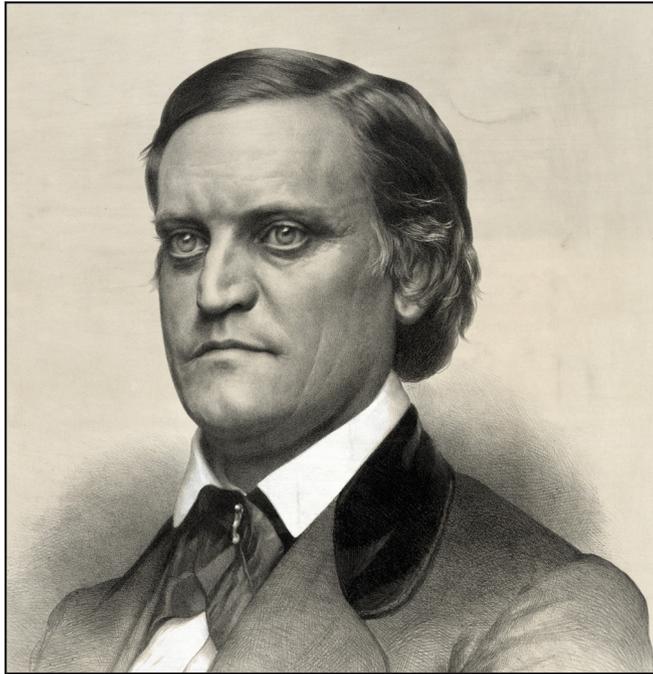




Southern Democrats

“The *Sovereignty and Equality* of the States”

Candidate: John C. Breckinridge



This portrait sketch done by artist Jules Emile Saintin shows Breckinridge as he would have appeared during the 1860 campaign season. Image Courtesy American Gallery.

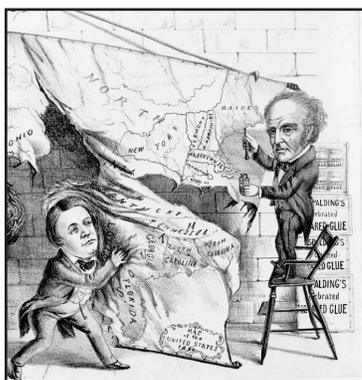
The Democratic National Convention assembled in Charleston, South Carolina on April 23, 1860 to select a nominee for the November election. Over the next two months, the party drifted apart, then split in two over the expansion of slavery into America’s new western territories. Southern slaveholders wanted to bring their slave property there with them, while Democrats from the North wanted the issue left to settlers in each territory (known as “popular sovereignty”). When their platform containing a Federal Slave Code (which would have permitted slavery in some form in those territories) was rejected by allies of the northern candidate, Stephen Douglas, southern delegates left the convention and met separately, picking John C. Breckinridge as their candidate for President.

Many involved knew that Breckinridge, a moderate lawyer from Kentucky and youngest Vice President in American history, had little chance to win the election outright. Slave states held only 120 of the 303 electoral votes contested in 1860 (with 152 needed to win). Moreover, southerners were deeply divided between radical pro-slavery “Fire Eaters,” loyal Unionists, and undecided citizens trapped between them (like Robert E. Lee and his family).

This oft-overlooked diversity among the supporters of Southern Democrats makes their electoral strategy difficult to precisely identify. A likely explanation (given the electoral math) is that they were seeking a similar outcome to that of the Constitutional Union: an indecisive election result

leading to a run off vote in the House. Also, if no clear winner emerged by March 5, 1861, the Senate (which, along with the House, had at least a third of its caucus seated from southern states) would have chosen the President from the top two finishers in the Vice Presidential election (Southern Democrat Joseph Lane and Republican Hannibal Hamlin). Both of these outcomes were within reach of southern politicians if they could somehow stop Lincoln or Douglas from achieving clear victory in the Electoral College.

John Bell, Breckinridge’s main opponent, thought differently: he accused these southerners of splitting the Democratic Party *intentionally*, assuring Lincoln’s election and justifying their true desire—secession from the Union.



Breckinridge’s decision to lead the Democratic walkouts puzzled many. Neither of these cartoons published during the 1860 campaign depicts him positively: in one (*left*), he is an utter secessionist; in the other (*right*), he is a clueless pawn helping Lincoln to victory. Images Courtesy Harpweek.

