America's Oddest Election

Lincoln came out a victor in the 1860 presidential election despite winning only 2 percent of the Southern vote

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Just six months before the presidential election of November 1860 and only days after winning his party's nomination, Abraham Lincoln received some stunning advice from one of his chief supporters, William Cullen Bryant. The influential editor of the pro-Republican New York Evening Post beseeched him to "make no speeches, write no letters as a candidate, enter into no pledges, make no promises." Only three months earlier, Bryant had urged a large audience at New York City's Cooper Union to pay heed to Lincoln's every word. Now, warned Bryant, silence was the only way of "preventing any mistake on your part."

The irony of this strategy was not lost on Lincoln: just two years earlier he had vaulted to national prominence largely on the oratorical skills he had exhibited during seven wildly successful public debates with Stephen A. Douglas in a race for an Illinois seat in the U.S. Senate. Although Lincoln lost the contest, the lengthy debates were printed in newspapers across the nation and appeared in book form, setting the stage for his bid for the presidency.

Ever the astute politician, Lincoln followed Bryant's recommendation to the letter. For the next six months, Lincoln said precious little in person or in print to advance his cause, limiting his public appearances to posing for painters and photographers, and watching mutely as one giant campaign parade lumbered past his Springfield, Illinois home in August. Two of his three opponents in the unparalleled four-way race remained similarly invisible: Tennessee's John Bell, running on the Constitutional Union ticket, who pledged to preventing secession; and Kentucky's John C. Breckinridge, the choice of Southern Democrats, who was committed to saving slavery. The fourth candidate, his longtime rival, Stephen Douglas, running on the Northern Democratic Party, chose not to keep quiet, a decision that would have ramifications.

Although the clear favorite at the Democratic National Convention in Charleston, South Carolina, Douglas had irritated Southern delegates by his long-held beliefs that new territories could, if their voters wished, reject slavery. Southerners had stormed out of the convention and nominated Breckinridge, while Northern Democrats had reassembled to anoint Douglas. While many historians have insisted that Lincoln's victory became a foregone conclusion with the split opposition, the final outcome remained very much in doubt—up to and even beyond Election Day.

The rupture in the Democratic Party certainly left Lincoln convinced by October that no "ticket can be elected by the People, unless it be ours." But would any candidate amass enough electoral votes to win the presidency outright? If none could, the election would shift to the House of Representatives, the field narrowed to the top three vote getters. Each state would cast a single vote. Anything might happen in such a scenario, because the slaveholding Southern states, which were overwhelmingly Democratic, would exercise more power than they did in the electoral college.

Sensing—and privately encouraging—an opening that would send the election to the House, Douglas defied presidential campaigning tradition and decided to travel east to visit his ailing mother in New England. He chose an indirect and southerly route that would give him ample opportunities for speeches whenever his train stopped for fuel. His less-than-subtle campaign swing inspired one cartoonist to depict him as "Little Stephen in Search of His Mother." Worse still, Douglas's trip did little to overcome opposition to his signature "popular sovereignty" policy, which the Republicans opposed because it would give voters the right to expand slavery into the West. Southern Democrats didn't like it because it gave voters the option to restrict the peculiar institution.

The low profile of the other candidates did not dampen public enthusiasm for the campaign. Americans thronged to rallies, marched in parades, distributed handbills, and turned campaign biographies into best sellers. Partisans ignited enough cannon to suggest that war had already begun. A record-breaking 82 percent turned out to vote on November 6, 1860.

Election Day dawned sunny but cold in Lincoln's hometown of Springfield, Illinois. At approximately 3:30 p.m., the nominee slipped out of his hideaway office inside the state capitol building and "walked leisurely" to a nearby courthouse to vote. As supporters greeted him with "wild abandon," Lincoln calmly "deposited the straight Republican ticket" after first modestly cutting off his own name from the ballot.

That night Lincoln coolly awaited returns at the city's telegraph office. Early reports favored the Republicans, but scant news emerged from New York State, whose mother lode of 35 electoral votes might determine whether the election was decided that very night or later by Congress.

Lincoln eventually took a break, strolling to a nearby "ice cream saloon" where a ladies' group had set up midnight refreshments. Here the long-anticipated dispatch from the Empire State finally arrived, confirming that Lincoln had won the day's biggest prize—and with it, the presidency. At this news, Lincoln supporters "fell into each other's arms shouting and crying, yelling like mad, jumping up and down," remembered neighbor William H. Bailhache. All the seemingly impassive victor said to his supporters was: "Well, the agony is almost over and you will soon be able to go to bed." Lincoln carried every Northern state but New Jersey, earning 180 electoral votes in all—comfortably more than the 152 required for a majority. But not until he was en route to Washington in February would he learn with certainty that the electoral votes had been safely counted without the violent interruption threatened by secessionists.

Lincoln could also take comfort from winning 1,866,452 votes, more popular votes than anyone who had run for president. Yet in the few Southern states where his name appeared on ballots, his support was anemic: Virginia gave the Lincoln ticket barely 1 percent of its 167,223 votes. And in his birth state of Kentucky, Lincoln won only 1,364 out of 146,216 votes, less than 1 percent. While he did win a decisive 54 percent in the North and West, he earned only 2 percent in the entire South (mostly from German Americans in St. Louis). It would prove the most lopsided vote in American history.

Had a few thousand Americans voted differently in Indiana, California, and New York, the outcome may well have changed. If the vote had gone to the House would Lincoln have won? Possibly not. Although he took 17 states (compared to the 16 for all three of his opponents

combined), lame duck House delegations would have felt no obligation to respect their states' Election Day outcomes. Deals and compromises would have remained on the table—especially if Congress concluded (as many Republicans and Democrats soon did) that denying Lincoln the White House might preserve the Union. Within weeks influential Northerners such as James Alexander Hamilton, son of the founding father, began suggesting that Lincoln electors throw their votes to others so that the House would get the final decision. Lincoln's fragile victory ultimately held. But would the Union?

Even on election night, Lincoln seemed to sense the grim future. One friend noticed that the "pleasure and pride at the completeness of his success" quickly evaporated. "It seemed as if he suddenly bore the whole world upon his shoulders, and could not shake it off."

As Lincoln left for home that historic night to tell his wife of the victory that more Americans lamented than celebrated, he was heard to mutter: "God help me, God help me."