

The Presidential Election of 1856

Introduction

Like the whole political climate of the United States during the mid-nineteenth century, sectional conflict and states rights fueled the Presidential election of 1856. The 1856 election was a time in which we see the creation of the Democratic and Republican two-party system, as we still know it today. We also see the dissolution of another national party during this time in which competing political and economic interests are driving almost every national decision.

Political Climate

The political climate in the mid-nineteenth century was tumultuous. Political battles were waged over slavery and popular sovereignty. On the surface, the American political system had a working two-party system, the Democrats, the party of Jackson, who controlled power mostly during the mid-century [the Democratic Party had elected Pierce to the White House in 1852 as well as controlling the majority in the Senate and a small plurality in the House of Representatives], and their main opposition, the Whigs. Formed by opposition of Andrew Jackson during the 1830's and 1840's, the Whig Party, which challenged "King" Andrew's strong presidential leadership, began to fall apart following the election of 1852. However, during the 1850's, as the issue of slavery came to the forefront of national politics, the Whig party saw itself divided over the issue almost as much as the nation was itself. In 1852 we see the last candidate for President nominated by the Whigs.

Kansas-Nebraska Act

Less than a decade away from the Civil War, the Election of 1856 served as a tool to foreshadow how much the issues of slavery and sectionalism would play in American politics for decades to come. Throughout the Nineteenth century, Congress had wrangled with the issue of admitting new states to the Union. Both free and slave states opposed any legislation that tipped the sectional balance of states and representation in their opponent's favor. One of the major pieces of legislation concerning the issues of state's rights and popular sovereignty was The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854. The act essentially repealed the provisions of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and allowed settlers in those territories to determine if they would allow slavery within their boundaries. This was a problem for many people because this act was seen as something that would disrupt the sectional balance in Congress between slave and free states. The Kansas-Nebraska Act divided the nation and pointed it toward civil war. The turmoil over the act split both the Democratic and Know Nothing parties and gave rise to the Republican Party, which split the United States into two major political parties, the Democratic and Republican Parties.

Mid-Term Elections of 1854

The 1854 election was beginning of the end for the Whig Party. In the mid-term election of 1854 the Democrats lost a huge number of seats to Republicans in the North due to the slavery crisis, but remained the plurality party in the House. The American Party, a small party created and based on the fears of immigration and Catholicism, became the second largest plurality. The Whigs, as stated earlier were divided over the issue of slavery and lost several seats and began to disintegrate. Meanwhile, the newly formed Republican Party, which was anti-slavery and pro-industry, quickly became a

major influence in the North and illustrated that with large gains. In the end, the Whigs and Republicans allied to become the largest faction, although they still did not hold a majority.

| Party | Total Seats (Change) | | | Seat Percentage (1856) |
|------------|-------------------------|------|-----|---------------------------|
| | 1854 | 1856 | | |
| Democratic | 157 | 84 | -73 | 33% |
| American | 0 | 62 | +62 | 24% |
| Whig | 71 | 60 | -11 | 23% |
| Republican | 0 | 46 | +46 | 18% |
| Total | 234 | 252 | +18 | 100% |

Footnote One:¹

The mid-term election of 1854 indicated that the political climate in the United States was strained and the American population was divided over the issue of slavery. These tensions and divisions will become even clearer during the election of 1856. With a nation divided almost equally, each party had to, they felt, nominate not necessarily the best candidate, but rather the best-fitting candidate for the time.

Political Parties, Conventions, and Nominees

Democratic Party

While the Democratic Party was still feeling the losses from the midterm elections of 1854, they were assembling in Cincinnati in an effort to nominate the next Democratic President. At the time of balloting for the nomination James Buchanan, President Franklin Pierce (seeking renomination), Senator Stephen A. Douglas and Senator Lewis Cass were all put forward. On the first ballot, Buchanan led with 135½, President Pierce 122½, Douglas 33, and Cass 5 (4 from the unhappy California

¹ NationMaster Encyclopedia: United States House of Representatives elections, 1854 Last Accessed February 15, 2009<http://www.nationmaster.com/encyclopedia/United-States-House-of-Representatives-elections%2C-1854>

delegation). The fourteen ballots taken that day saw the President's totals fall, mostly to the benefit of Sen. Douglas. On June 6th, President Pierce's name was withdrawn and two more ballots taken without result (two-thirds majority being necessary). William A. Richardson, who had nominated Douglas, withdrew the Senator's candidacy and Buchanan was the nominee.²

Republican Party

Two weeks later, in Philadelphia, the Republicans held their inaugural convention to nominate their first candidate for the office of President of the United States of America. Not having a clear party leader or definite nominee, the Republican Party nominated John C. Frémont. Personifying the young, energetic spirit of the new Republican Party, Frémont had gained widespread popularity as an explorer of the western frontier. Taking only one formal ballot, John C. Fremont became the Republican Party's first nominee for President. The Republicans summed up their platform in their slogan: Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Men, and Frémont.³

