

Federal Slavery Legislation and Voting in U.S. Gubernatorial Elections, 1840-1860

Paper accepted for publication in the *Journal of Historical Political Economy*. Will appear in volume 3, issue 2.

April 25, 2023

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Abstract: The demise of the Whig Party in the 1850s is a subject of great attention among scholars and the general public. However, this issue has received less attention from the vantage point of quantitative empirical analysis. Using state-level gubernatorial electoral returns from 1840-1850, we assess how major events like the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act/Compromise of 1850, the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the rise of the Know Nothing Party influenced the transformation of America's party system in the lead up to the Civil War. We ultimately find evidence linking the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in particular to a drop in support for Northern Whigs, Free Soilers, and (to a lesser and slightly non-significant extent), Northern Democrats. The result suggests that the Kansas-Nebraska Act unleashed fears among free soilers that led to a coalescing around the new Republican Party.

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Acknowledgments: We are grateful to D. Roderick Kiewiet and participants of the Workshop on Antebellum Political Economy at the University of Southern California for incisive comments. All mistakes are our own.

Introduction

The failure of attempts to keep the Union together and the resulting drift toward secession and civil war have long been the focus of scholarly attention. A major element in the lead up to secession and civil war was the disintegration of the Whig Party combined with the emergence of the Republican Party in the 1850s. The breakup of the Whigs—a coalitional party that brought together Northerners and Southerners around the idea of fostering the development of a commercial nation—to some extent signaled the end of substantial efforts to achieve compromise as party orientation hardened around the issue of slavery (Riker 1982; and Weingast 1998). Although much has been written about this momentous period—an influential argument from William Riker, for example, links the demise of the Whig Party to the successful attempt by its successor (the Republican Party) to deploy slavery as a wedge issue to break the Jacksonian Democrat coalition—quantitative accounts of party collapse during the period preceding the Civil War are sparse. When, specifically, did the Whig Party’s downslide begin? Did it occur in response to the rise of a unique political talent in the form of Abraham Lincoln? To what extent did seminal events like the Fugitive Slave Act and Kansas-Nebraska Act hasten the end of the Whig Party? How did these events influence other parties such as the Democrats and Free Soilers? Exploring the empirical basis of the reorientation of America’s party system around the issue of slavery is key to understanding the lead up to the Civil War in particular as well as political change in general.

In this paper, we conduct an empirical examination of the extinction of the Whig Party in the 1840s and 1850s. Using gubernatorial vote shares taken from Dubin (2003), which we believe are a good representation of general statewide popularity of a party’s candidates, we trace how support for Whig, Free Soil, and Democratic gubernatorial candidates shifted as a

result of events like the Fugitive Slave Act, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the election of Abraham Lincoln.⁶ We also trace changes in Republican gubernatorial candidate support in the middle and late 1850s.⁷ We ultimately find that support for Whig *and* Free Soil gubernatorial candidates cratered in response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854; this conforms to the idea raised by Riker and others (Epps 2016) that the Kansas-Nebraska Act obviated faith in the ability of the Whigs (and for different reasons for some, the Free Soilers) to manage the status quo situation confining slavery to the 36th parallel. Support for Democratic gubernatorial candidates, on the other hand, appears less responsive to the Fugitive Slave Act and Kansas-Nebraska Act, reflecting greater tolerance of slavery within the Democratic coalition. The result sheds light on the complexity of the end of the Antebellum party system and provides an empirical corollary to rich descriptive accounts of this tumultuous time in American history. The paper proceeds as follows: we review literature about changes to the configuration of the party system in the 1850s; we then estimate empirical models to assess these changes; and we conclude with thoughts about the role of slavery in precipitating party changes in the lead up to the Civil War.

Accounts of America's Party System in the Antebellum Era

⁶ We are unable to evaluate Abraham Lincoln's election on Free Soil support, as the Free Soil party largely ended operations by the late 1850s.

