

The democrats and republicans before the civil war



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and Section The Democrats and Republicans Before the Civil War The Democratic and Republican Party platforms in the presidential election year of 1856 reflected, to a great extent, the sectional tensions of the era. The year marked increasingly violent confrontations between adherents of diametrically opposed views on slavery and other fundamental issues. The platforms reinforced each Party's unyielding stance on the core contentions, leaving virtually no middle ground for compromise and presaging armed conflict between the North and South in the Civil War.

The escalating tensions were highlighted by a much-publicized physical assault on the Senate floor. Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina severely beat abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts with a cane after the latter made an impassioned speech about the deteriorating situation in the disputed state of Kansas, where hostilities had exploded around the issue of slavery ("Bleeding Kansas").

The Democratic Party platform (Cooper 36-39), resolutely promoting the interests of the Southern slaveholders, was explicit in its calls for limited Federal government powers -- in effect placing more authority in the hands of individual states. A portion of the opening statement that stated it would be "inexpedient and dangerous" for the Federal government to "exercise doubtful constitutional powers" left very little mystery regarding the remaining thrust of the document.

Adopting a "strict constructionist" interpretation of the Constitution, the Democrats further posited that general powers were not granted to the central government in relation to commerce, to conduct "improvements," or to assume debt for the individual states. Also addressed were the national administration's right to disperse funds from public lands or to charter a
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national bank.

All of the aforementioned matters had a direct bearing on the ultimate ability of the central government to exercise any overarching powers to control individual states, especially on the slavery question. A weak, non-invasive, decentralized government was exactly what Southern politicians desired. While the Democratic platform gradually worked up to addressing the issue of slavery directly, the Republican Party immediately got to the heart of the matter (Cooper 39–40). Right at the outset, their platform declared that Kansas should be admitted to the Union as a free state.

Refuting the Democratic Party's desire for a weak Federal government, the Republicans declared that the Constitution conferred sovereign power to Congress over the states, enabling it to proscribe the "twin relics of barbarism -- polygamy and slavery."

Much of the Republican platform dwelt on the bloody conflict in the Nebraska Territory, including the area that would eventually become Kansas, which had become an actual battleground between pro- and anti-abolitionist forces. The concept of "popular sovereignty," in which the residents of a given territory applying for entry into the Union decided the disposition vis-à-vis slavery, engendered a fractious situation that earned the label "Bleeding Kansas."

While the violence in the territory subsided as 1856 came to a close, the burning issues of the era did not. When the decision was made that Kansas would enter as a free state, it was strongly opposed by the pro-slavery side. The acrimony generated in Kansas, along with a host of other disagreements between the North and South, such as whether ultimate power would reside in the Federal government, led directly to the succession of the Southern

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states and the advent of the Civil War.

Examining the issues presented in the two platforms, it is clear why the War Between the States was all but inevitable. Too many hard stances were taken, and on the core contentions there were no middle ground between the pro- and anti-slavery camps. As the ill-fated Compromise of 1850 (“Bleeding Kansas”) showed, even moves intended to be conciliatory were doomed to failure. Since the difference in positions could not be decided legislatively, given the depth of conviction and passion on both sides, the battlefield appeared to be the only venue to come to a resolution.

Other than slavery, the two warring sides were in complete disagreement over fundamental issues such as how much power would be invested in the Federal government. Southerners did not want a central government that had the capability to dictate terms to member states, while those in the North saw a strong government as the only way to get control over the country as a whole. Peripheral issues, such as powers over national commerce; the right to conduct improvements within the states; the right to assume national debt; to administrate over public lands or set up a national bank were all symptomatic of the huge philosophical divide between the North and South. When peaceable solutions failed, the most realistic option for both sides was to enforce their viewpoint through force of arms.

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