political History that long-term party affiliation was the most critical factor in explaining voter behavior. Stability was the defining feature of the political order in this view, and the 1860 election was “critical” because of the sudden stirring to life of voters’ hitherto supposedly latent agency.³ Since the 1990s, political history has been written in the shadow of the “cultural turn” rather than the social sciences, yet the language of party systems remains stubbornly embedded in historians’ portrayal of the nineteenth-century political landscape. And consequently, the core problematic of antebellum history—explaining the origins of the Civil War—has been

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dominated for nearly half a century by the concept of the breakup of the “second party system.”

There is now considerable evidence to show that electoral change in American history was more gradual and convoluted than the punctuated equilibrium model suggests, and that shifts in the fortunes of different political parties were to do with contingency and strategy as least as much as with structural changes in the economy. At the same time, rational choice theoretic models influenced some scholars to challenge the passive conception of voters implied by the realignment model.⁴ In “the real world,” David R. Mayhew observes (correctly, in my view), voters must make judgments not just during a periodic realignment but “all the time.”⁵ Although, according to the realignment model, 1860 was the decisive watershed between two stable phases of fixed partisan loyalties, it would be more accurate to see it as one in a sequence of elections through the 1850s and 1860s in which party identities and voter loyalties were malleable. Even the founding father of the realignment synthesis, Walter Dean Burnham, acknowledged that the second party system’s “dramatic collapse” after 1854 “disclosed its essential fragility.”⁶ This is an understatement; the competition between Whigs and Democrats was not only fragile; it was also fleeting. If the second party system only coalesced in 1840, by 1848 it was already fragmenting.⁷

Most of Michael F. Holt’s work on mid-nineteenth-century politics has been influenced by the presumption that voters’ loyalties were not fixed, and that party identities were fluid.⁸ And from a different angle, Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin suggested provocatively that there was little more to voter engagement than the prospect of free beer and a hog roast: mobilization strategies were all.⁹ Yet, on the whole, historical scholarship on the politics of the 1850s, and on the 1860 election in particular, has not yet taken account of the devastating critiques of realignment theory mounted by political scientists.¹⁰ The purpose of this chapter is to consider whether, in the light of the theoretic disarray left by the assaults on the realignment synthesis, it is possible to make sense of this election and assess its significance within a larger framework.

Contingency

Elections are a challenging subject for scholars with a systematizing bent because it is hard to explain outcomes without taking into account contin-

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gent factors that can only be explained in narrative form. At first glance, the 1860 election may appear an exception to that rule: Abraham Lincoln's victory in the Electoral College was comfortable and was widely predicted several months in advance. "I hesitate to say it," wrote the ever-cautious Lincoln in August 1860, "but it really appears now, as if the success of the Republican ticket is inevitable."¹¹ This uncharacteristic sanguinity on Lincoln's part proved well founded, as it turned out, but it was the product of a series of events that in themselves need an explanation. Most important was the sectional split in the Democratic Party. The decision of the southern wing of the party not to support Stephen A. Douglas—the man who, back in the spring, was the favorite to win the election—meant that the 1860 contest became, in practice, two parallel elections: one between Lincoln and Douglas in the North, and one in the South between the candidate of the southern Democrats, John C. Breckinridge, and John Bell, who ran as a Constitutional Unionist.¹² Only one of these candidates—Lincoln—had any realistic prospect of winning a majority in the Electoral College. The refusal of southern Democrats to back Douglas made it almost impossible for him to win outright, given the strength of the Republicans in so much of the North. Breckinridge, the strongest supporter of the extension of slavery, could not hope to be a serious contender in the free states—and even if he won every slave state, that would still be insufficient. Some of Bell's more optimistic supporters dreamed of a national reaction against pro- and antislavery "extremism" which might sweep the old southern Whigs to power, but, realistically, with Douglas and Lincoln fighting to position themselves as the best defenders of the rights of free laborers in the North, and Bell's campaign lacking any clear statement on what to do about the slavery controversy, he was left, in the main, with the support only of southern moderates who could not stomach Breckinridge. Given this electoral reality, the other campaigns seem to have been focused on preventing Lincoln getting a majority rather than on building one for their man. Even Douglas campaign newspapers devoted lots of space to electoral analysis "proving" that Lincoln could not amass enough votes to win, rather than to arguing that the "Little Giant" would do so.¹³ Although Douglas initially had hopes of winning New York, most political observers expected Lincoln to pick up the states Fremont had won in 1856 (plus Minnesota, which had recently been admitted and was, as Lincoln put it, "as sure as such a thing can be"¹⁴). The only question, then, was whether he would win sufficient numbers of Electoral College votes elsewhere.