⁷ We are unable to evaluate Republican gubernatorial candidate support as a result of events like the Fugitive Slave Act or Kansas-Nebraska Act since the creation of the Republican Party occurred after the Fugitive Slave Act and simultaneous to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

During the 1840s and much of the 1850s, the United States featured two prominent political parties: the Jacksonian Democrats (the Democrats) and the Whigs (Riker 1982; Sibley 1985; and Sibley 1991). The Democratic coalition brought together agrarian interests apprehensive of federal involvement in the economy and had its geographical center of gravity in slaveholding regions of the South and frontier regions; the Whig coalition, which was smaller than its Democratic rival, was more tolerant of federal involvement in and potential regulation of the economy and was more prevalent in the northern states. Both parties were bisectional in the sense that they drew from the North and the South (Holt 2003; and Wallach 2017); to maintain this bisectionality, the issue of slavery—and specifically where in the United States the institution of slavery would be permitted to exist—was at first managed according to the dictates of the Missouri Compromise, which admitted Missouri as a slave state, Maine as a free state, and established the 36°30' parallel as the line of demarcation separating slave (to the south) and free (to the north) territories of the United States (Holt 2003).

The addition of Texas as well as subsequent American acquisition of lands from Mexico put strain on the bisectional nature of the Democrats and the Whigs. To opponents of the territorial expansion of slavery, Texas's entry into the Union necessitated the entry of a free state; California's entry as a free state in 1850, however, ostensibly angered Southern pro-slavery advocates based on the fact that part of California lay south of the 36°30' parallel. More generally, the solution brokered by both the Whigs and the Democrats to address the issue of slavery and territorial expansion, the Compromise of 1850 proved to be untenable as pro-slave and free soil interests within both parties arguably found the agreement wanting; free soilers, for example, may have been angered at the marshaling of federal power to execute and enforce the Fugitive Slave Act; and both free soilers and pro-slavery advocates may have been frustrated at

the utilization of popular sovereignty to decide the fates of Utah and New Mexico at some future time (Maizlich 2018).⁸ The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854, however, upset any modicum of agreement that had been reached four years earlier. Particularly, it was the justification of the use of popular sovereignty—a practice whereby the residents of a territory vote to choose whether that territory would be free or slave—to determine the status of slavery in territory as far north as Nebraska (which at that time stretched to the Canadian border) that rankled free soilers. If the existence of slavery were no longer tied to climate (and using popular sovereignty rather than banning slavery in territory as far north as Nebraska was a reflection of the idea that slavery was to some extent being dissociated from climate), then one could make the argument that slavery could be reintroduced into a place like New York. And considering that popular sovereignty was amenable to manipulation and violence, as the experience of “Bleeding Kansas” demonstrated, the zone of contestation for slavery arguably became the entire United States (Earle and Burke 2013).

Given the nationalization of the slavery issue in the 1850s, free soilers of all parties and abolitionists, who were much smaller in number, coalesced into the Republican Party (Holt 2003). Free soil itself (Foner 1995) was a manifestation of the idea that an individual possesses agency to engage in labor, that labor itself is more virtuous when an individual engages in it of their own choosing, that an individual should receive just desserts for engaging in labor, and that

⁸ The stipulations of the Compromise of 1850 were (1) the admission of California as a free state; (2) the passage of an updated Fugitive Slave Act; (3) the banning of the slave trade in the District of Columbia; and (4) the use of popular sovereignty to decide slavery in the territories of Utah and New Mexico (Ibid).

republican self-governance (as opposed to oligarchic governance) was made possible through agency and self-ownership of one's productive faculties. To believers in free soil, slavery represented a grave danger because it introduced a rival labor system where a small elite (slaveowners) could use unpaid labor to amass great wealth for themselves and undermine self-governance in favor of cartelized rule. Integral to the free soil philosophy was the concern that the introduction of slavery would decrease wages for white labor and effectively threaten free enterprise and self-governance as slaveowners maximized their power (Ibid).⁹ The Kansas-Nebraska Act crystallized free soil fears and galvanized the demise of bisectionalism in America's parties. The Whigs, for whom the North was a traditional base of power, were arguably more susceptible to migrating to a party centered on free soil than were their Democratic rivals. Consequently, the end of bisectionalism fostered a migration of those with anti-slavery views to the nascent Republican Party while those who were indifferent to supportive about slavery tended to affiliate with the Democratic Party.¹⁰

