

# United States presidential election, 1860

The United States presidential election of 1860 set the stage for the American Civil War. The nation had been divided throughout most of the 1850s on questions of states' rights and slavery in the territories. In 1860 this issue finally came to a head, fracturing the formerly dominant Democratic Party into Southern and Northern factions and bringing Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party to power without the support of a single Southern state. Hardly more than a month following Lincoln's electoral victory came declarations of secession, first by South Carolina and then other Southern states, which were rejected as illegal by the then-current President, James Buchanan and President-elect Abraham Lincoln.

## The Political Parties

***The Democratic Party:*** The Democratic Party traces its origins to the Democratic-Republican Party, founded by Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and other influential opponents of the Federalists in 1792. It favored yeoman farmers, strict interpretation of the Constitution, and a weaker federal government. These policies fell under the umbrella term “Jeffersonian” democracy. The Democratic-Republican Party ascended to power in the election of 1800 (when Thomas Jefferson defeated incumbent President John Adams). However, the Democratic Party truly arose in the 1830s, following the disbanding of the Federalist Party and the election of Andrew Jackson. In contrast to the Jeffersonian era, “Jacksonian” democracy promoted the strength of the presidency and executive branch (often deemed at the expense of Congress), while also seeking to broaden the public's participation in government (expanding the voting franchise to all white males rather than just landowners or merchants). They demanded elected (not appointed) judges and rewrote many state constitutions to reflect the new values. In national terms the Jacksonians favored geographical expansion, justifying it in terms of Manifest Destiny. There was usually a consensus among Jacksonians that battles over slavery should be avoided. The Democrats were weakest in the industrial North, but their support of the farmer and ambivalence toward slavery expansion carried strong support in the South.

***The Democratic Party Splits:*** In the 1850s, due to the controversy surrounding the Fugitive Slave Law and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, many anti-slavery Democrats left the party. Against this backdrop of the slavery issue, a major re-alignment took place among voters and politicians, with new issues, new parties, and new rules. The Whig Party dissolved entirely. While the Democratic Party survived, many northern Democrats joined the newly established Republican Party. However, in 1860, after controversy surrounding the successor to Democratic President James Buchanan, Democrats split along Northern and Southern lines. The northern Democrats supported Stephen A. Douglas for President in 1860, but the southern Democrats demanded that Douglas support a federal slave law and repudiate the Freeport Doctrine (Douglas’ statement that despite the court's ruling in the Dred-Scott Decision, slavery could be prevented from any territory by the refusal of the people living in that territory to pass laws favorable to slavery and vice versa). Consequently, southern Democrats endorsed John C. Breckinridge. As the American Civil War broke out, Northern Democrats were divided into War Democrats and Peace Democrats and Southern Democrats formed their own official party.

***The Republican Party:*** The Republican Party was first organized in 1854, growing out of a coalition of anti-slavery Whigs and Free Soil Democrats who mobilized in opposition to Stephen Douglas's 1854 introduction of the Kansas-Nebraska Act into Congress, a bill which repealed the 1820 Missouri Compromise prohibition on slavery north of latitude 36° 30' in the old Louisiana purchase territories (it was viewed by many as an aggressive expansionist pro-slavery maneuver). Besides opposition to

slavery, the new party put forward a radical vision of modernizing the United States—emphasizing higher education, banking, railroads, industry and cities and promising free homesteads to farmers. They vigorously argued that free-market labor was superior to slavery and the very foundation of civic virtue and true American values. All of these ideologies were highly unpopular in the South. Since its inception, the Republican Party's chief opposition has been the Democratic Party, but the amount of flow back and forth of prominent politicians between the two parties was quite high from 1854 to 1896.

***The Constitutional Union Party:*** The Constitutional Union Party was a political party in the United States created in 1860. It was made up of conservative former Whigs who wanted to avoid disunion over the slavery issue. In short, the Constitutional Union Party united Whigs and Know-Nothings who were unwilling to join Democrats or the Republicans. Its name comes from its extremely simple platform, a simple resolution "to recognize no political principle other than the Constitution...the Union...and the Enforcement of the Laws." They hoped that by failing to take a firm stand either for or against slavery or its expansion, the issue could be pushed aside. The party and its purpose largely disappeared after the 1860 election as the southern states began to secede. Bell and many other Constitutional Unionists later supported the Confederacy during the Civil War, but backers of the party north of the Carolinas tended to remain supporters of the Union. Constitutional Unionists were also influential in the Wheeling Convention, which led to the creation of the Union loyalist state of West Virginia, as well as winning Congressional elections in Kentucky and Maryland.

## **1860 Campaign**

The contest in the North was between Abraham Lincoln (Republican) and Stephen A. Douglas (Northern Democrat), but only the latter took to the stump and gave speeches and interviews. Douglas was the first presidential candidate in American history to undertake a nationwide speaking tour; prior to his campaign, "people saw candidates in the flesh less often than they saw a perfect rainbow." He traveled to the South where he did not expect to win many electoral votes, but he spoke for the maintenance of the Union. The dispute over the Dred Scott court case had helped the Republicans dominate the Northern states, allowing that party, although a newcomer on the political scene, to easily spread its popular influence. In the South, John C. Breckinridge (Southern Democrat) and John Bell (Constitutional Union) were the main rivals.

Throughout the general election, Lincoln did not campaign or give speeches. This was handled by the state and county Republican organizations, who were tasked with sustaining party enthusiasm and thus securing a high turnout. In the North, there were thousands of Republican speakers, tons of campaign posters and leaflets, and thousands of newspaper editorials. These focused first on the party platform and second on Lincoln's life story, making the most of his boyhood poverty, his pioneer background, his native genius, and his rise from obscurity. His nicknames, "Honest Abe" and "the Rail-Splitter," were exploited to the full. The goal was to emphasize the superior power of "free labor," whereby a common farm boy could work his way to the top by his own efforts. There was little effort to convert non-Republicans, and there was virtually no campaigning in the South except for a few border cities such as St. Louis, Missouri, and Wheeling, Virginia; indeed, the party did not even run a slate in most of the South.