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If Lincoln had lost in the Far West (very possible), had failed to win any electoral votes in New Jersey (very possible), and narrowly lost instead of narrowly won Indiana and Illinois (entirely plausible), he would not have had the 152 votes needed to win in the Electoral College. And had Lincoln failed to carry Pennsylvania (which he did handily in the end, but which was by no means certain), his chances of winning would have been very slim. Maybe a less appealing Republican candidate—one perceived as being more radical, like William H. Seward—and a more northern-friendly Constitutional Unionist might have limited the very large number of northern voters who had supported Millard Fillmore in 1856 from moving into Lincoln’s column.¹⁵ In 1860 a different cast of characters may have influenced those crucial voters in Indiana, Illinois, and Pennsylvania who, in effect, put Lincoln in the White House. Candidates matter, as politicians at the time were very aware. Even given where things stood in August, Lincoln’s confidence in his likely election might plausibly have been shaken if attempts to form anti-Republican “fusion” tickets had been more successful. Where there were fusion slates, voters often did not cooperate and split their tickets. This was one reason why Lincoln won some of the electoral votes in New Jersey that may otherwise have gone to Douglas. Had Lincoln fallen short, and the election been thrown into the House, it seems likely the Republican would have been blocked: Democrats controlled eighteen state delegations against the Republicans’ fifteen in the Thirty-Sixth Congress.

And might the election have turned out differently had particular events not occurred? John Brown’s dramatic attempt to incite a slave insurrection at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, in 1859, to take the most important example, shaped the contours of the election campaign profoundly. Democrats tried to tar the Republican Party with having fostered John Brown’s extremism. The *Democratic Review* charged that William H. Seward’s “Irrepressible Conflict” speech had “anticipate[d] the riot at Harper’s Ferry as inevitably as night follows day.” Lincoln too, with his “House Divided” speech, had launched a “war to the knife against Southern institutions.”¹⁶ Republicans responded that, on the contrary, Brown’s violence was an outgrowth of the lawlessness, vigilantism, and “filibustering” of proslavery forces in Kansas and therefore a direct result of Douglas’s “popular sovereignty” doctrine.¹⁷ Furthermore, some of them welcomed Brown’s execution on the grounds that it was a warning to disunionists of the consequences of treason. For southerners, both Bell and Breckinridge supporters alike, Brown’s raid was the ultimate evidence of the threat they faced from northern abolitionists. The prominence of the issue

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in the campaign in both sections is a reminder of how the presentation and re-presentation of dramatic and essentially “random” news stories can be powerful elements in political discourse at a given moment. Had the raid not happened, the election would have been a different event.

Musings about alternative possibilities could be expanded almost ad infinitum, but where do they leave us? Was politics no more than a series of contingent events, with the agency of political actors generating constant flux? The specificity of the sequence of events that elections represent means that it is essential for them to be properly historicized; no determinative model can do full justice to electoral outcomes. Nevertheless, we can do more than simply tell the story. The significance of the 1860 election is not what the proponents of the realignment synthesis claimed. Although, for a while, the Republican Party did achieve a majority status, this was a product of war and Reconstruction and of postelection contingent events. On its own terms, what is striking about the 1860 contest is the similarity of the Republicans and Douglas Democrats in the North, and of the Bell and Breckinridge campaigns in the South. Rather than being the inauguration of a new political order, the 1860 election in fact exemplified some key characteristics of mid-nineteenth-century politics that are not captured by the realignment synthesis. These were (1) a *political culture* framed by republican ideological assumptions about the nature of power and liberty; (2) *electoral behavior* in which there were underlying continuities in the orientation of regions and social groups toward particular policies and political styles, yet in which voters were actively engaged in making choices, often *retrospective judgments* on perceived political performance; and (3) *campaign strategies* in which “valence” issues were more important than “positional” issues, in which political elites’ responses to events were crucial, and which can be usefully imagined as a contest among competing *narratives*. I will take each of these characteristics of the election in turn.