While accounts of the end of Whig-Democrat bisectionalism are common—a Google Scholar search of the phrase “end of Whig Party 1850s” receives over 32,000 returns—

⁹ To be clear, the free soil movement is not synonymous with a belief in racial equality. One-time Democrat David Wilmot, for example, was very clear that the free soil movement was about the well-being of whites and not about the well-being of African-Americans. Many in the free soil movement probably subscribed to the idea that whites sat atop a racial hierarchy (Riker 1982).

¹⁰ Importantly, the divide in views about slavery was not entirely geographical, as plenty of Northerners were indifferent to supportive about slavery.

quantitative treatments of the era appear less common.¹¹ Here, we endeavor to provide a quantitative companion to the account of the end of bisectionalism described in the previous section, and we aim to see how major federal legislation dealing with the issue of slavery influenced the demise of bisectionalism and along the way, the Whig Party itself. In our empirical investigation, we analyze state gubernatorial electoral returns (Dubin 2003). Governors are the chief executive functionaries in each state and are representative of partisan dynamics occurring within each state. Evaluating party-specific vote shares earned by gubernatorial candidates across the U.S. states in the 1840s and 1850s therefore gives us a window into how party support changed during this tumultuous time at the state level. We now turn to this exercise.

Evaluating State Gubernatorial Candidate Vote Shares in the 1840s and 1850s

To evaluate state gubernatorial candidate vote shares in the 1840s and 1850s, we utilize authoritative data from Dubin (2003). We identify candidates who belonged to one of the following four groupings: Whig, Democrat, Free Soil/Liberty, and Republican. Importantly, variations on party name were considered to be part of the general party whose name was part of the variation; thus, “Breckinridge Democrat,” “Calhoun Democrat,” and “Southern Democrat” are considered to have a “Democratic” affiliation inasmuch as “Independent Whig” is considered to have a “Whig” affiliation. Candidates from the Free Soil and Liberty are considered to be part of the same grouping since these two parties were explicitly organized around the issue of slavery; we also include a couple of minor slavery-focused parties (the Emancipation Anti Slave-State and Abolitionist parties, for example) in this grouping as well. Candidates not belonging to

¹¹ The search was conducted on April 17, 2023.

any of the four groupings identified are not analyzed in this study. After identifying affiliation in each of the four groupings, we separate observations by each of the four groupings and study changes in *Gubernatorial Candidate Vote Share*, or the percentage of the vote earned by a gubernatorial candidate in a gubernatorial election, within the groupings. It is worth mentioning that this variable takes a state-year-candidate format. As mentioned earlier, governors, as arguably the chief elected officials within a state, exhibit party reputation and support within a state (Wolak and Parinandi 2022); tracing gubernatorial candidate vote share within party provides a glimpse of change in party fortunes in response to significant events. Since party label is a fundamental source of candidate support in the United States (Campbell et al 1980), a drop in support among candidates of the same party label reflects a weakening of party brand (Aldrich 2011).

We include a number of variables on the right-hand-side to assess how changes in the status of slavery in federal legislation might impact the vote share of gubernatorial candidates from different partisan groupings. *Fugitive Slave Act* is a binary variable that takes a value of 1 in the year in which this legislation was adopted (1850) as well as subsequent years and a value of 0 in preceding years. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 effectively tasked the federal government and free state populations with the responsibility of upholding the institution of slavery (Maizlich 2018). Although this act did not expand the reach of slavery (through the designation of states as slave states) into the North, it did turn the North into a zone of contestation over slavery, as marshals and bounty hunters combed across the North in search of escaped slaves. If it was the use of federal power to underwrite slavery and enforce its position within the United States that contributed to Whig decline and the end of bisectionalism, then we would expect to see the presence of the Fugitive Slave Act variable associated with a decrease in

gubernatorial candidate vote shares associated with the Whig Party and gubernatorial vote shares associated with the Liberty and Free Soil parties (to the extent that these parties are unable to prevent legislation such as the Fugitive Slave Act). We might see differential results with respect to gubernatorial candidate vote shares from the Democratic Party: a decrease in vote share might be experienced among northern members of the Democratic Party (to the extent that northern Democratic voters were free soilers which was not at all universally true) while an increase in vote share might be experienced among southern members of the Democratic Party. We cannot see how the Fugitive Slave Act impacted the Republican Party, as the Republican Party was created four years after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act.

