

## **Lincoln's Election**

**<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

Elections during the mid-nineteenth century differed from those of today in that most candidates were content to run “front porch” campaigns, with relatively few public events. They relied instead on officials at the national, state, and local levels to promote their party’s candidates. Abraham Lincoln did not participate in campaign events, preferring to remain at home in Springfield, Illinois. He did give one brief speech on August 8, and authorized the publication of a short campaign biography, but the Republican standard bearer was largely content to rest on his record and on the party platform approved at the convention. With the Democratic split making a Republican victory nearly certain, he saw no advantage to rehashing his positions on controversial issues such as the expansion of slavery into the territories. “I could say nothing which I have not already said,” he shrewdly concluded. Republican victories in a number of northern state elections held in October only reinforced this strategy.

Stephen Douglas was the only candidate to actively “campaign” during the period leading up to the election. As it became clearer that Lincoln was the likely winner, Douglas bravely determined to conduct a speaking tour of the south, not to promote his own candidacy, but to try to convince southerners not to support secession in the event of a Republican victory. Douglas gave speeches in Kentucky, Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, and eventually in the Deep South states of Georgia and Alabama. Perhaps his most famous public appearance was in Norfolk, Virginia, where, in responding to audience questions, he argued that the south would not be justified in seceding if Lincoln became president, and that the new chief executive would be within his authority to resist secession if and when it did occur.

While Douglas campaigned in the south, pleading for the slave states to remain in the Union regardless of the election results, southern fire-eater William Yancey toured a number of northern cities, urging citizens there to vote for any candidate other than Lincoln, in order to avoid the possible secession of the southern states. In these addresses he clearly emphasized the issue of slavery and its protection as the major concern of the south, and of the southern fear over the possible election of a “Black Republican” who they believed might threaten the institution.

When the results were tabulated following the November 6 polling, the popular vote totals favored Lincoln, who received 1.8 million, with Douglas next at 1.3 million, followed by John Breckinridge at 800,000 and John Bell at nearly 600,000. In the Electoral College, Lincoln won a majority, thus keeping the election out of the House of Representatives. The final count was Lincoln at 180, followed by Breckinridge at 72, Bell at 39, and Douglas with a disappointing 12. Douglas had finished second in popular votes in most regions of the country, but the only state that he was able to win outright was Missouri. In addition he received a portion of New Jersey’s electoral votes. Lincoln, meanwhile, had won all of the northern states (including a split in New Jersey), as well as California and Oregon. Bell won the Border States of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia, while Breckinridge carried the Deep South states, and also Maryland and Delaware.

The election results reflected the divided nature of the country, with a majority in the north and south each voting for candidates who had little or no support in the opposite region. Lincoln, in fact, was not even on the ballot in ten slave states, and Breckinridge had virtually no support in the north. Bell’s support came mainly from the Border States of the Upper South, and the more moderate Douglas fell victim to the intense sectional discord. In the election’s aftermath, president-elect Lincoln began the long process of organizing his administration, while

attempting to reassure the south that he had no plans to interfere with the institution of slavery in the areas where it already existed. To many in the south the mere election of the Illinois Republican was reason enough for secession, and calls quickly went out in several southern states for secession conventions to consider the issue. “The tea has been thrown overboard,” proclaimed the *Charleston Mercury*, “the revolution of 1860 has been initiated.”