Political Culture

Politics in this era, despite (or perhaps because of) wrenching social transformations, was characterized by continuity in the underlying assumptions made about the nature of power and politics. A republican frame—fear of subversion and conspiracy; a concern with protecting liberty from monopoly and tyranny with manhood and honor—underlay most political choices.

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And so too did preoccupations with the nation and with the threat from radical anticapitalist ideologies that testify to the embeddedness of the mid-nineteenth-century United States in a transatlantic political world. The continuing importance of republicanism in political culture ensured that Civil War Americans were quick to scent abuses of power, to worry about conspiracies to undermine the liberties of the people, to fear the corrupting effects of partisanship, and to condemn a love of luxury or pretentious airs as evidence of a lack of republican virtue in leaders.

Officeholders always faced insurgency from those who could successfully pose as “outs,” representing the people against the wire pullers of corrupt parties. Republican electoral advances 1858–60 were due to their ability to pose as the antiestablishment insurgents as well as to their antislavery message. Like the Know-Nothing organizations that swept to dramatic victories in state elections in 1854 and 1855, Republicans claimed that their candidates were “fresh from the loins of the people.” Republican campaign songs included the “Anti-party Glee,” which contained the line

I vote no longer for a name /
pure principles are now my aim.¹⁸

The Constitutional Union Party also defined itself as the antidote to politics as usual (despite being led by a cobwebbed coterie of elderly ex-Whigs), denouncing the “spirit of party [that] raised its serpent fangs above them all.”¹⁹

In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville, absorbing no doubt the presumptions of his informants, made a revealing distinction between “great” and “petty” parties, the former being “those which cling . . . to ideas, and not to men,” and the latter being driven by a desire for power and pelf.²⁰ Like other nineteenth-century elections, that of 1860 was, on one level, a battle over which party represented great principles—such as the “eternal struggle between liberty and tyranny,” as one (Douglas Democratic) newspaper put it—and which was merely the product of the “petty” schemes of “ambitious” or “fanatical” men. The Republican conspiracy theory about a scheming Slave Power was not just rhetorical window dressing; it was a powerful narrative, one that made sense of key events (the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, “bleeding Kansas,” the Dred Scott decision, and so on). The Breckinridge campaign drew on similar tropes in its depiction of a Black Republican conspiracy to undermine southern rights. In both cases, a conspiratorial mode of presenting the world drew on a common republican political culture in which politics was

about binary choices, pluralism was poorly developed as a concept, and liberty always had to be protected from those with power.

This was also the political cultural context in which anxiety about corruption was framed. A report by the Republican congressman John Covode on the corruption of the Buchanan administration was a widely circulated campaign document.²¹ Corruption of the venal kind was bad enough, but in a republican political culture the pilfering by officeholders and the disreputable reputation of parties and wire pullers threatened to undermine the Republic by draining it of virtue and honesty. In the Republican Party imagination, corruption scandals were symptomatic of the existential threat posed by the Slave Power. There were two irrepressible conflicts, explained *New York Tribune* editor Horace Greeley during the campaign, one pitting freedom against “aggressive, all-grasping Slavery propagandism,” and the second, “not less vital,” between “frugal government and honest administration” on the one hand and “wholesale executive corruption, and speculative jobbery” on the other.²²

Electoral Behavior

In this, as in every election in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, neither the appearance of new party labels nor the salience of new issues could obscure an underlying continuity in voting patterns. The Republican vote was strongest where Whigs and antislavery parties before them had always done well. It was regionally concentrated in New England (where Lincoln won every single county) and those parts of the North most influenced by evangelicalism and Yankee settlement: upstate New York and parts of Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin and Iowa, plus northern counties of Illinois and Indiana. In 1860 Republicans did especially well in comparison with their predecessor parties in Illinois and Pennsylvania, states that had once been dominated by the Democracy. But the Democrats remained strong among their traditional supporters—Irish immigrants and working-class urbanites (the only major city Lincoln won was Chicago), and non-Yankee-influenced rural voters in the Midwest.