## Election Results

**Abraham Lincoln:** The election was held on November 6, 1860. Lincoln, the candidate from the newly formed Republican Party, won almost every state in the North (except New Jersey) and the West (California and Oregon). Sectionalism was running rampant at this point. He did not expect to win the South (and was not even on the ballot in many states). Of the eleven states that would soon declare their secession from the Union, Lincoln was on the ballot only in Virginia, getting just 1.1 percent of the popular vote there (about 2,000 votes). In the four slave states which did not secede after the election (Missouri, Kentucky, Maryland, and Delaware), he came in last in Missouri, Kentucky and Maryland and third in Delaware. Ultimately, Lincoln captured less than 40% of the popular vote, but he won outright majorities in enough of the states to win the Presidency through the Electoral College. The split in the Democratic Party (into the Northern and Southern Party) was not really a decisive factor in Lincoln's victory. Only in California, Oregon, and Illinois were Lincoln's victory margins less than seven percent. Even if these states had gone to Breckinridge or Douglas, this would not have been enough to take the victory away from Lincoln.

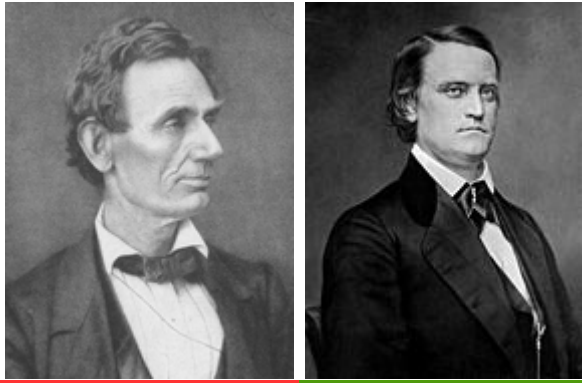
**Stephen A. Douglas:** Douglas, the Northern Democrat candidate, had the most geographically widespread support, with 5-15% of the vote in most of the slave states and high percentages in many of the free states where he was the main opposition to Lincoln. With his votes thus scattered around the country, Douglas finished second in the popular vote (at 29.5%) but last in the Electoral College (winning only Missouri and New Jersey).

**John C. Breckinridge:** Breckinridge, the Southern Democrat candidate (who was the sitting Vice-President of the United States and the only candidate to later support secession), as expected won 11 of 15 slave states. He carried the border slave states of Delaware and Maryland, and nine of the eleven Southern states that later formed the Confederacy (minus Virginia and Tennessee which went to Bell). Breckinridge faced stiff competition from John Bell (the Constitutional Union candidate) in the South and received very little support in the free states, showing minor strength only in parts of California, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. This was not enough to win him a large percentage of the popular vote, much less the presidency. He won only 72 Electoral College votes.

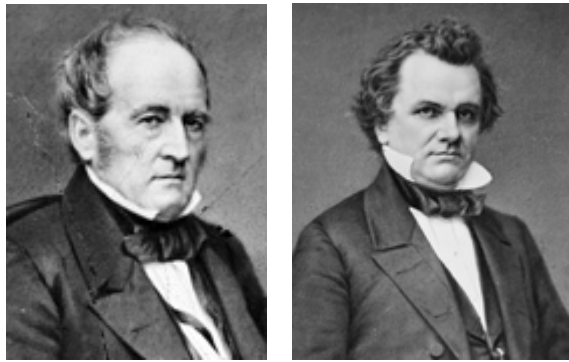
**John Bell:** Bell, the Constitutional Union candidate, was a plantation owner and wealthy slaveholder from Tennessee. Bell supported states' rights and the institution of slavery, but generally opposed secession. Not surprisingly, he carried three of the border slave states (Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia) and often finished a strong second in the other slave states. He even got tiny shares of the vote in some counties in the free states. Bell was not considered a strong contender in the election; it is likely the vague political ideology of this new party was not articulated strongly enough for the times. He did, however, receive just under 13% of the popular vote. In the aftermath of the election, Bell was instrumental in the formation of West Virginia – the area of Virginia that refused to follow suit and secede from the Union.

The voter turnout rate in 1860 was the second-highest on record (81.2%, second only to 1876, with 81.8%). Of note, however, is that at this time only white males were allowed to vote and might also be subject to other “tests of citizenship” such as land ownership or literacy (which were often designed to disenfranchise the foreign-born and impoverished population).

**United States Presidential Candidates  
Election: November 6, 1860**



<b>Nominee</b>	Abraham Lincoln	John C. Breckinridge
<b>Party</b>	Republican	Southern Democratic
<b>Home state</b>	Illinois	Kentucky
<b>Running mate</b>	Hannibal Hamlin	Joseph Lane
<b>Electoral vote</b>	180	72
<b>States carried</b>	18	11
<b>Popular vote</b>	1,865,908	848,019
<b>Percentage</b>	39.8%	18.1%



<b>Nominee</b>	John Bell	Stephen A. Douglas
<b>Party</b>	Constitutional Union	Northern Democratic
<b>Home state</b>	Tennessee	Illinois
<b>Running mate</b>	Edward Everett	Herschel Vespasian Johnson
<b>Electoral vote</b>	39	12
<b>States carried</b>	3	2
<b>Popular vote</b>	590,901	1,380,201
<b>Percentage</b>	12.6%	29.5%