American (Know-Nothing) Party

The American Party's National Convention was held in National Hall in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on February 22-25, 1856. The party was split at the convention over the issue of slavery. The anti-slave forces were furious at the party for the decision to not address the slavery issue on a national platform. Former President Millard Fillmore was nominated for President with 179 votes out of the 234 votes. The

² Official proceedings of the National Democratic convention, held in Cincinnati, June 2-6, 1856. Pub. By order of the Convention: Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Library
2005

³ USHistory.org Created by the Independence Hall Association in Philadelphia
http://www.ushistory.org/gop/convention_1856.htm

convention chose Andrew J. Donelson of Tennessee for vice president with 181 votes to 30 other recipients and 24 abstaining.⁴

Whig Party

The final Whig National Convention was held in the Hall of the Maryland Institute in Baltimore September 17 – 18 1856. There were 150 delegates from 26 states. Although Whig party leaders wanted to keep the party alive, they decided to endorse the American Party's ticket of Fillmore and Donelson. The one hundred and fifty Whig delegates voted unanimously to endorse the Fillmore/Donelson ticket.

James Buchanan – Democratic

The Democratic candidate, James Buchanan was seen as a great debater and very gifted in the law. Buchanan's skills and knowledge in the law allowed him to become a career politician. He was elected five times to the House of Representatives; then, briefly served as a Minister to Russia, and served for a decade in the Senate. He became Polk's Secretary of State and Pierce's Minister to Great Britain.⁵

In regards to the Democratic Party's platform James Buchanan generally adhered to the principles of limited government and states' rights. Although Buchanan was not morally opposed to Slavery, he blamed Abolitionists for endangering southern Security and the Union. Under President Polk, Buchanan was largely responsible for the foreign policy of the administration. During the Polk Administration, Buchanan was in charge of annexing Oregon and the attempted purchase of Cuba. Buchanan's international prominence as Minister to England proved to be beneficial to him in securing his party's

⁴ Convention City: Philadelphia 1856

http://www2.hsp.org/exhibits/convention/1856_main.html

⁵ The White House Official Biography: James Buchanan -

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/jamesbuchanan/>

nomination. His international service had exempted him from involvement in bitter domestic controversies (namely the debates over the Kansas-Nebraska Act) and was seen as untainted.

James Buchanan thought his election would resolve the sectional crisis over slavery and state's rights if he were to maintain a "sectional balance" within his own cabinet.⁶

John C. Frémont – Republican

John Fremont was admired as a national hero for his five courageous crossings of the Rocky Mountains and his leadership role in getting California from Mexico. Fremont held ideas and beliefs fit the Republican Platform tremendously. For Republicans, it was mostly name recognition and wanting to not offend any of the party factions that made Fremont the front-runner and eventual nominee. Frémont was opposed to the expansion of slavery, which was the largest and most important issue in the Republican Platform and a large reason why he received the nomination.

Millard Fillmore – American Party (Know-Nothings)

Like James Buchanan, Millard Fillmore had a career of public service. Holding a variety of political offices, Fillmore was no stranger to public service, Fillmore held state office and for eight years was a member of the House of Representatives. In 1848, while Comptroller of New York, he was elected Vice President. Fillmore presided over the Senate during the months of intense debates over the Compromise of 1850. He made no public comment on the compromise proposals, but just before Taylor's death, Fillmore told the President that if there were a tie on the bill, he would vote in favor of it. As the

⁶ The White House Official Biography: James Buchanan - <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/jamesbuchanan/>

Whig Party disintegrated in the 1850's, Fillmore refused to join the Republican Party; but, instead, in 1852 accepted the nomination for President of the Know Nothing, or American, Party

General Election

The 1856 Presidential Election was about one issue: the expansion of slavery. The nation was deeply divided over the issue, and it was clear that none of the candidates would have an easy job uniting the country. With one party falling apart, putting up their last candidate (Whig) and one party still in their infancy (Republican) the sentiment was that the Democratic Party along with the stronghold in the South would win this election. Although there were no real organizations that conducted surveys or polls at this point in history, we can adapt current predictive models to fit this election and predict the expected outcome.

Key's to the White House

One of the best predictive models that we can use to predict the expected outcome of the 1856 Presidential Election would be Allan J. Lichman's *Key's to The White House*. In total, six keys were turned against the Democratic Party for the Election of 1856, which according to the predictive model would indicate a Democratic victory.⁷ These determinations were a result of my own research and findings and turned by my judgment. Lichman only begins to address Presidential elections starting in 1860. My suspicion on why the 1856 election was not included was because of the economic and political transformations, which our nation was enduring.