In the South, John Bell won in traditional areas of Whig strength—in his home state of Tennessee, plus Virginia and Kentucky. He also came in a close second in Georgia and North Carolina. Confirming his Whiggish appeal, some people supported Bell in the explicit hope that they might be able to

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create, as one Virginia Whig put it, a new, national “conservative Union party, somewhat resembling the old Whig party.”²³ But this was, in the end, a purely regional, Upper South project. In the free states, the Constitutional Unionists failed, on the whole, to attract the support of former Whig and Know-Nothing voters; only in Massachusetts and the Pacific West did the old Whig vote gravitate to John Bell rather than Lincoln.²⁴

Although in very broad terms, election results reflected historic cultural and socioeconomic political identities, these underlying patterns did not determine election outcomes, which were often shaped by relatively small margins. Politicians did not take the electorate for granted. On the contrary, they behaved as if defending and attacking the record of incumbents would swing votes. And corruption scandals, the fallout of the Panic of 1857, and the general sense that the nation was on the brink of disunion undermined the incumbents, the Democratic Party that had dominated national politics for thirty years. Despite his reputation, James Buchanan was not a vacillating and feeble president, but, on the contrary, ideologically driven and activist.²⁵ His most disastrous move was trying to drive the proslavery Lecompton Constitution for Kansas through Congress, at the cost of splitting his party, because he was convinced that only by acceding to southern demands could the controversy over slavery in the territories be “solved.” The Democratic Party may well have split anyway, since, as numerous historians have shown, there was a powerful southern lobby that deliberately maneuvered to this end. Even moderate southern Democrats were determined to settle for nothing less than a federal slave code that was anathema to, and would have been electoral suicide for, the northern wing of the party. Nevertheless, at every stage of his administration, Buchanan took decisions that exacerbated the problem. And his loyalty to southerners in his cabinet meant that he overlooked the egregious corruption of men like Secretary of War John B. Floyd.

In the light of all this, many observers understandably saw the election as more a rejection of Buchanan and what he had come to represent than an endorsement of the Republicans. The *New York World*, which was not yet a Democratic organ, claimed in October 1860 that most Republican voters did not care “a broken tobacco-pipe for the negro question.” The cause of Lincoln’s likely victory, the newspaper suggested, was the popular belief that “the democratic party has been so long in power that it has become corrupt; that it understands too well the crooked arts by which partisan pockets are lined at the public expense; and that it is safer to try an experiment with new men and a young party, than to continue a set of old party hacks at the public crib.”²⁶

Chairman of the Democratic National Committee August Belmont agreed. “The country at large had become disgusted with the misrule of Mr. Buchanan, and the corruption which disgraced his Administration,” he wrote. “The Democratic party was made answerable for his misdeeds, and a change was ardently desired by thousands of conservative men out of politics.”²⁷ The “great idea” settled by this election, declared the Philadelphia *North American*, was “the overthrow of corruption.” It made no mention of slavery extension.²⁸

Campaign Strategies

Politicians’ responsiveness to voters intensified sectional polarization by curtailing candidates’ room for maneuver within each section. Since each party system is imagined to be oriented around a different set of issues, proponents of the realignment synthesis stressed the “positional” (that is, distinctive, new) issues of insurgent parties. However, my reading of the evidence is that so-called valence issues (that is, points on which the parties agree but compete to present themselves as best placed to deliver) were generally more important drivers of political debate in this period.²⁹ In 1860 the ideological divide (in Burnham’s sense of “highly salient issue-clusters”) *within* each section was *narrower than* in previous elections. On important matters of policy, Republican and Democrats were not so far apart. Douglas did not just endorse a Homestead Act, a Pacific railroad, and federal support for internal improvements, all policies that were championed by the Republicans; he claimed, not entirely implausibly, to have invented them all (although, to be fair, large sections of his party remained wary of all three).³⁰

Both parties claimed to be the defenders of free white labor. Democrats were much more overt in their use of racism to warn of competition from freed slaves. But Republicans in Indiana and Illinois, where this was a major campaign issue, used similar arguments to make the case against slavery extension, albeit usually without the crude racism of the Democrats. Republicans attacked Democrats for favoring Cuban annexation on the grounds that it would lead to racial amalgamation. One such article, in the *Illinois State Journal*, may, according to Lincoln biographer Michael Burlingame, have been penned by the candidate himself.³¹ As the Republican *New York Times* asked rhetorically, “How is the doctrine of negro equality to be ‘forced upon the South’ by the Republicans, when they scout and scorn it for the free negroes of the North?” Republicans do not “have any more love of the negro—any

