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# Running to Lose?: John C. Breckinridge and the Presidential Election of 1860

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## Abstract

One important catalyst for the onset of the Civil War was the Presidential Election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860. Lincoln, competing against three other candidates, won the election with the smallest percentage of the popular vote in American history. Given the circumstances, a slightly different electoral slate might have engineered his defeat. We examine this possibility by focusing on the candidacy of John C. Breckinridge, the final entrant into the race. Historians disagree over the rationale behind Breckinridge's candidacy. Some argue that it was a desperate effort to defeat Lincoln; others suggest that it was designed to *insure* Lincoln's victory. Using election counterfactuals and applying spatial voting theory, we examine these arguments. Our evidence suggests that Breckinridge had *no* reasonable chance to win. Support for Breckinridge's candidacy was *only* reasonable if the intention were to elect Lincoln.

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You understand, of course, that you were ill-used. You were tricked by a cabal that wanted only to see elected the man who was anathema to their region, and then divide the Union (*fictional statement by Francis Preston Blair to John C. Breckinridge, Safire, 1987: p. 33*).

## 1. Introduction

The Civil War years (1861–1865) were arguably the most traumatic in American history. While Northern victory yielded important, tangible benefits—preservation of the Union and freedom for four million slaves—it was monumentally costly. Over 600,000 soldiers died, more Americans than in any other war before or since, the Southern economy and infrastructure were completely destroyed, and many of the characteristics of antebellum life, both North and South, were lost and gone forever.

It is no surprise, then, that many historians have focused on the causes of the war, specifically, the political, economic, and social dynamics that led up to the conflict. The historiography of this time period is complex: determining who was responsible for the war and, more importantly, whether the war was the inevitable result of an “irrepressible conflict” can almost certainly never be fully answered (Stamp, 1980). Nevertheless, there are certain events that played a pivotal role in the drive to secession, and ultimately the outbreak of war, whose inevitability *can* be examined.

Perhaps, the most important of these events was the Presidential Election of Abraham Lincoln in November 1860. As Southern secession and the formation of the Confederacy occurred *after* Lincoln’s election, it is quite possible that Lincoln’s defeat, at a minimum, would have delayed the outbreak of war. Lincoln, a moderate anti-slavery Republican from Illinois, ran against three other candidates—Stephen Douglas, a moderate pro-slavery Democrat from Illinois; John Bell, a moderate former Whig from Tennessee; and John C. Breckinridge, a strong pro-slavery Democrat from Kentucky—and won election with the smallest percentage of the popular vote in American history. Given his narrow margin of victory, a slightly different electoral slate might have engineered his defeat. As McLean (2002: p. 552) writes:

In a four-candidate race, Lincoln beat Stephen Douglas narrowly in each state of the North, while getting no votes at all in the Deep South. His vote total was distributed as efficiently as it could have been for winning in the Electoral College; Douglas’s, as inefficiently as it could have been. But then we need to ask: as the magnifying and distorting effects of the Electoral College were well known, why was it a four-horse race?

We set out to answer this question. More specifically, we investigate why the election involved *four* candidates rather than *three*. While both Douglas’s and Bell’s candidacies can be explained in terms of reasonable electoral aspirations, Breckinridge’s candidacy is more difficult to explain in such terms. That is, given that he was an ideological extremist (on the slavery issue) and *three* candidates were already in the field, his chances of an outright victory appeared small. While

historians have examined this question, no consensus has emerged. Some contend that Breckinridge's supporters believed that no candidate could achieve an Electoral College majority, which would throw the election into the House of Representatives, where Breckinridge stood a solid chance at victory (Dodd, 1911; Nichols, 1948; Heck, 1976). Some argue that Breckinridge's candidacy was a desperate effort by Southern Democrats to prevent a Lincoln victory in the Electoral College, by setting into motion a process in which *all* of Lincoln's opponents would exit the race in favor of one "fusion" candidate (Fite, 1911; Davis, 1974; Alexander, 1981). Finally, others suggest that Breckinridge's candidacy was a ploy by certain Southern power brokers, like Jefferson Davis, to *insure* a Lincoln victory in the Electoral College, by dividing and diluting the anti-Lincoln vote (Johannsen, 1965; Crenshaw, 1969).

Using election counterfactuals and applying the spatial theory of voting, we examine these competing hypotheses. While scholars in the public choice literature have studied the election and concluded that Breckinridge would have fared quite poorly under a variety of voting rules (Riker, 1982; Taborrok and Spector, 1999; Mackie, 2001, 2003), a number of important questions remain unanswered.<sup>1</sup> What impact did Breckinridge's candidacy have on the likelihood of a Lincoln victory in the Electoral College? What impact did Breckinridge's candidacy have on the likelihood of a non-Lincoln outcome, should the election have been thrown into the House of Representatives? And, finally, is there evidence to suggest that a "fusion candidate" strategy was attempted and/or had any chance of being successful?

While striving to understand the rationale behind Breckinridge's candidacy is a relatively narrow matter on its face, we believe this inquiry also makes two important, broader contributions. First, investigating Breckinridge's candidacy has important implications for the larger issue of the "inevitability" of the Civil War. That is, much of the historiography suggests that if the war was not inevitable, it was the result of a series of egregious tactical errors by the national leaders of the time—who Stamp (1980) characterizes as the "blundering generation".<sup>2</sup> In particular, the behavior of the Democratic Party during the Presidential Election has often been characterized as "unwittingly" abetting Lincoln's victory. Such characterizations, to maintain validity, need to be subjected to empirical investigation. It is possible that those actions perceived as "blunders" accidentally leading to war were actually shrewd political maneuvers intended to facilitate secession.

Second, this inquiry fits well into the growing literature on counterfactual reasoning and inference in political science (Fearon, 1991; Tetlock and Belkin, 1996; Lebow,

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<sup>1</sup> Riker (1982) analyzes mass voter preference orderings, examines the likely outcomes under different methods of voting, and finds that *none* generate a Breckinridge victory. Instead, he finds a cycle between Bell, Douglas, and Lincoln, whereby each can emerge as the winner under different voting rules. Taborrok and Spector (1999) build on Riker's analysis by incorporating a range of additional voting methods (specifically *all* positional voting methods) and uncover results similar to Riker's. Mackie (2001) recalculates Riker's preference orderings and finds that Douglas finishes first (and Breckinridge *last*) under a series of five different voting rules.

<sup>2</sup> For additional accounts of the critical events leading up to the Civil War, see Potter (1976), Ransom (1989), Weingast (1991, 1998), and Wawro (2005).

2000; Humes et al., 2002). Scholars working within this tradition contend that counterfactual conjectures are not only *useful* for drawing causal inference from historical data, but *necessary* as well. As Tetlock and Belkin (1996: p. 38) suggest, the “disciplined use of counterfactuals—grounded in explicit standards of evidence and proof—can be enlightening in specific historical, theoretical, and policy settings”. This is one such historical setting. Moreover, our use of spatial voting theory to generate counterfactual conjectures complements, as well as expands, the more general literature on formal approaches to counterfactual study (see, e.g., Weingast, 1996).