Lichman's model seems to take the modern two-party system as a continuous (discounting any minor third party candidates) element in predicting elections. (Either the

⁷ Keys 1,2,4,8 12 and 13 were all turned against the Democratic Party.

incumbent party or the opponent.) However, as we have noted, we see the dissolution and creation of two major national parties during this time period.

Secondly, we see a nation divided between agriculture and industry, as it was during most of the 19th Century as a means of economic policy. In this time period the industrialized north began to control the entire economy through banks and railroads and the average farmer being pushed out of the economic picture, creating a bifurcated economy, which could experience huge economic growth in the North while experiencing economic constriction in the South.

Political Cartoons

Unlike today, Americans did not have political jargon available at their fingertips. Newspapers were about the only medium in which any news would be available to the average citizen during the 1856 election. With that said, newspapers became a good place for election propaganda. While newspapers would have been a good source for first-hand accounts of campaign stops as well as text from important speeches newspapers were also a good home for propaganda during the Election of 1856. Unfortunately for readers of newspapers, these mediums were really the only way to use widespread propaganda against a candidate during this election.

Slavery and Party Platforms⁸

The general election campaign was wholly about one issue, slavery and how it affected the United States. As the nation was divided so were the parties. Each party campaigned on their respective positions on slavery trying to garner as much support from the nation in order to get elected and steer the slavery debate in their direction.

⁸ [From Thomas V. Cooper, and Hector T. Fenton, *American Politics from the Beginning to Date* (Chicago: Charles R. Brodix, 1882), pp. 39–40.]

The Republican platform opposed the repeal of the Missouri Compromise through the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the policy of popular sovereignty in deciding whether a state would enter the Union as a free or slave state. The Republicans also accused the Pierce administration of allowing a fraudulent territorial government to be imposed upon the citizens of the Kansas Territory, provoking the violence that had raged in Bleeding Kansas, and advocated the immediate admittance of Kansas as a free state. Along with opposing the spread of slavery into the continental territories of the United States the party also opposed the Ostend Manifesto, which advocated the annexation of Cuba (where slavery still existed) from Spain. In summation the campaign's true focus was against the system of slavery, which they felt was destroying the Republican values that the Union had been founded upon.

The Democratic platform supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the system of popular sovereignty established in the Western territories. The party supported the pro-slavery territorial legislature elected in Kansas and opposed the free state elements within Kansas. The Democrats also supported the plan to annex Cuba, advocated in the Ostend Manifesto, which Buchanan helped devise while serving as minister to Britain. One of the most caustic portions of the Democratic campaign was a warning that a Republican victory would lead to the secession of numerous southern states.⁹

Election Outcome

Democrat James Buchanan won the Presidential Election of 1856. James Buchanan won the popular vote over John Fremont and Millard Fillmore, 1,836,072 to 1,342,345 and 873,053.¹⁰ The electoral vote was broken down as followed: Buchanan

⁹ * Whole section cited in title in section title

¹⁰ Source: The American Presidency Project

<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1856>

174 electoral votes, Fremont 114 electoral votes, and Fillmore 8 electoral votes. Buchanan won every southern state as well as California, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Indiana and Ohio, while Fremont showed strong support in the North and Fillmore only carried Maryland.

Election Analysis

Fremont did not win any county in a Slave State. In fact, he only won only 595 votes in all the slave states put together. (Only the Slave States of Maryland and Delaware delivered votes to Fremont - His strongest county showings are in Vermont, western Massachusetts, and northern Illinois, all far from counties with appreciable slave presence. In 1856, if you were a slave owner or someone else who profited from slavery, you wanted to keep the United States as black as possible; so Fillmore seemed to be the better candidate for you. He won almost no counties in the northern Free States.¹¹

The slave-heavy lower Mississippi valley and the “Black Belt” in the southeast almost unanimously went to Fillmore. In general, as you move within a Slave State from counties with a lower slave population to those with a higher one, the vote shifts from Buchanan toward Fillmore. In the South, the issue of Catholic immigration shows up in the Buchanan-Fillmore divide as well. The only state whose electoral votes Fillmore took was Maryland - the state with the highest rate of church (i.e. Protestant) adherence.¹²

Conclusion

¹¹ Source: The American Presidency Project
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1856>

¹² Source: The American Presidency Project
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showelection.php?year=1856>

If you examine the platforms of both parties, and analyze the vote distribution you will see how much slavery played a part of this presidential election. Unfortunately for Buchanan, he was not able to keep the country from edging closer to Civil War. The results of 1856 proved one thing to be clear, the Democratic Party had a new formidable party to reckon with on the national stage; the Republican Party successfully over-took the Whig Party as the main national opposition to the Democratic Party.

The distribution of the electoral vote suggested that the Republicans were in a strong position to take over the White House in 1860 if there were a lack-luster performance by Buchanan, simply winning two more states, possibly Pennsylvania and Illinois.