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greater disposition to make sacrifices for his sake, or to waive their own rights and interests for the promotion of his welfare, than the rest of mankind, North and South.”³² Meanwhile, northern Democrats indignantly warned that if the consequence of southerners’ “bolting” was Lincoln’s election, they should no longer expect any support from northern Democrats in returning “a ‘fugitive’ which they have not a dollar’s interest in.” Douglas newspapers used the terms “slaveocracy” and “Slave Power,” coinages associated with the Republicans, to describe Breckinridge.³³

Both parties battled for the mantle of conservatism, with Republicans vigorously countering Democrats’ claims to be the true Unionists. Lincoln’s hometown Republican newspaper made this its consistent theme. The election, it stressed, was a battle between “conservative Republicanism [and] fire-eating, slave-extending Democracy.”³⁴ One of Lincoln’s supporters in 1860, a young ex-Whig, Manton Marble, later to become editor of the vocally anti-Lincoln *New York World*, was convinced that support for the Republicans was the only true “conservative” course.³⁵

I do not mean to suggest that the differences between the parties were unimportant. Especially in its New England heartland, the Republican Party expressed itself in a political style colored by evangelicalism and a long reform tradition that was at odds with the laissez-faire approach and tolerance of cultural diversity of most Democrats. Almost everywhere the Douglas Democrats proved much more willing to use the nastiest forms of race baiting than did Republicans. And Republicans opposed all slavery extension on principle, whereas northern Democrats made much of their candidate’s championing of “popular sovereignty.” Yet while these were positions with divergent legislative implications, both were—overtly or implicitly—antagonistic to the Dred Scott decision, and both were expressed in terms of white settlers’ opportunity in the West. Largely unnoticed by historians, powerful voices within the Republican Party even tried to neutralize the public appeal of Douglas’s policy of congressional noninterference in the territories by denying that it amounted to a significant distinction between the parties. “The great mass of the people in all sections . . . recognize popular sovereignty as a fair, just and safe way of solving a very difficult problem,” acknowledged the Republican *New York Times* in July 1860. “The slavery question *will* be settled on this basis, *whichever party may come into power*. This is, under any circumstances, to be the *practical solution of the difficulty*.”³⁶

The key to the Republican Party’s appeal in 1860 was its claim to be the most effective bulwark against an aggressive and destabilizing Slave Power.

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Republicans presented themselves as the new broom that would sweep away years, if not decades, of rule in Washington by a corrupted national Democratic Party that was betraying the interests of the ordinary free white men it claimed to represent. The campaign made a conservative pitch to restore ancient liberties. There was a relentless focus in campaign speeches on the threat of the slave trade being reopened (this was mentioned by Lincoln in most of his 1859 speeches) and on Breckinridge's policy, backed by President Buchanan, of introducing a congressional slave code for the territories.³⁷ During the campaign, Lincoln newspapers reported random lynchings of northerners in the South, stories that fed their narrative about the barbarism of the Slave Power.³⁸

Democrats had presented themselves as the embodiment of the common man for thirty years or more, but in 1860 Republicans worked hard to co-opt this Jacksonian language for themselves. Republican clubs held meetings to celebrate Jefferson's birthday, and Lincoln was hailed as a "Jeffersonian Republican" in campaign literature.³⁹ Republican campaigners argued that the "so-called Democratic party" was "false to its name" and was now the "aristocratic" party, its support for slavery extension being in effect support for land monopoly by slaveowners, securing "power to the few." Jefferson and Jackson were retrospectively enlisted as Republican spokesmen, since they had wanted to "give and preserve power to the people to enable them to become proprietors and secure them in their homes."⁴⁰ The candidate's carefully projected image as a "Rail Splitter" and as "Honest Abe," as an "obscure child of labor" who was "an apt illustration of our free institutions," was a core component in the project of presenting Republicanism as on the side of the workingman.⁴¹

The Douglas Democrats were left with a problem of differentiation. They too had the appeal of a popular candidate who had made his own way in the West. And they were the original party of the common man. Furthermore, Douglas's campaign was at least as enthusiastic as Lincoln's in trying to profit from the anti-incumbent mood of the electorate through excoriating and often very personal attacks on Buchanan's administration. Douglas's political feud with the president allowed his campaign to try to outbid Lincoln as the candidate of change. In 1860, Douglas Democrats, freed of their southern wing, ran against the Slave Power too—a high proportion of Democrats' campaign speeches framed the issue as a battle between the Union-saving Douglas and southern disunionists. Historians have sometimes assumed that "popular sovereignty" was a rather shallow fig leaf for a policy that benefited

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the South, but that is to underestimate the passion with which the Douglas campaign advocated it, on moral, economic, and nationalist grounds. So Douglas, like Lincoln, was presented as the defender of northern free labor values, with “popular sovereignty,” an idea rooted in the American tradition, as the guarantor of that promise. What Douglas supporters tried to do was to tell a story about their candidate as the only true nationalist, the one man who could save the Union against “fanaticism,” northern as well as southern. Douglas alone, the campaign asserted, would not only save the Union (in contrast to the “recklessness” of Lincoln and the “Disunionist bolter” Breckinridge), but would also transform the opportunities available to white northerners.