We also include a binary *Kansas-Nebraska Act* variable that takes a value of 1 in the year in which this legislation was adopted (1854) and subsequent years and a value of 0 in preceding years. The Kansas-Nebraska Act established the possibility that a slave state could exist well to the north of the 36°30' parallel and may have hastened both the end of the Whigs and bisectionalism based on concerns among free soilers that pro-slavery interests (colloquially referred to as the "Slave Power") no longer thought preservation of the institution was guaranteed through restricting slavery to the South and now wanted to guarantee preservation of the institution through aggressive expansion to colder regions of the United States (aided, of course, by manipulation of the popular sovereignty feature to sway votes in favor of slavery). This potential expansion of slavery beyond the Southern United States created a fear among free soilers in the North that no part of the United States was off-limits with respect to slavery and that a slave economy would displace free white labor throughout the United States. If this fear had electoral ramifications, we might see the presence of this variable associated with reduced support for Whig candidates, reduced support for Liberty/Free Soil candidates, and reduced

support for northern Democratic candidates (to the extent that voters for each of these groupings support free soil ideology) as former adherents of these groupings coalesce around the new Republican Party. We again are unable to directly test the impact of the Kansas-Nebraska Act on the Republican Party since the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the formation of the Republican Party occurred in the same year (1854), meaning that there are no pre-treatment observations for the Republican Party with respect to the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Nonetheless, the primacy of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in accounts of Whig collapse and the end of bisectionalism (Riker 1982; and Holt 2003, for example) suggests that this variable might have key explanatory power with respect to Whig, Liberty/Free Soil, and even Democratic candidate vote shares.

In addition to the variables already discussed, we include a binary variable denoting whether or not a candidate is an *Incumbent*. Incumbency typically bestows a major advantage to electoral candidates (Mayhew 1974), and we account for the possibility that incumbent status may influence vote share here. We also include a variable capturing the percentage of a state's population consisting of slaves (*Slave Percentage*) to try to proxy (albeit imperfectly) the degree of centrality of slavery to a state's economic identity. We also include a variable, *Year*, capturing the linear progression of time to reflect the idea that the bisectionalism of the Whig and Democrat coalitions may have become more unstable over the passage of time. Finally, we include a variable, *Lincoln Election*, capturing the year 1860. Many popular accounts of the end of this period and the start of the Civil War link Abraham Lincoln's election to disunion based on the logic that the choosing of Lincoln presented the South with a *fait accompli* regarding secession. However, it is possible (and indeed probable) that Lincoln's election was a manifestation of events that were already set in motion by the legislation and party changes regarding slavery discussed earlier.

For each of the partisan groupings, we utilize ordinary least squares regression with state fixed effects and standard errors clustered by state. The time period and number of observations per grouping changes given that each grouping was active during a different time: while the Democrats and Whigs were active over the entire 1840-1860 interval, the Liberty/Free Soil grouping was active from 1840-1858, and the Republicans were active from 1854-1860.¹² For each of the groupings (except for the Republican Party, for which there are no pre-treatment observations for the Fugitive Slave and Kansas-Nebraska legislation and for which we estimate post-treatment variables), we estimate two models: a base model including only the Fugitive Slave Act and Kansas-Nebraska Act variables; and a full model including all the described right-hand-side variables.

Results

Table 1 displays results for both the base and full models for each grouping using OLS regression with state fixed effects and state clustered standard errors.

<TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE>

At first glance, table 1 results are illuminating. For the Whig Party, there is consistent support (models 1 and 2) indicating that the Kansas-Nebraska Act corresponded with a decline in gubernatorial vote share. When the Whig-specific Kansas-Nebraska Act result is viewed in

¹² While the number of Whig gubernatorial candidates dropped precipitously by the mid-1850s, there was a Whig gubernatorial candidate in 1860. Similarly, although the number of Liberty/Free Soil candidates also dropped by the mid-1850s, there was an “Abolitionist” gubernatorial candidate in 1858.

conjunction with consistent support (models 3 and 4) linking the Kansas-Nebraska Act to a decline in gubernatorial vote share for Liberty/Free Soil candidates, there is support for the assertion that the Kansas-Nebraska effectively shattered bisectional glue keeping the Whigs together as well as claims by the Liberty/Free-Soil grouping that they could keep slavery confined to the South. There are some other results worth mentioning. The positive (though non-significant) result for the Fugitive Slave Act with respect to the Whigs points to a couple of possibilities. First, bisectionalism may have been alive and well in 1850 with southern Whigs supporting the Fugitive Slave Act—this might make sense given that the upper South was a bastion of Whig support in the South—while northern Whigs were ambivalent to opposed to it. Second, the Fugitive Slave Act was part of the larger Compromise of 1850, and this Compromise included other treatments (the admission of California, the abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia, and the use of popular sovereignty to determine the status of slavery in Utah and New Mexico) that muddy our ability to determine how the Fugitive Slave Act per se impacts party gubernatorial candidate vote share. The Liberty/Free Soil grouping, on the other hand, suffers negatively from the Fugitive Slave Act/Compromise of 1850, suggesting that voters largely motivated by the issue of free soil found the legislative solution of the Compromise of 1850 to be unpersuasive. The positive and significant result with respect to the Lincoln variable for the Whigs is, in our opinion, largely driven by a lone Whig gubernatorial candidate (John Pool) who gained pro-Union votes in North Carolina in 1860; general Whig results from table 1 are unchanged if we drop this anomalous observation.¹³

¹³ More generally, although we include the Lincoln variable, we recognize that the data end in 1860, meaning that we never see a post-treatment effect for this variable.

The Democratic Party results are also instructive. The non-significant results with respect to the Fugitive Slave Act/Compromise of 1850 and Kansas-Nebraska Act variables reflect the more fully bisectational nature of the Democratic Party vis-à-vis the Whigs and Liberty/Free Soil groupings; indeed, the greater bisectionality of the Democratic Party is corroborated by the positive statistical significance of the slave percentage variable with respect to gubernatorial candidate vote share. The Republican Party results cannot show the impacts of the Fugitive Slave Act and Kansas-Nebraska Act; however, it is worth noting that slave percentage possesses negative statistical significance with respect to Republican gubernatorial candidate vote share, corroborating the idea that the Republican Party was largely sectional (confined to non-slave states). It is also worth noting that the Lincoln election variable is not significant; although this variable only takes a value of 1 in the final year of the dataset—meaning we never observe “post-treatment” effects for this variable—its non-significance suggests that the rise of political sectionalism (and not just the unique retail talent of Abraham Lincoln) helped fuel the ascendancy of the Republican Party.¹⁴

Figures 1-3 help visualize the findings with respect to the Whigs, Democrats, and Legacy/Free Soil groupings in table 1.

<FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE>

<FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE>

<FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE>

¹⁴ The slave percentage variable retains its negative statistical significance with respect to gubernatorial vote share if we drop the Lincoln election variable from our analysis.

Figure 1 depicts quite vividly the negative influence of the Kansas-Nebraska Act on Whig gubernatorial candidate vote shares. It is by far the most starkly negative factor on Whig gubernatorial candidate vote share when considered alongside other factors. In figure 2, notice that the federal slavery legislation (both in the form of the Fugitive Slave Act/Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act) is non-significant with respect to influencing Democrat gubernatorial candidate vote share. Finally, in figure 3, notice that both instances of federal slavery legislation produce a negative effect on Liberty/Free Soil gubernatorial candidate vote share; the Kansas-Nebraska Act, however, has a more pernicious effect on vote shares of this group compared to the 1850 federal slavery legislation.

<TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE>

Table 2 displays gubernatorial candidate vote share results for Northern Whigs, Southern Whigs, Northern Democrats, and Southern Democrats. In this table, the models again employ ordinary least squares regression with state fixed effects and standard errors clustered by state. The South includes all states that would eventually comprise the Confederacy as well as border states that would remain in the Union; the North includes all other states of the Union. The results broken down by region are again instructive. The Kansas-Nebraska Act retains its negatively (and large in terms of magnitude) statistically significant association with the gubernatorial candidate vote share of Northern Whigs, suggesting that the Whig Party in the North experienced a sharp retreat after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Moving to the Northern Democrats, there is a negative relationship between the Kansas-Nebraska Act and gubernatorial candidate vote share; although this relationship is relatively close to achieving statistical significance, it does not. The negative relationship suggests that free soilers were an important portion of those associating as Northern Democrats but that Northern Democrats

probably included a large number of voters who were indifferent toward or even unconcerned about slavery; this assertion should probably make sense given that one of the architects of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Stephen Douglas, was a prominent Northern Democrat (Riker 1982; Sibley 1985; and Holt 2003).

The results of the Southern wings of the Whig and Democratic parties are harder to explain. Both wings experience a reduction in gubernatorial candidate vote share following the Fugitive Slave Act/Compromise of 1850 (though the reduction is steeper and slightly significant for the Southern Democrats), suggesting that Southerners were potentially on the whole left dissatisfied by the stipulations of the Compromise of 1850. We honestly do not know why voters would penalize Southern Democrats more than Southern Whigs in the aftermath of the 1850 legislation and invite future research on this issue; one possibility that we believe is not at play is that Whigs and Democrats represented different parts of the South; if we divide the South into two parts—the Upper South, comprising of the border states as well as future Confederate states that did not immediately join the Confederacy; and the Lower South, comprising of states that were part of the first wave of seven states joining the Confederacy—we find that the Whigs and Democrats both had a greater share of gubernatorial candidates during the 1840-1860 period come from the Upper South rather than Lower South. What is interesting is the positive though non-significant result of the Southern Whigs and Southern Democrats with respect to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. The positive directionality for Southern Whigs and Southern Democrats makes sense given (1) that the Kansas-Nebraska Act expanded the zone of geographical contestation regarding slavery (which Southern voters, assuming they many of them would have voted with the goal of the preservation of slavery, would have ostensibly liked) and (2) the Fugitive Slave Act/Compromise of 1850 (which has negative though non-significant

directionality for Southern Whigs and negative and significant directionality for Southern Democrats) created some demand among Southern voters for policy course correction, which could have taken the form of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

The non-significance of the positive association for the Kansas-Nebraska Act variable for Southern Whigs and Southern Democrats is fascinating in its own right, however, because it suggests possible ambivalence on the part of some Southern voters regarding the Kansas-Nebraska Act. While Southern voters presumably supported the pro-slavery intent of the act, it is possible that many Southern voters were concerned by the possibility that the act would embolden anti-slavery interests in the North and potentially lead to increased conflict; if such ambivalence were common enough, it could generate the variance in the effect of the Kansas-Nebraska Act variable rendering it non-significant. When this scenario is viewed in conjunction with the demise of bisectionalism among Northern Whigs, it appears that possible fears about the Kansas-Nebraska Act disturbing the tenuous peace within America's party system at that time were far from misguided.

One issue with the analysis displayed in the paper thus far is that we do not account for the rise of the American ("Know Nothing") Party in the 1850s. This party, espousing nativist beliefs, emerged as a competitor to the Whig, Democrat, and Republican parties but fizzled out. In table 3, we re-estimate the models from table 1 but include an *American* variable capturing whether a Know Nothing candidate ran for governor in a given state-year.

<TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE>

Inclusion of the variable capturing the presence of a Know Nothing candidate does not change the negative effect that the Kansas-Nebraska Act had on Whig and Liberty/Free Soil gubernatorial vote shares; it also does not change the lack of an effect with respect to Democratic

gubernatorial vote shares. There is some evidence that the American-Know Nothing Party did reduce the vote shares of parties that were stronger in the North, but the presence of this party did not fundamentally displace the role of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in accounting for the demise of the Whig and Liberty/Free-Soil groupings.

<TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE>

Table 4 recreates table 2 with the inclusion of the same American-Know Nothing variable. Key results here are also largely unchanged. The Kansas-Nebraska Act still negatively influences the gubernatorial vote share of Northern Whig candidates and now nearly reaches statistical significance in terms of negatively influencing Northern Democrat gubernatorial candidates. Moving to the Southern side, the Kansas-Nebraska Act still retains a positive but non-significant relationship with respect to Southern Whig and Southern Democrat candidates; moreover, the Fugitive Slave Act/Compromise of 1850 variable is no longer statistically significant with respect to Southern Democrat candidates. Although the American-Know Nothing Party negatively influenced the gubernatorial vote share of Southern Whigs, it did not change fundamental findings with respect to the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

Conclusion

The end of bisectionalism, the demise of the Whig Party, the dying out of third parties dedicated to free soil (the Liberty and Free Soil parties are two prominent examples), and the rise of the Republican Party have been the subject of meticulous and rigorous scholarly attention from Riker (1982), Sibley (1985), Weingast (1998), Holt (2003), Wallach (2017), and Maizlich (2018) among many others. In spite of great scrutiny given this time period, quantitative empirical analysis about how events like the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act/Compromise of 1850, the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, and the brief rise of the American Know-Nothing

influenced seminal change to the American party system in the lead up to the Civil War appears lacking. To that end, we applied statistical analysis to gubernatorial candidate vote shares in U.S. state elections in the 1840-1860 in an attempt to gain purchase on how major political events may have crystallized party transformation in this era.

We ultimately find evidence linking the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act to a steep decline in Whig gubernatorial electoral returns and particularly Northern Whig electoral returns. The Kansas-Nebraska Act had a similar effect on those belonging to prominent third parties (the Free Soil party) organized around the issue of stopping the spread of slavery, and it had a negative (though slightly non-significant) effect on the electoral returns of Northern Democrats. What accounts for these effects is the possibility that many in the North feared that the justification of the Kansas-Nebraska Act was not about protecting slavery so much as expanding the potential zone of slavery to colder climates and even core parts of the North itself. Seen in this vein, free soilers within the Whig Party and those adhering to free soil ideology within the Free Soil Party (as well as some Northern Democrats) could make the argument that the status quo party system in the United States was insufficient to stop pro-slavery interests. Organizing a new party, the Republicans, for whom free soil would be a key plank could unite free soilers under one roof and help to provide a bulwark against pro-slavery interests. The consolidation of Republican Party strength in the North and the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860, ending a long stretch of dominance of the presidency by pro-slavery interests and precipitating the secession of several Southern states to preserve slavery, attests to the notion that the free soilers may have been right in their thinking.

While our paper attempts to fill what we see as a gap in historical quantitative empirical research, there is much more work that can be done on this subject. Extending our analysis to

state legislative returns would provide a useful robustness check to the gubernatorial investigation developed here. Researchers could also exploit the tools of sentiment analysis or quantitative text analysis to assess whether the statements of Whig, Democrat, and Free Soil officials and candidates changed as events such as the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act occurred. Along the same vein, a text analysis of those who switched from the Whig and Free Soil parties could provide validation to the analysis put forth here. Here, we offer only a glimpse of what is possible in this area.