While it is unlikely that anyone sought—or expected—a conflict of the Civil War’s magnitude, we do think that intentionality played a greater role in the decision-making that led up to the conflict than previously realized. While we cannot know with certainty what the actors in the presidential drama intended, we can, following in the rational choice tradition, say that if the intentions were thus and the preferences so, then certain strategies were more rational than others. Remembering that each of the candidates and their top supporters were gifted, experienced political actors, the implementation of “foolish” strategies requires some explanation. Thus, we set out to determine if John C. Breckinridge *really* could have won the presidency. If he could not have won, or could not have reasonably expected to win, then we must re-evaluate the political preferences—and strategic intentions—of his staunchest supporters.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, we provide some historical background leading up to the election, describing the various conventions and candidate nominations. We then analyze several Electoral College scenarios, based on different slates of candidates and vote distributions, to assess the likelihood of non-Lincoln outcomes. Next, using spatial voting theory, we examine how the Presidential Election would have been decided—under different candidate scenarios—had it been thrown into the House of Representatives. We then examine the merits of the “fusion candidate” theory, in the context of defeating Lincoln and saving the Union. Finally, we summarize our findings and conclude.

## 2. Historical background

After a decade of intensifying legislative and judicial conflict—a decade that included the Compromise of 1850, the Kansas–Nebraska Act, the Lecompton Constitution, the *Dred Scott* Supreme Court decision, John Brown’s raid, and the Freeport Doctrine—the nation was teetering “on the brink” in November 1860. Even the most cursory reading of accounts of the time suggests that few expected the severity of the conflict that was to come, but many realized that the Presidential Election of 1860 was a crossroads—a milestone of sorts—in American history.

Though informal politicking for the presidency had been ongoing for years, the 1860 campaign did not officially begin until April 23, 1860, when the Democratic Party Convention opened in Charleston, South Carolina. The primary dimension of conflict in Charleston was sectional; the focal point of that conflict was Stephen Douglas. As Murat Halstead wrote, “Every delegate was for him or against him.

Every motion meant to nominate or not to nominate him. Every parliamentary war was *pro* or *con* Douglas” (Hesseltine, 1960: p. 3).<sup>3</sup> Although Douglas had the support of a majority of delegates—sufficient to control floor votes and the construction of a platform—he did not have the two-thirds necessary for nomination. After some lengthy politicking with Southern leaders, Douglas and his supporters refused to include a Slave Code plank in the platform, and in quick succession most of the delegates from Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and South Carolina walked out. Two days later, after 57 ballots, the convention disbanded without producing a nominee.<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after the Charleston debacle, on May 9, 1860, the Constitutional Union Party Convention opened in Baltimore. As the prospects of a unified Democratic Party fielding a candidate waned, the Constitutional Union delegates—most of whom were former Whigs—were energized with the possibility that their nominee might be able to win the presidency either directly, via the Electoral College, or more likely, indirectly, by pushing the election into the House of Representatives (Parks, 1950). While the Democratic convention broke down due to conflicts over party planks, the Constitutional Unionists made few specific claims in their platform—calling only for the preservation of the status quo, or the “Union as it is”—and it gained wide support. Though several candidates vied for the nomination, the delegates quickly settled on John Bell of Tennessee for President and Edward Everett of Massachusetts for Vice President. This would be the last gasp for the (former) Whigs in American electoral politics.

One week later, on May 16, 1860, the Republican Party Convention opened in Chicago. Several candidates, including Abraham Lincoln of Illinois, were in the mix, but the front-runner was William H. Seward of New York (Fite, 1911). Unfortunately for Seward, Bell’s presumed strength in the border states combined with the uncertainty surrounding the Democratic nomination persuaded Republican leaders to seek a candidate with the broadest potential support base, one who could carry all the Northern states that had gone for Fremont in 1856, while also winning the pivotal “heartland” states like Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Illinois. Seward’s extreme anti-slavery views made his support in these latter states exceedingly weak (Donald, 1995: p. 247).

<sup>3</sup> Hesseltine (1960) is an edited compilation of the first-person reports of the various party conventions held during 1860 filed by a Cincinnati journalist named Murat Halstead. For understanding the setting and the internal political dynamics of the various conventions, Halstead’s reports are indispensable.

<sup>4</sup> With 49 Southern delegates gone from the convention, the task of nominating Douglas had eased considerably. Or, so Douglas’s supporters thought. Traditionally, nominees were chosen by a two-thirds vote of the *attending* delegates. However, almost immediately after the Southern bolt, John Howard of Tennessee proposed a resolution requiring that a successful nominee must gain two-thirds of *all* delegates, including those who had already left the convention (Hesseltine, 1960: p. 95). The resolution passed, by a 141 to 112 vote, effectively ending Douglas’ hopes for nomination. As Wells (1971: pp. 228–29) states, “Douglas would now have to carry every free state delegation plus 19 votes from among the seven full slave-state delegations remaining in the convention. That was impossible.”

Lincoln's strategy was to avoid making strong statements and taking controversial positions immediately prior to and during the convention. As he told Samuel Galloway:

My name is new in the field; and I suppose I am not the *first* choice of a very great many... Our policy, then, is to give no offence to others—leave them in a mood to come to us, if they shall be compelled to give up their first love (quoted in Donald, 1995: p. 244).

When Seward managed only a plurality on the first ballot, it became obvious that he would not carry the day. Lincoln's more moderate anti-slavery views appealed to many delegates, and he polled second on the first two ballots before winning the nomination on the third (Hesseltine, 1960). What the Democrats had failed to do in 57 ballots, the Republicans had done in 3.

A month later, on June 18, 1860, the Democratic Party reconvened in Baltimore. In the interval between Charleston and Baltimore, intra-party relations had deteriorated further, and two states, South Carolina and Florida, refused to send delegates to the convention (Wells, 1971: p. 232). This played into the hands of Douglas's supporters, who used their numbers to control the convention rules and proceedings. Though the convention was not without conflict (there was a second Southern bolt), Douglas's selection was never in serious doubt, and he won the nomination by an overwhelming majority—173.5 of the 191.5 votes cast (Hesseltine, 1960: p. 249).

Several days later, many of those who bolted the Democratic convention in Baltimore hastily convened a rump convention, or what has become known as the "Seceders" Convention, and nominated John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky for President and Joseph Lane of Oregon for Vice President. A more formal convention of Southern Democrats, which had been meeting in Richmond since June 11, immediately ratified the Breckinridge–Lane ticket (Fite, 1911). Soon thereafter, Jefferson Davis and Robert Toombs, two prominent Southern senators and statesmen, met Breckinridge and convinced him to accept the nomination.

So, by early summer, Breckinridge had become the fourth candidate for the presidency. Given the timing and the general political context, Breckinridge's decision to enter the race is open to several explanations. Was his candidacy designed to defeat Lincoln by pushing the election into the House (or Senate)? Was it the first step in a more elaborate fusion strategy? Or, was it a calculated attempt to divide the anti-Lincoln vote and *insure* a Lincoln victory? We consider each of these possibilities in due course.

### 3. Estimating Electoral College support

In the Presidential Election of 1860, Lincoln won a majority of Electoral College votes with just under 40% of the popular vote (see Appendix A). As a result, scholars often question whether the outcome would have differed, had one or more of the actual candidates chosen not to run. For example, what would have happened had Bell or Breckinridge not joined the race? And, perhaps most interestingly, who

would have won a two-candidate race between Douglas and Lincoln? By making some assumptions about the distribution of votes for candidates counterfactually excluded from the race, we can provide reasonable answers to these questions.