Back in 1856, the Buchanan campaign had some success in painting the Republicans as dangerous radicals, and Douglas tried the same approach in 1860. But circumstances had changed, the stakes now seemed higher, and the Republicans’ warnings about southern aggression seemed, in the previous four years, to have been vindicated. Douglas supporters, meanwhile, tried to use Brown’s raid as evidence of Republican extremism, but the charges did not stick, even with natural conservatives like Manton Marble. All the Harpers Ferry drama did, in the end, was to make it more difficult for Douglas to deny the severity of the sectional crisis. The case for the Republicans in 1860 was that if, as a northerner, one wanted to defend free institutions, why vote for Douglas, who was compromised by his association with the national Democratic Party and who probably could not win anyway, when one could vote for Lincoln, whose anti-Slave Power credentials ran much deeper?

In the slave states, Bell and Breckinridge supporters each presented their candidate as the one most likely to defend southern rights, albeit through different mechanisms. Bell’s story was that he was a wise statesman in the tradition of Henry Clay. Breckinridge’s was that he offered a specific and supposedly final plan to secure southern rights within the Union. A federal slave code would provide legislative backup to the Dred Scott decision; promises of Caribbean expansion offered a way of building the collective strength of the slave states within the Union. Explicit in this story was the idea that if the North rejected these demands, and Lincoln or Douglas became president, the South would have been finally vindicated in its assumption that Yankees were no longer prepared to respect their equal rights (by which they meant respect for slaves as legitimate property).

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These campaign strategies were, in essence, aimed at creating “narratives” that connected an image of the candidate to a story about what was wrong, who the enemy was, and how it could be put right. The task of politicians—whether party managers, editors, or other opinion formers such as ministers and popular speakers—was to “make sense” of the world to voters, shaping, but by definition also being shaped by, voters’ understanding of who their friends and enemies were and where their interests lay. Politics, especially at election time, was about synthesizing policy, political style, and underlying values into a plausible and compelling story. Whereas ideology is a way of describing longitudinal attitudes, it was the narratives constructed out of ideological components that mattered at election time. Such narratives were more or less compelling depending on context, events, candidates, and the effectiveness of mobilization strategies. Politics, as Robert Kelley once observed, often revolves around the “dramatic imagination” of its protagonists.⁴² The drama lay in the acute consciousness of the choice confronting the nation and is often constructed, in a republican frame, around fears of conspiracy and threats to liberty.

All four campaigns told a story about how their man was best placed to maintain *order* and *stability*, how their man, and theirs alone, was the true protector of the legacy of the *Revolution*, the defender of *freedom*. Obviously the crisis over slavery, the threat of the Slave Power (to northerners), or of abolition (to southerners) was the immediate reference point. But the partisan political narratives in 1860 were given layers of additional meaning in the light of the fallout of the 1848 revolutions in Europe. When politicians talked about nation, revolution, freedom, power, government, the people, or order they were using terms reshaped over a dozen years by fears, and hopes, of social transformation and national transfiguration. So, for example, the prospect of disunion was equated in the northern imagination with civil disorder, anarchy, and violence, while antislavery politics was associated by its opponents with dangerous ideas about the confiscation and redistribution of property. When the Democratic *New York Herald* attacked Lincoln as an “abolitionist of the reddest dye,” the implicit reference to revolutionary socialism was not accidental.⁴³

The value to the historian of identifying the competing political narratives at play in an election is that it focuses attention on the practical process of political persuasion. It draws attention to how ideas, or abstract ideologies, were framed and expressed, and how perceptions of events were processed

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and manipulated. It cannot “explain” the election result in the sense of making alternative outcomes impossible to conceive, but it can identify the underlying assumptions that constitute the sources of political authority, and therefore how changes to them have implications for political development.

