

The 1858 Senatorial Election in Illinois

Prepared by Dan Reigle for Cincinnati Civil War Round Table, February 2009
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One of the questions raised at the February 2009 CCWRT meeting with President Lincoln referred to the fact that the 1858 election in Illinois in which Lincoln and Douglas were campaigning was not a direct election of a Senator by the voters, as were none of the U.S. Senatorial seats before the adoption of the 17th Amendment in 1913. Who was actually being elected in 1858?

The simple answer is that voters were electing the members of the Illinois state legislature (the General Assembly), who would be responsible in turn for the election of a U.S. Senator, as provided in the original language of the U.S. Constitution, Article I, Section 3: "The Senate of the United States shall be composed of two Senators from each state, *chosen by the legislature thereof*, for six years."

The Illinois General Assembly in 1858 had 100 members: 25 senators and 75 representatives. Only half of the State Senators were up for election: 13 Senators were in the middle of their term so not running, and 12 were up for election. With the seats of 75 representatives and 12 senators, there were 87 members of the General Assembly (out of its 100 members) who were being elected. Democrats won 46 of these seats, and Republicans won 41 of the seats.

The outcome of the election for the House was 35 Republicans and 40 Democrats, 75 in total. The outcome of the election for the Senate was 11 Republicans and 14 Democrats, 25 in total. As a result, the General Assembly would have 46 Republican members and 54 Democratic members, 100 in total.

The new General Assembly convened on January 3, 1859. Two days later, to no one's surprise, Senator Douglas was re-elected by a straight party-line vote of 54 to 46.

Much was made at that time about the difference between the state-wide total votes given to Republican candidates and Democratic candidates. There are two ways to look at this:

(1) This was an "off year" for election of state offices in Illinois, so the only two state-wide offices up for election were State Treasurer and State Superintendent of Public Instruction. The numbers often quoted are the results for State Treasurer, which were 125,430 for the Republican candidate; 121,609 for the Douglas Democratic candidate; and 5071 for the Buchanan Democratic candidate (the Democratic Party being split by the Douglas-Buchanan disagreements over Kansas.) This result is interpreted as Republicans winning the "popular vote," while losing the Senatorial vote in the General Assembly.

(2) If the votes in all House districts across the state were combined, Republican candidates received 190,468 votes; Douglas Democratic candidates received 166,374 votes; and 9951 votes went to Buchanan Democrats or write-ins. The same happened in the twelve open State Senate districts: Republican candidates received 53,784 votes; Douglas Democratic candidates received 44,750 votes; and Buchanan Democrats/others received 1308 votes. Then as now, apportionment

was a volatile political issue, and the apportionment of districts within Illinois in 1858 was complicated by the fact that it was now eight years since the last census, covering a period in which Illinois had significant population growth in the northern half of the state which tended to be more Republican. One Republican newspaper claimed that Republican districts by 1858 had an average population of 19,655 while Democratic districts averaged 15,675, which would enable the Democrats to gain more seats with fewer total votes. The Republican Party had not even been in existence when the apportionment was done after the 1850 census, and had competed only in one prior state election, in 1856.

There are several excellent references if you wish to read more:

- Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Prelude to Greatness: Lincoln in the 1850's*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1962, pages 114-120, esp. 119.
- Allen C. Guelzo, *Lincoln and Douglas: The Debates that Defined America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2008, pages 281-287, esp. 285-286.
- David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995, pages 227-229 and note 228 on page 634.
- Illinois Office of Secretary of State. *Illinois Blue Book, 1900-1901*. "Twenty-first General Assembly, 1858-1860." Senate on page 234, House on page 235. Online at Illinois Secretary of State, Illinois Digital Archives, <<http://www.idaillinois.org/u/?/bb,24209>>.
- Gary Ecelbarger, *The Great Comeback: How Abraham Lincoln Beat the Odds to Win the 1860 Republican Nomination*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008. This book picks up on January 5, 1859, for the "sixteen-and-a-half month surge that carried Lincoln from the depths of despair to the exhilaration of claiming his party's most cherished prize," including his important trip to Ohio in September and his speech at the 5th Street Market in Cincinnati.