First, it is important to note that Lincoln received a majority vote in a sufficient number of states to win in the Electoral College *even if all other votes cast were given to a single candidate*. However, these ex post results were not observable by the candidates when they made their respective decisions to join the campaign. If we take these ex post results as the only reasonable ex ante expectations, then both Douglas and Breckinridge were fools to enter the race.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, even if we are willing to take the ex post results as the best indicator of each candidate's expectations, a small deviation of voters could have generated a Lincoln loss. Thus, one or more candidates—including Breckinridge—might have reasonably expected to have a fighting chance against Lincoln. By estimating the number of vote changes necessary to generate a non-Lincoln outcome, holding the *total* number of voters in the election and candidate campaign strategies constant, we can also evaluate the relative likelihood of alternative counterfactuals—and thus, the reasonableness of individuals' decisions to join the race.<sup>6</sup>

To evaluate ex ante candidate strategies, we first examine the extent to which small deviations in vote totals might have produced a non-Lincoln outcome. We then identify the scenario that required the smallest deviation from the actual vote totals. From this baseline, we then compare the vote-total deviations required by other scenarios to generate a non-Lincoln outcome. Once this is done, we are in a position to evaluate the impact of various candidate strategies on the likelihood of a non-Lincoln outcome.

Though he received the fewest number of electoral votes (12), Stephen Douglas received the second highest number of popular votes (1,380,202), less than a half million fewer than Lincoln and just less than Bell and Breckinridge combined. How many vote switchers did Douglas need to beat Lincoln in a two-candidate race? The answer, in general terms, is not many. In the actual election, Lincoln received 180 of 303 available electoral votes. Thus, for Douglas to win, he simply needed 29 of Lincoln's electoral votes.

To determine *how* Douglas could have siphoned votes from Lincoln, we must first make assumptions about the relative placement of the candidates on the underlying dimension of vote choice. Our chief assumption is that citizens' vote choices were based on the candidates' positions on slavery (see Fite, 1911; Crenshaw, 1969; Morison, 1971; Mackie, 2001, 2003). The distribution of candidates, then, based on positions that they took on relevant slavery-related issues of the day is illustrated in

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<sup>5</sup> Bell was the first candidate to enter the race. Without knowing the identity of his opponents (or how many he would face), he might reasonably have expected his moderate position to carry the day.

<sup>6</sup> The number of *vote switchers* is obviously not a perfect indicator of candidate expectations. To improve upon this indicator, however, it would be necessary to know (1) that the absence of one or more of the candidates from the race would have changed the electoral dynamics—i.e., modified candidate strategies or bolstered (or dampened) turnout—in ways that would have *significantly altered the outcomes* and (2) that this knowledge was incorporated into candidate expectations. Unfortunately, the limitations of existing data prevent us from constructing a more nuanced indicator of candidate expectations.

**Table 1.** From most pro-slavery to most anti-slavery, the distribution was Breckinridge–Douglas–Bell–Lincoln.<sup>7</sup>

Given this distribution, Douglas, in a two-man race with Lincoln, would have received all of Breckinridge's voters. If we also assume that Douglas would have received all of Bell's voters, what is the minimum number of vote switchers necessary to produce a Douglas victory? Stated another way, how many Lincoln voters would Douglas have needed to siphon off to win? By examining the actual state vote totals and the number of Electoral votes associated with each state, we were able to identify the "Douglas victory" electoral scenarios resulting from the fewest number of vote switchers. As the first option in the first scenario<sup>8</sup> in Table 2 illustrates, to emerge victorious, Douglas would have needed only 5318 voters to switch—2356 Lincoln voters in Illinois and 2962 Lincoln voters in Indiana—to win the election.<sup>9</sup> This would have constituted just 0.29% of Lincoln's total vote. However, because Bell was positioned *between* Lincoln and Douglas, *all* of Bell's voters would not have likely gone to Douglas. If we assume, as seems more reasonable, that Douglas would receive *half* of the Bell voters (the other half going to Lincoln), a higher bar for a "Douglas victory" is set.<sup>10</sup> As illustrated in the second scenario in Table 2, the minimum number of switchers increases to 10,428, which still amounts to less than 0.43% of Lincoln's projected vote total.

<sup>7</sup> While placing Breckinridge and Lincoln at the extremes of the four-candidate ordering is generally accepted by scholars, the relative placement of Douglas and Bell is debatable. Riker (1982), for example, is clear in arguing that Lincoln voters preferred Bell to Douglas. Taborrok and Spector (1999) conducted a survey of historians on the matter and received a near split in responses regarding the placement of Douglas and Bell. While Douglas and Bell held similar positions on many slavery-related issues, we argue that Douglas was more pro-slavery than Bell (see Table 1). While Douglas emerged as an opponent of the pro-slavery agenda in the late-1850s, he behaved quite differently earlier in the decade. In particular, he was the legislative mastermind behind the development and subsequent passage of the Kansas–Nebraska Act in the House, which negated the Missouri Compromise and opened the portion of the Louisiana Purchase north of 36° 30' to slavery (see Potter, 1976). Bell, on the other hand, had largely opposed the pro-slavery Southern agenda *throughout* his years in Congress. For example, while a member of the House, he joined John Quincy Adams in opposing the various "gag rules" in the early-1840s. And, as a Senator, he was the *only* Southerner to vote *against* the Kansas–Nebraska Act, and later opposed the Tennessee legislature's instructions to support the Lecompton Constitution (Crenshaw, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> For each scenario (or set of candidates), we present several "options". Each of these mutually exclusive options includes a set of states, the total number of vote switchers required to produce a Lincoln loss in each of the states in the set, and the number of Electoral votes that would shift to one or more alternate candidates (depending upon the scenario). The options presented under each scenario are those that require the smallest number of vote switchers—in order of number of switchers—to produce a Lincoln loss or a non-majority outcome in the Electoral College.

<sup>9</sup> Note from the Appendix A that the vote totals were such in California and Oregon that shifting the Bell and Breckinridge supporters to Douglas automatically gives those states' electoral votes to Douglas. In the actual election, Lincoln won both states but only by the slimmest of *pluralities*.

<sup>10</sup> It is certainly possible that Bell's voters would not have split evenly between Lincoln and Douglas. However, short of possessing a distribution of voters in the mass election, we have no way of determining how likely this would have been. But, of course, we also have no justification for assuming a vote split that differed significantly from 50 to 50, nor do we have any reason to expect that the candidates would have expected an uneven vote split. Thus, we think the 50–50 split is a fairly conservative assumption. If the distribution of voters in the mass election mirrored the distribution of members in the House (see Fig. 1), then a 50–50 split seems reasonable.



Table 1  
Candidate distribution on the slavery issue

John C. Breckinridge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported the Lecompton Constitution</li> <li>• Supported the Dred Scott decision</li> </ul>
Stephen Douglas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported “popular sovereignty” in all of the territories</li> <li>• Opposed the Lecompton Constitution</li> <li>• Opposed the Dred Scott decision</li> </ul>
John Bell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supported “popular sovereignty” in the Western territories, per the stipulations under the Compromise of 1850</li> <li>• Opposed the extension of slavery, via “popular sovereignty”, into the former Louisiana Purchase territory (i.e., opposed the Kansas–Nebraska Act and stood by the stipulations in the Missouri Compromise)</li> <li>• Opposed the Lecompton Constitution</li> <li>• Opposed the Dred Scott decision</li> </ul>
Abraham Lincoln	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opposed the extension of slavery into <i>any</i> of the territories</li> <li>• Would allow slavery to remain “where it was”</li> <li>• Opposed the Lecompton Constitution</li> <li>• Opposed the Dred Scott decision</li> </ul>

*Notes:* *Popular sovereignty* was the right ascribed to a territory for self-determination on the subject of slavery. The *Lecompton Constitution* was a pro-slavery constitution put forth by a rump-government from the Territory of Kansas, for the purposes of statehood. Congress eventually rejected the constitution and sent it back to Kansas Territory for ratification by the people, where it was overwhelmingly rejected. The *Dred Scott decision* was an 1857 Supreme Court decision that, among other things, rejected congressional legislation on the subject of slavery. In effect, the decision stated that slavery was a right inherent in the Constitution, making congressional (as well as state) interventions unconstitutional. Adherence to the decision, therefore, meant that a state or territory could *not* prohibit slavery (making the notion of “popular sovereignty” moot).