Conclusion

The 1860 election precipitated a highly consequential shift in party control with clear implications for public policy in some key areas such as banking, currency, tariffs, and, ultimately, federal-state relations. In rough correlation with Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.’s cyclical theory of American politics, the “outs” became the “ins.”⁴⁴ Lincoln’s victory, together with the withdrawal of southern congressmen as their states seceded, marked the ascendancy of a new group of men in Washington and the effective end of thirty years in which a distinctive Jacksonian variant of transatlantic liberalism had been the default setting in American politics. Since the Democratic ascendancy of the antebellum years had also been, to a greater or lesser extent, a southern ascendancy at the federal level, the shift in party control was more properly understood as a fundamental shift in the sectional balance of power.

But the relationship between this coming Republican ascendancy and the election was complex. The South, as it turned out, was excluded from national power because of secession and war rather than as a direct result of the rise in the Republican vote in Pennsylvania and the Midwest. And although around 7 percent of the whole electorate shifted toward Lincoln in 1860, the party’s hold on these conservative voters was conditional. Apart from in Pennsylvania (where Buchanan’s 1856 victory was the last in the state by a Democrat until 1936), Republican gains in 1860 were not wholly secure in the medium term, with Democrats making big gains in the 1862 midterm elections and beyond (although Lincoln held them all in the exceptional circumstances of the 1864 presidential election). In 1860 the Republican Party was still a very loose coalition of state machines, not all sharing the same name, let alone political priorities.⁴⁵ Even in victory, there were constant expectations that the party would cease to exist in its current form and under its current name. In 1864 Lincoln ran for reelection not as a Republican but as a National Unionist, which reflected, in part, recognition of the continuing toxicity of the Republican brand in large swaths of the country outside New England.⁴⁶ Just as the War of 1812 had—in popular memory—led to an “era of

good feeling,” the Civil War, argued *Harper’s Weekly* in 1865, had taught Americans a valuable lesson: “Old party lines do not separate us. We are at the end of parties.”⁴⁷ William H. Seward spoke enthusiastically of a “great coming together” of the parties once the divisive issue of slavery was dispensed with by the Thirteenth Amendment.⁴⁸ Expectations of continuing realignment, in other words, continued long after the late 1850s.

The Republican Party that was ascendant in the late nineteenth century was “made” during Reconstruction, building retrospectively on its wartime accomplishments to create a narrative about the “Grand Old Party” as the defender of the Union. A series of contingencies such as the assassination (and near sanctification) of Lincoln, the battle with President Andrew Johnson over early Reconstruction legislation, and the Panic of 1873 all helped to forge the institutional identity and characteristics of the party. It is difficult, if not impossible, as historians to deny ourselves the luxury of hindsight. But in order to understand a political event like this election on its own terms we need to try and isolate what happened in November 1860 from how subsequent events and subsequent political narratives retrospectively colored it.

Realignment theory presented the 1860 election as the moment when the party system readjusted to the underlying social reality. I have presented an alternative formulation: like other elections in this period, although with greater consequences in terms of war and a shift in party control, the 1860 election was a contest among parties to offer the most compelling narratives about how to save the Republic to voters whose political values had underlying consistency but whose partisan loyalties were more fluid. For a series of contingent reasons (to do with short-term party strategy and the impact of events like John Brown’s raid), the parties that gained support (the Republicans in the North and the Breckinridge Democrats in the South) were those that most effectively dramatized the national crisis and offered the clearest solution to it.

Given the underlying political culture, campaign strategies that relied on fears of corruption and conspiracy were especially effective. As many historians have demonstrated, northerners did not vote for an antislavery party because they had all become abolitionists; they voted for the party that had the clearest solution to the threat posed by the Slave Power. The Douglas Democrats tried to offer their own solution to the national crisis by using Republican language about the Slave Power to show they knew who the real enemy was, and by presenting popular sovereignty as the most effective solution to the crisis. But they were also drawing, as were the Constitutional Unionists,

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on the “compromise” tradition, damning extremism on both sides. The balance was tipped against these compromisers in 1860. As is the way with most elections, the short-term losers did not regard themselves as having lost the argument, though, and, as events unfolded in the following years, both the Douglasite Democratic tradition in the north and the Whiggish southern tradition felt vindicated. They saw the 1860 election as just one battle in a bigger and ongoing contest.