*Sources:* Fite (1911); Parks (1950); Hesseltine (1960); Crenshaw (1969); Wells (1971); Davis (1974); Stampf (1980); Donald (1995).

If Breckinridge is added to a Lincoln–Douglas race, it becomes more difficult for Douglas to beat Lincoln, because Breckinridge cuts into Douglas’s support without affecting Lincoln’s support. If Bell is added to a Lincoln–Douglas race, the results are less clear. Bell would take electoral votes that might otherwise have been Douglas’s, but he would also take votes from Lincoln. In fact, a Lincoln–Bell–Douglas race might easily have produced no Electoral College winner, in which case the election would have been thrown into the House of Representatives (which was the hope of Bell and his supporters).<sup>11</sup> The third scenario in Table 2 illustrates how many switchers were necessary to prevent Lincoln from gaining an Electoral College majority in a Lincoln–Bell–Douglas race. Notice that it is the same number as required for a Douglas victory in a two-man race with Lincoln where Bell voters are evenly split between the candidates. Finally, the fourth scenario in Table 2 documents the number

<sup>11</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this paper, we may at some point pursue an analysis using ecological inference with aggregate vote outcomes and census data to examine how (and at what rates) different demographic groups voted for the various candidates. This could be instructive in terms of understanding how likely certain groups (like the Bell voters) were to switch to a given candidate (versus a different candidate). For an analysis of the Presidential Election of 1860 using an early version of ecological regression, see McCrary et al. (1978).

Table 2  
Alternative Electoral College scenarios

Option number	States needed to switch	Minimum number of necessary vote switchers	Total electoral votes
<i>Douglas victory scenario in a Lincoln–Douglas race</i>			
1	IL, IN, CA, OR <sup>a</sup>	5318	31
2	OH, CA, OR	10,345	30
3	NY	25,069	35
4	PA and OR or CA	29,810	30 or 31
<i>Douglas victory scenario in a Lincoln–Douglas race, taking Bell into account</i>			
1	IL, IN, CA, OR <sup>b</sup>	10,428	31
2	OH, CA, OR	16,442	30
3	NY	25,069	35
4	PA and CA	36,198	31
<i>No majority winner in the Electoral College in a Lincoln–Bell–Douglas race</i>			
1	IL, IN, CA, OR <sup>b</sup>	10,428	31
2	OH, CA, OR	16,442	30
3	NY	25,069	35
4	PA and CA	36,198	31
<i>No majority winner in the Electoral College in a Lincoln–Douglas–Breckinridge race</i>			
1	IL, IN, CA, OR	17,741	31
2	OH, CA, OR	22,145	30
3	NY	25,069	35
4	PA and CA	36,566	31

<sup>a</sup> It is important to note that the vote totals were such in California and Oregon that shifting the Bell and Breckinridge supporters to Douglas automatically gives those states' electoral votes to Douglas. In the actual election, Lincoln won both states but only by the slimmest of *pluralities*.

<sup>b</sup> Again, California and Oregon become Douglas states immediately.

of switchers needed to push the election into the House if Breckinridge is added to a Lincoln–Douglas race (assuming, again, an even split of Bell voters between Douglas and Lincoln). Of all the scenarios presented, the Lincoln–Douglas–Breckinridge is the *least* likely to produce a non-Lincoln outcome.<sup>12</sup>

These possible scenarios, given our *ceteris paribus* assumptions, suggest the following about the Presidential Election of 1860 and the relative likelihood of counterfactual alternatives:

1. A non-Lincoln outcome was *most* likely in a two-man race between Lincoln and Douglas. If defeating Lincoln were one's sole purpose in the 1860 election, then the only reasonable strategy would have been to support Douglas's candidacy.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> We have not included a Lincoln–Bell–Breckinridge scenario for two reasons: (1) it was extremely unlikely and (2) given the ideological placement of the candidates, a non-Lincoln outcome would have required *at least* as many (and probably many more) vote switchers as the number required in a Lincoln–Bell–Douglas scenario.

<sup>13</sup> This assumes, of course, that supporting Bell's candidacy, in a possible two-man race with Lincoln, was *not* an option for most Southerners. While Bell was more pro-slavery than Lincoln, his views on slavery extension were too moderate for many Southerners (especially in the Deep South) to support. Thus, a two-man race between Lincoln and Bell would have been highly unlikely.

2. Breckinridge's candidacy all but assured that if the Electoral College were able to choose a winner, it would be Lincoln. Given that he was the candidate furthest from Lincoln, Breckinridge would have siphoned votes away from Douglas, while not hurting Lincoln.

#### 4. Estimating support in the House of Representatives

Results from the Electoral College counterfactuals aside, the Presidential Election of 1860 *was* in reality a four-candidate race. As a result, as election day approached, there was a reasonable *ex ante* probability that an Electoral College deadlock would occur and that the election would be thrown into the House of Representatives.<sup>14</sup> If this indeed transpired, how likely would a non-Lincoln outcome have been? While historians have often speculated about the result of such a House election, the validity of their conjectures is empirically problematic. That is, a way of *testing* various electoral counterfactuals has not been presented.

We explore how the Presidential Election of 1860 would have been decided, had it been thrown into the House, using the tools of spatial voting theory. More to the point, we apply a version of the W-NOMINATE vote-scaling technique to generate ideal-point estimates for all members of the 36th House of Representatives as well as all four of the possible House candidates on the primary dimension of choice, which Poole and Rosenthal (1997: pp. 41–42, 95–100) define as a “slavery” dimension during this period.<sup>15</sup> Creating sincere-voting

<sup>14</sup> This is especially true given that the Democratic Presidential candidate in 1856 (James Buchanan) was able to win four free (non-slave) states: Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. Thus, while it was possible for a candidate to win a majority of Electoral College votes in 1860 without winning any slave states, the likelihood of Lincoln achieving that outcome was considered quite small (Dodd, 1911; Nichols, 1948; Crenshaw, 1969; Aldrich, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> The version of the W-NOMINATE procedure that we use is based on work by Poole (1998), which creates a *single* set of ideal points for all members who served in either chamber across a given number of Congresses and places them in a common evaluative space. For our purposes, we use all members between the 33rd and 37th Congresses in our common-space W-NOMINATE estimation, a period in which the first dimension was characterized by issues relating to slavery (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997: pp. 5, 41–42, 95–100). Correlations between members' first-dimension congress-specific W-NOMINATE scores and their first-dimension common-space W-NOMINATE scores were 0.975, 0.982, 0.993, 0.992, and 0.927 for the 33rd through the 37th Houses, respectively. So, in the critical 36th Congress, in which the House ballot for president would have been held, the two sets of scores are essentially identical. This common-space estimation has the crucial benefit of allowing us to generate ideal points for Bell, Breckinridge, and Douglas, who all served in Congress during this time, but not for Lincoln, who served only in the 30th House. To generate an ideal point for Lincoln, we performed a simple regression, incorporating those members who served in *both* the 30th House (in which Lincoln served) and *any* Congress within the set used in our common-space W-NOMINATE estimation. For this set of members, 45 in all, we regressed their first-dimension common-space W-NOMINATE score on their second-dimension D-NOMINATE score in the 30th House (the second dimension during the 30th House was characterized by slavery, see Poole and Rosenthal, 1997: p. 49). We then “fit” Lincoln's D-NOMINATE score in the 30th House into the estimated model to generate a common-space W-NOMINATE prediction (or forecast) for him. For a more detailed explanation of the forecasting technique, see Greene (1999: pp. 307–312). For a general introduction to the NOMINATE procedure, see Poole and Rosenthal (1997).

predictions for all House members for each of the possible election scenarios—the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution stipulates that the “Top 3” finishers in the electoral balloting be placed on the House ballot—then becomes straightforward, based on simple Euclidean distance calculations from each member to each of the candidates.<sup>16</sup> From these individual-level voting predictions, we are then able to generate unit-level voting predictions, given that balloting in the House election follows the unit rule, to determine how many state votes each of the various candidates would have received.<sup>17</sup> After tabulating these state votes, we can then determine if there is a sincere-voting majority winner under each potential House scenario.<sup>18</sup>

The distribution of House members and the Presidential candidates on the primary W-NOMINATE dimension appear in Fig. 1.<sup>19</sup> Notice, first, that the NOMINATE-based candidate ordering *matches* the qualitative candidate ordering presented in Table 1 *exactly*. Breckinridge anchors the extreme pro-slavery end (−0.408), with Douglas serving as a less extreme pro-slavery candidate (−0.129). Bell appears near the middle of the distribution (0.041), consistent with his moderate stance, with Lincoln serving as the most anti-slavery candidate (0.130).<sup>20</sup> The House median was slightly to the anti-slavery side of the spectrum (0.057).

We focus on three possible House scenarios, which are presented in Table 3: (1) an election involving Lincoln, Bell, and Douglas; (2) an election involving Lincoln, Bell, and Breckinridge; and (3) an election involving Lincoln, Douglas, and Breckinridge.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>16</sup> This assumes, of course, that members’ preferences are single-peaked and symmetric. For a general introduction to spatial voting theory, see Hinich and Munger (1997).

<sup>17</sup> That is, each state, regardless of size, could cast one vote. In order for a unit vote to be cast, a majority of a state’s House contingent would need to support a given candidate; otherwise no vote would be cast. To win election, a candidate would need to receive a majority of *all* states (voting or otherwise).

<sup>18</sup> Jenkins and Sala (1998) used this W-NOMINATE procedure in a spatial voting analysis of the 1825 Presidential election in the House and found that both individual and state vote choices were predicted well. Jenkins and Nokken (2000) also used this W-NOMINATE procedure in a spatial voting analysis of the 1855 House Speakership election and found that individual vote choices were predicted well.

<sup>19</sup> We assume that voting in the House election would be one-dimensional. This is consistent with normal congressional voting patterns that Poole and Rosenthal (1993, 1997) document during this time. Moreover, we examined the validity of this claim, in two ways. First, we ran the W-NOMINATE estimation procedure on the full set of roll-call votes in the 36th House, and only one dimension had a significant eigenvalue. Alternatively, following Poole and Rosenthal, we examined a second measure, by comparing the APRE (aggregate proportional reduction in error) from a two-dimensional model to the APRE from a one-dimensional model. Poole and Rosenthal argue that in order for a second dimension to be meaningful (i.e., in order for it to be doing more than fitting “noise” in the estimation), the APRE gain from adding a second dimension must be at least 0.2. For the 36th House, the APRE gain from adding a second dimension is only 0.05. Thus, whether one uses eigenvalues or APREs, there is no evidence of a significant second dimension in the 36th House.

<sup>20</sup> Because Lincoln’s ideal point is a forecast (see Footnote 15), we are sensitive to issues of precision in measurement. Thus, in all subsequent election counterfactuals, we not only use Lincoln’s ideal point, but also points representing the bounds of a 95% confidence interval around Lincoln’s ideal point as a check. None of the individual (or state) vote predictions change, suggesting that the Lincoln ideal-point forecast has face validity.

<sup>21</sup> We do not consider scenarios in which Lincoln is not a “Top 3” finisher. Such scenarios would have been unlikely, given the large number of Republican voters in the North.

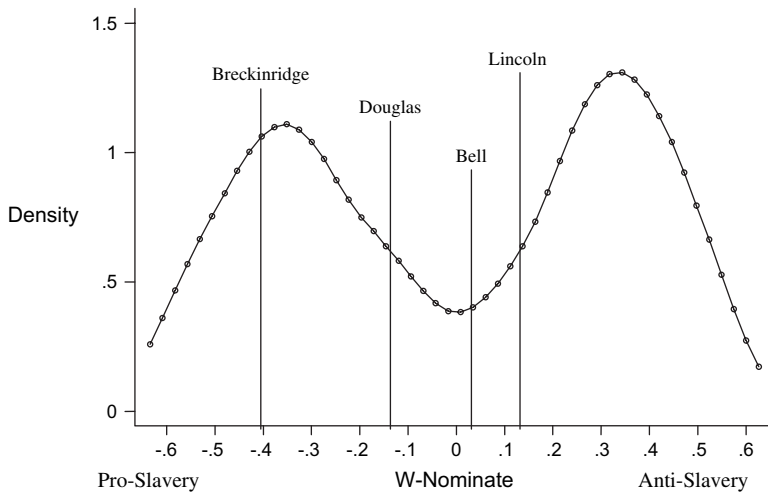


Fig. 1. Distribution of House Members and Presidential Candidates. *Note:* The ideal points of the presidential candidates are as follows: Breckinridge (−0.408), Douglas (−0.129), Bell (0.041), and Lincoln (0.130).

In the Lincoln–Bell–Douglas scenario, an interesting result emerges: Douglas is predicted to be a majority winner on the first ballot. Of the 34 possible state votes, Douglas would have captured 18, a bare majority, with the remaining 16 going to Lincoln. The key states in such a scenario would have been California, Illinois, and Oregon, which would have gone for Douglas, rather than Lincoln, despite the fact that they were free (non-slave) states.<sup>22</sup>

In the other two election scenarios, a first-ballot majority winner would *not* have emerged. In the Breckinridge–Bell–Lincoln scenario, Breckinridge is predicted to win 16 states, two short of a bare majority. Here, two states that Douglas won in the prior scenario—Illinois and Oregon—would not have been captured by Breckinridge: the Illinois delegation would have been split and thus cast no vote, while Oregon would have been won by Bell. In the Breckinridge–Lincoln–Douglas scenario, Lincoln is predicted to be the top vote-getter with 16 states, two short of a bare majority, with Breckinridge winning 13 states, Douglas 2, and three delegations split. Thus, in these two scenarios, at least one additional ballot would have been needed (and potentially many more) to decide the contest, opening the door to strategic behavior.

If a prolonged House deadlock ensued, the Twelfth Amendment specified that the Vice President would become President if the House could not produce a choice by March 3.<sup>23</sup> If no Vice Presidential candidate received a majority of Electoral College votes, the Senate possessed the authority to choose a Vice President from the *two*

<sup>22</sup> In each of these three state contingents, a Democratic majority existed, which would have benefited Douglas.

<sup>23</sup> This stipulation would later be superseded by section 3 of the Twentieth Amendment (1933).

Table 3  
House Election scenarios

	<i>Scenario 1:</i> Lincoln, Bell, Douglas	<i>Scenario 2:</i> Lincoln, Bell, Breckinridge	<i>Scenario 3:</i> Lincoln, Douglas, Breckinridge
Alabama	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Arkansas	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
California	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Connecticut	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Delaware	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Florida	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Georgia	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Illinois	Douglas	***	***
Indiana	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Iowa	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Kansas	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Kentucky	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Louisiana	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Maine	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Maryland	Douglas	Breckinridge	***
Massachusetts	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Michigan	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Minnesota	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Mississippi	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Missouri	Douglas	Breckinridge	Douglas
New Hampshire	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
New Jersey	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
New York	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
North Carolina	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Ohio	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Oregon	Douglas	Bell	Douglas
Pennsylvania	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Rhode Island	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
South Carolina	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Tennessee	Douglas	Breckinridge	***
Texas	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Vermont	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln
Virginia	Douglas	Breckinridge	Breckinridge
Wisconsin	Lincoln	Lincoln	Lincoln

*Note:* Row entries indicate the candidate for which the state's unit vote would be cast. The \*\*\* indicates that the state's delegation was split and therefore a unit vote could not be cast.

Vice Presidential candidates with the highest number of Electoral College votes. In the Senate, unlike the House, every member casts a *single* vote, and the winner must receive a majority of the total membership (voting or otherwise).

The most likely Senate scenarios involve an election between Hannibal Hamlin (ME), Lincoln's running mate, and *either* Herschel Johnson (GA), Douglas's running mate, or Joseph Lane (OR), Breckinridge's running mate. Given the ideological predisposition of the 36th Senate, the Democratic candidate would have won—and won easily—in either case. A spatial voting analysis of a possible Senate election, using ideal-point estimates from the same W-NOMINATE procedure as

detailed previously, indicates that *either* Johnson or Lane would have defeated Hamlin 40–28.<sup>24</sup> Thus, in a Lincoln–Bell–Douglas scenario, even though Douglas’s margin of victory in the House is slight—a bare majority—it would have been quite secure. That is, despite their aversion to Douglas, *none* of the strongly pro-slavery Southerners would have strategically abstained to produce a deadlock, so as to allow Johnson, the likely Vice President, to slip into the Presidency. This was because Johnson, despite his Southern heritage, was more moderate on the slavery dimension (0.01) than was Douglas (–0.129).<sup>25</sup>

To estimate the strategic dynamics associated with a House election involving Breckinridge, it is important to remember two facts. First, neither of the House scenarios involving Breckinridge generates a sincere-voting majority winner. Second, Breckinridge’s running mate, Lane, was strongly pro-slavery (–0.381), while Douglas’s running mate, Johnson, was (as discussed in the prior paragraph) a moderate.<sup>26</sup> Without a sincere-voting majority winner, we turn our attention to strategic voting outcomes and, thus, consider three possible scenarios: (1) a Breckinridge–Lincoln–Bell scenario with Lane as the Vice President; (2) a Breckinridge–Douglas–Lincoln scenario with Lane as the Vice President; and (3) a Breckinridge–Douglas–Lincoln scenario with Johnson as the Vice President.<sup>27</sup> Two questions then emerge: (1) How would the states with split delegations have voted?; and (2) How would the states that were supporting third-place finishers have voted?

The strategic voting dynamics are presented in Table 4. In the Breckinridge–Lincoln–Bell scenario, Illinois would have eventually thrown its support behind Lincoln, but Oregon would have continued to support Bell, as Oregon’s sole representative, Lansing Stout, preferred Lane to Lincoln. Stout’s continued support of Bell should have eventually forced the Lincoln delegations, only *one* delegation shy of a majority, to switch to Bell, since Bell was preferred to Lane. Thus, Bell, the sincere-voting preference of only *one* state delegation, would have emerged as the winner in the House election in the Breckinridge–Lincoln–Bell scenario.

In the Breckinridge–Douglas–Lincoln scenario with Lane as VP, Illinois, as in the previous scenario, should have moved to Lincoln. However, Maryland and Tennessee should have continued their deadlock, as the pivotal Breckinridge

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the same group of voters would have selected Hamlin in both races, while the same opposing group of voters would have selected either Lane or Johnson. Why? If one examines the range of ideal points on the first W-NOMINATE dimension, one sees a very bipolar distribution. The *weakest* anti-slavery member has an ideal point at 0.227, while the weakest pro-slavery member has an ideal point at –0.073. There is no one in the “middle” between these two camps. Thus, Johnson (0.01) would have garnered as much support as Lane (–0.381)—that is, *all* of the pro-slavery members—while Hamlin (0.38) would have captured all of the anti-slavery members.

<sup>25</sup> Johnson considered himself a “states-rights Unionist”, in that he was virulently opposed to secession but was also a firm advocate of a “non-interventionist” national policy with regard to the issue of slavery (Flippin, 1931).

<sup>26</sup> Like Breckinridge, Lane supported the Lecompton Constitution and the Dred Scott decision (Hendrickson, 1967).

<sup>27</sup> We separate the Breckinridge–Douglas–Lincoln scenario into *two* scenarios, because it is unclear whether Lane or Johnson would have emerged as a “Top 2” finisher, along with Hamlin, in the Electoral College balloting.

supporters in those delegations preferred Lane to Lincoln. Likewise, Missouri and Oregon should have continued supporting Douglas, preferring the eventual choice of Lane to Lincoln and hoping to force the Lincoln supporters to move to Douglas. Again, Lincoln comes up one delegation short of a majority, and the Lincoln delegations should have eventually thrown their support behind Douglas, as he was preferred to Lane. Thus, Douglas, running a distant third with only two sincere-voting majority state delegations, would have become President.

Finally, in the Breckinridge–Douglas–Lincoln scenario with Johnson as VP, Illinois, Maryland, and Tennessee should have moved to Douglas, as the Breckinridge voters in each delegation preferred Douglas to either Lincoln or Johnson. Similarly, Missouri and Oregon should have continued supporting Douglas, preferring Douglas to Johnson and hoping to force the rest of the Breckinridge delegations to switch to Douglas. In the end, the Lincoln delegations should have continued to vote for Lincoln, hoping to get Johnson, who was preferred to Douglas; however, the Breckinridge delegations, as suggested, should have thrown their support eventually to Douglas, as they preferred him to Johnson. Thus, as in the prior scenario, Douglas would have emerged victorious, despite initially running a distant third in the House balloting.

Thus, a non-Lincoln outcome in the House election is predicted in all scenarios. Yet, if defeating Lincoln *and* achieving their second-best outcome was the objective of Southern conservatives, the support for the Breckinridge candidacy was a serious strategic misstep. That is, from the view of Southern conservatives, the *best* House outcome from a Breckinridge candidacy would have been a Douglas election (Scenarios 2 and 3 of Table 4). This, however, could have been achieved *without* a Breckinridge candidacy, in a simple three-person race between Douglas, Bell, and Lincoln (Table 3). Moreover, a *worse* scenario could have been produced if the three-person race was between Breckinridge, Bell, and Lincoln, as Bell would have been elected (Scenario 1 of Table 4). *Thus, for Southern conservatives in a House election game, a Breckinridge candidacy is a weakly dominated strategy.*<sup>28</sup>

## 5. What about fusion, or what was Jefferson Davis thinking?

Shortly before he accepted the presidential nomination of the Richmond convention, Breckinridge met with Jefferson Davis and Robert Toombs. In his memoirs, Davis states that the subject of the meeting was to persuade Breckinridge to accept the nomination, so that Davis might have the leverage to convince both

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<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Breckinridge's entry into the race most likely *reduced* the chances of a House election. That is, in order for his candidacy to have made sense in the context of expediting a House election, Breckinridge would have needed to steal popular votes from Lincoln. In other words, Lincoln needed to be the second preference of some potential Breckinridge voters in the mass electorate; only then could Breckinridge have taken votes from Lincoln. However, such a preference ordering was quite unlikely, as McLean (2001: p. 18) notes: "Lincoln and Breckinridge were the extreme candidates. So it is safe to guess that almost everybody who voted for one of them ranked the other last." Riker (1982: pp. 228–231) echoes this sentiment by eliminating Breckinridge–Lincoln as a viable first-second preference ordering. In reality, Breckinridge took votes from Douglas, *not* Lincoln.



Table 4  
Possible strategic voting scenarios

States	Initial House outcome	Strategic voting outcome	Eventual House outcome
<i>Scenario 1: Breckinridge, Bell, and Lincoln</i>			
Illinois	Split Delegation: 4 votes for Lincoln, 4 votes for Breckinridge, 1 vote for Bell	Unit Vote for Lincoln: Bell voter switches to Lincoln, preferring Lincoln to Lane	Lincoln voters can only muster enough support to win 17 states. Thus, rather than accept Lane, they swing their support to Bell and elect him.
Oregon	Unit Vote for Bell: 1 vote for Bell	Unit Vote for Bell: Bell voter prefers Lane to Lincoln; thus, he attempts to force Lincoln voters to accept Bell	
<i>Scenario 2: Breckinridge, Douglas, and Lincoln, with Lane as VP</i>			
Illinois	Split Delegation: 4 votes for Lincoln, 3 votes for Breckinridge, 2 votes for Douglas	Unit Vote for Lincoln: 1 Douglas voter would switch to Lincoln	Lincoln voters can only muster enough support to win 17 states. Thus, rather than accept Lane, they swing their support to Douglas and elect him.
Maryland	Split Delegation: 3 votes for Breckinridge, 2 votes for Douglas, 1 vote for Lincoln	Split Delegation: All 3 Breckinridge voters continue to support him, in hopes of getting Lane	
Missouri	Unit Vote for Douglas: 4 votes for Douglas, 3 votes for Breckinridge	Unit Vote for Douglas: All 4 Douglas voters prefer Lane to Lincoln, so they continue to vote for Douglas, in hopes of getting Douglas	
Oregon	Unit Vote for Douglas: 1 vote for Douglas	Unit Vote for Douglas: Douglas voter prefers Lane to Lincoln, so he continues to support Douglas, in hopes of getting Douglas	
Tennessee	Split Delegation: 5 Douglas voters, 4 Breckinridge voters, 1 Lincoln voter	Split Delegation: 3 Douglas voters prefer Lane to Lincoln, so they continue to support Douglas, in hopes of getting Douglas	
<i>Scenario 3: Breckinridge, Douglas, and Lincoln, with Johnson as VP</i>			
Illinois	Split Delegation: 4 votes for Lincoln, 3 votes for Breckinridge, 2 votes for Douglas	Unit Vote for Douglas: 3 Breckinridge voters would switch to Douglas	Lincoln voters can only muster enough support to win 16 states. Thus, they continue to support Lincoln, in hopes of getting Johnson. However, the Breckinridge delegations, rather than accept Johnson, swing their support to Douglas and elect him.

Maryland	Split Delegation: 3 votes for Breckinridge, 2 votes for Douglas, 1 vote for Lincoln	Unit Vote for Douglas: 3 Breckinridge voters would switch to Douglas
Missouri	Unit Vote for Douglas: 4 votes for Douglas, 3 votes for Breckinridge	Unit Vote for Douglas: All voters prefer Douglas to Johnson or Lincoln
Oregon	Unit Vote for Douglas: 1 vote for Douglas	Unit Vote for Douglas: Douglas voter prefers Douglas to Lincoln or Johnson
Tennessee	Split Delegation: 5 Douglas voters, 4 Breckinridge voters, 1 Lincoln voter	Unit Vote for Douglas: 4 Breckinridge voters would switch to Douglas

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Bell and Douglas to leave the race in favor of a compromise candidate who could save the Union (Davis, 1890: p. 52). According to Davis, Breckinridge and later Bell supported the “fusion” idea and agreed to withdraw, but Douglas obstinately refused to leave the race—thus, the fusion plan failed. Nevertheless, Davis’s biographers speak in grand terms about his efforts to avoid secession and the coming war through his meetings with Breckinridge, Bell, and Douglas. For example, William C. Davis (1991: p. 282) states that “in one of the most statesmanlike efforts of his career, [Davis] tried to avert calamity by taking the same sort of managerial hand in affairs that he exercised in the Missouri compromise repeal.”<sup>29</sup>

Is this story true? Though most historians accept these events as fact, the primary evidence for much of this is sparse. Aside from Davis’s own memoirs—written in 1881, two decades after the fact—there is *no* evidence that (a) Bell agreed to leave the race, (b) Davis met with Douglas, or (c) Douglas refused to leave the race. In fact, there are no known letters or other documents that suggest that Bell ever considered leaving the race; yet, there *is* primary evidence that Douglas *was* willing to leave the race (see Crenshaw, 1969; Wells, 1971; Johannsen, 1961, 1965). Though Davis’s version of events is now widely accepted, there is good reason to believe that his memory might have been something less than perfect. Given that Douglas (*d.* 1861), Bell (*d.* 1869), and Breckinridge (*d.* 1875) all had died long before Davis released his memoirs, and therefore could not contradict (or substantiate) his claims, Davis may have concocted the fusion scenario in an attempt to rehabilitate his reputation.

However, if Davis did in fact propose that a “compromise” candidate replace Bell, Breckinridge, and Douglas, our results suggest that, from the standpoint of Southern conservatives, the strategy was irrational. If the plan were successful, then our results imply the following. First, if the compromise candidate’s ideological position fell in the space bounded by Bell and Douglas, he would have performed no

<sup>29</sup> The quote at the beginning of the paper, from Safire (1987), is a reference to a fictional account of the meeting between Davis, Toombs, and Breckinridge. Unlike many historians, Safire accepts the premise that Breckinridge was duped: “Davis’s maneuvering to announce the nomination of Breckinridge not only led to the election of Lincoln, but set off the chain of events that culminated in the secession of the South... Davis knew what he was doing in making sure Breckinridge was on the ballot” (982).

better than either Bell or Douglas in two-man races with Lincoln. Second, if the compromise candidate were more conservative (pro-slavery) than Douglas, a non-Lincoln outcome would be no more likely and almost certainly less likely in the Electoral College. Finally, if the compromise candidate's ideological position fell to the liberal side of Bell, he would be at least as likely to beat Lincoln as Bell or Douglas and probably more so. But then, the candidate would be *more* liberal (anti-slavery) than either Bell or Douglas, making the Breckinridge candidacy, and the Southern bolt from the Charleston convention, nonsensical.

So, if defeating Lincoln and saving the Union were Davis's first priorities, the fusion plan—as opposed to support for Douglas at the Charleston convention—was misguided. If Davis meant, however, to ensure Lincoln's *victory* by convincing Breckinridge to enter the race by disingenuously concocting a fusion scenario, then his gambit was quite shrewd.<sup>30</sup> Davis's memoirs notwithstanding, the evidence suggests that Breckinridge's candidacy was designed to insure Lincoln's victory, and that discussions about a fusion candidate were baseless.

Moreover, Davis had other ways to push “fusion”, but there is no evidence that he attempted to do so. For example, by October, the Republicans' convincing victories in the congressional elections in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Illinois were widely known.<sup>31</sup> Presumably, this should have led Davis to conclude that Lincoln's electoral strength was significant. If Davis was indeed intent on preventing Lincoln's election in November, then new strategies were needed. One option would have been to institute fusion *indirectly*, by convincing state officials to create two-man races with Lincoln by dropping candidates from the ballot. Douglas's managers, for example, had some success in this regard, as New Jersey, New York, and Rhode Island removed Bell and Breckinridge from their ballots. Yet, as William C. Davis (1974: p. 244) writes, “it does not appear that Breckinridge's managers... seriously looked into this method of blocking Lincoln.” This lack of effort in the face of Lincoln's increasing likelihood of election casts additional doubts on Davis's initial fusion efforts as well as raises suspicions regarding his true motives.

## 6. Conclusion

Many historians still speak of the Charleston Convention and the subsequent Presidential Election in terms of irrationality and blind (bad) luck. As Potter (1976: p. 414) puts it:

Arguments about whether the bolters wanted...to break up the Union all suffer from one common defect: They are too rational. The delegates at Charleston and at Baltimore were operating in an atmosphere of extreme excitement, in which gusts of emotion constantly swept the floor as well as the galleries. In the

<sup>30</sup> This is especially true if Douglas's defeat was a secondary objective, as the personal animosity between Davis and Douglas was legendary (Crenshaw, 1969; Wells, 1971; Davis, 1991).

<sup>31</sup> At this time, some states held their congressional elections prior to the November Presidential election. A uniform national election day would not be a reality until the early-1880s.

midst of this turmoil, men took positions which led to consequences that they did not visualize.

While this may well be an accurate assessment of the behavior of the rank-in-file members of the Democratic Party, we contend that it is likely *not* an accurate characterization of the behavior of experienced party leaders like Jefferson Davis. That is, in pushing Breckinridge to enter the race, Davis, we argue, *knowingly* set into motion a process that would lay the groundwork for Lincoln's election and, inevitably, Southern secession.

Using election counterfactuals and applying the spatial theory of voting, we find that Breckinridge's candidacy had only the slimmest hopes of electoral success. Probabilistically speaking, by far the most likely outcome resulting from Breckinridge's entry into the 1860 presidential race was a Lincoln victory. We find that the best chance for a non-Lincoln, pro-slavery outcome in the Electoral College was a two-person race between Lincoln and Douglas. Breckinridge's candidacy had the effect of *enhancing* Lincoln's Electoral College chances, by reducing Douglas's support base. If the election *had* been thrown into the House of Representatives, a non-Lincoln outcome is predicted in all scenarios. But, if defeating Lincoln *and* electing a pro-slavery candidate was the objective of Southern conservatives, their support for Breckinridge's candidacy was a strategic error. If Breckinridge had made it onto the House ballot, we find that he could not have won. However, he *could* have prevented Douglas from winning, by squeezing Douglas from the House ballot, which would have led to the election of Bell (who was considerably more moderate on the slavery issue, relative to Douglas).

In summary, our series of counterfactual analyses demonstrates that a successful Breckinridge candidacy was never a realistic possibility. We find that the failure to select a candidate in Charleston combined with Breckinridge's entrance into the race *increased* the likelihood of a Lincoln victory. We believe that this should have been an inescapable conclusion for party leaders, like Davis, who had spent years developing a keen sensitivity to the positions of state electorates, representatives, and senators on the slavery issue. Moreover, this comports well with views of Davis's motives at the time, in particular those views held by John Bell, who shortly after Breckinridge's nomination wrote:

I am now firmly persuaded that the *secession* from the Convention at Charleston and again at Baltimore was *instigated* & finally passed consummation by those artful and able instigators, who said, or believed, that the movement would lead *to the election of Lincoln*... I repeat, the Breckinridge movement must have been made designedly to elect Lincoln. This *design*, you will remark, I impute to the *few* arch leaders, not to the rank & file of the delegates from Va. N.C. Tenn. & Mo. These latter are dupes, but not altogether innocent. The malignancy of some of them led them to prefer the election of Lincoln, with all its *possible* evil consequences, to the election of Douglas (original emphases; quoted in Crenshaw, 1969: pp. 32–33).

Thus, it is unlikely that Lincoln's election was—for Davis and many Southern conservative leaders—completely unexpected or undesired.

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## Appendix A. 1860 Presidential Election results

State	Popular votes				Electoral votes			
	Lincoln	Douglas	Breckinridge	Bell	Lincoln	Douglas	Breckinridge	Bell
Alabama	—	13,618	48,669	27,835	—	—	9	—
Arkansas	—	5357	28,732	20,063	—	—	4	—
California	38,733	37,999	33,969	9111	4	—	—	—
Connecticut	43,488	15,431	14,372	1528	6	—	—	—
Delaware	3822	1066	7339	3888	—	—	3	—
Florida	—	223	8277	4801	—	—	3	—
Georgia	—	11,581	52,176	42,960	—	—	10	—
Illinois	172,171	160,215	2331	4914	11	—	—	—
Indiana	139,033	115,509	12,295	5306	13	—	—	—
Iowa	70,302	55,639	1035	1763	4	—	—	—
Kentucky	1364	25,651	53,143	66,058	—	—	—	12
Louisiana	—	7625	22,681	20,204	—	—	6	—
Maine	62,811	29,693	6368	2046	8	—	—	—
Maryland	2294	5966	42,482	41,760	—	—	8	—
Massachusetts	106,684	34,370	6163	22,331	13	—	—	—
Michigan	88,481	65,057	805	415	6	—	—	—
Minnesota	22,069	11,920	748	50	4	—	—	—
Mississippi	—	3282	40,768	25,045	—	—	7	—
Missouri	17,028	58,801	31,362	58,372	—	9	—	—
New Hampshire	37,519	25,887	2125	412	5	—	—	—
New Jersey	58,346	62,869	—	—	4	3	—	—
New York	362,646	312,510	—	—	35	—	—	—
North Carolina	—	2737	48,846	45,129	—	—	10	—
Ohio	231,709	187,421	11,406	12,194	23	—	—	—
Oregon	5329	4136	5075	218	3	—	—	—
Pennsylvania	268,030	16,765	178,871	12,776	27	—	—	—
Rhode Island	12,244	7707	—	—	4	—	—	—
South Carolina	—	—	—	—	—	—	8	—
Tennessee	—	11,281	65,097	69,728	—	—	—	12
Texas	—	18	47,454	15,383	—	—	4	—

Vermont	33,808	8649	218	1969	5	—	—	—
Virginia	1887	16,198	74,325	74,481	—	—	—	15
Wisconsin	86,110	65,021	887	161	5	—	—	—
Totals	1,865,908	1,380,202	848,019	590,901	180	12	72	39

*Note:* The “—” in the Popular Vote section indicates that a candidate was not on the ballot in a given state and thus received no votes. There was no popular election in South Carolina, as electors were chosen by the state legislature.

*Source:* CQ Guide to U.S. Elections, 3rd Edition.

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