Table 1: Determinants of Gubernatorial Vote Share by Partisan Grouping

| Variable/Model | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) |
|---------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| Partisan Grouping | Whig | | Democrat | | Liberty/Free-Soil | | Republican |
| Fugitive Slave Act | -3.93** (1.91) | 1.86 (1.38) | -1.74 (1.72) | -3.18 (2.00) | 3.52* (1.73) | -3.79** (1.72) | ^ |
| Kansas-Nebraska Act | -15.43** (5.68) | -14.12** (5.60) | -2.75 (1.94) | -2.34 (2.32) | -5.45** (2.52) | -10.47** (3.62) | ^ |
| Incumbency | | 2.16 (1.48) | | 6.16*** (1.54) | | ^ | 3.79 (3.42) |
| Slave Percentage | | -0.44*** (0.10) | | 0.212*** (0.019) | | 15.32 (52.07) | -3.62** (1.60) |
| Year | | -0.75** (0.16) | | 0.192 (0.326) | | 1.22*** (0.31) | 1.40 (1.31) |
| Lincoln Election | | 17.90*** (4.90) | | -6.93** (2.65) | | ^ | -0.93 (5.05) |
| Observations | 206 | 206 | 322 | 322 | 101 | 101 | 59 |

^ = no observations meet the condition where this variable is present or there are no pre-treatment observations for the variable; hence, results are not reported.

***critical value = 0.01; **critical value = 0.05; *critical value = 0.10

Figure 1: Visualization of Influence of Selected Variables on Whig Gubernatorial Vote Share (%)

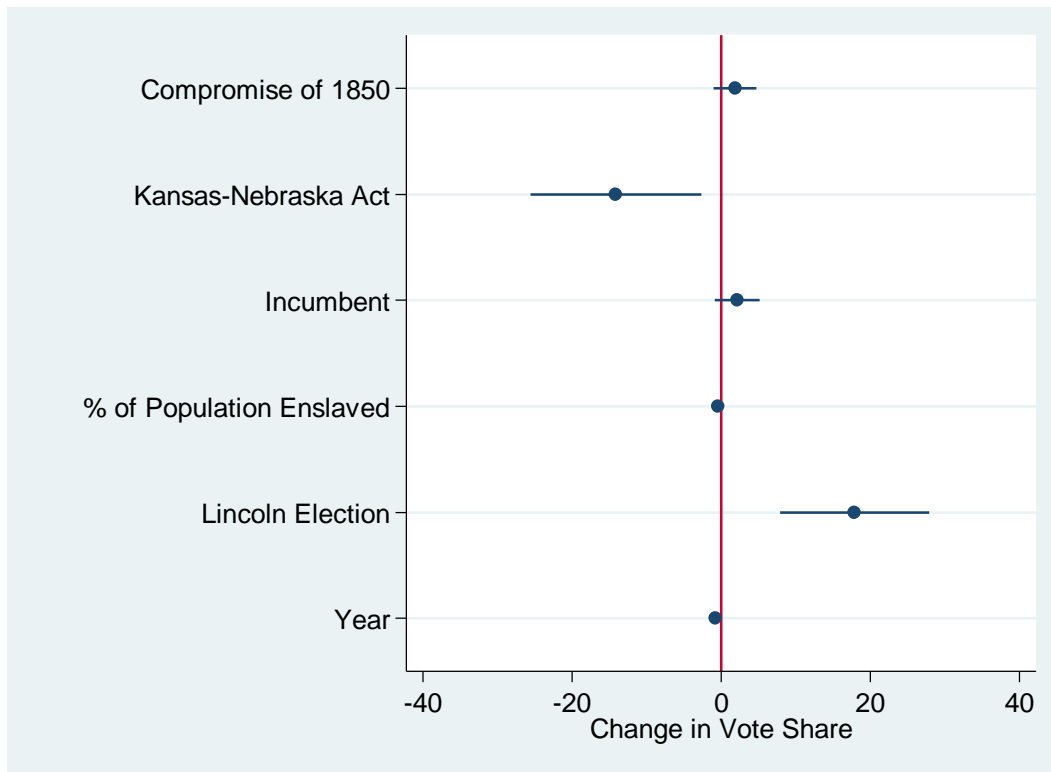


Figure 2: Visualization of Selected Variables on Democrat Gubernatorial Vote Share (%)

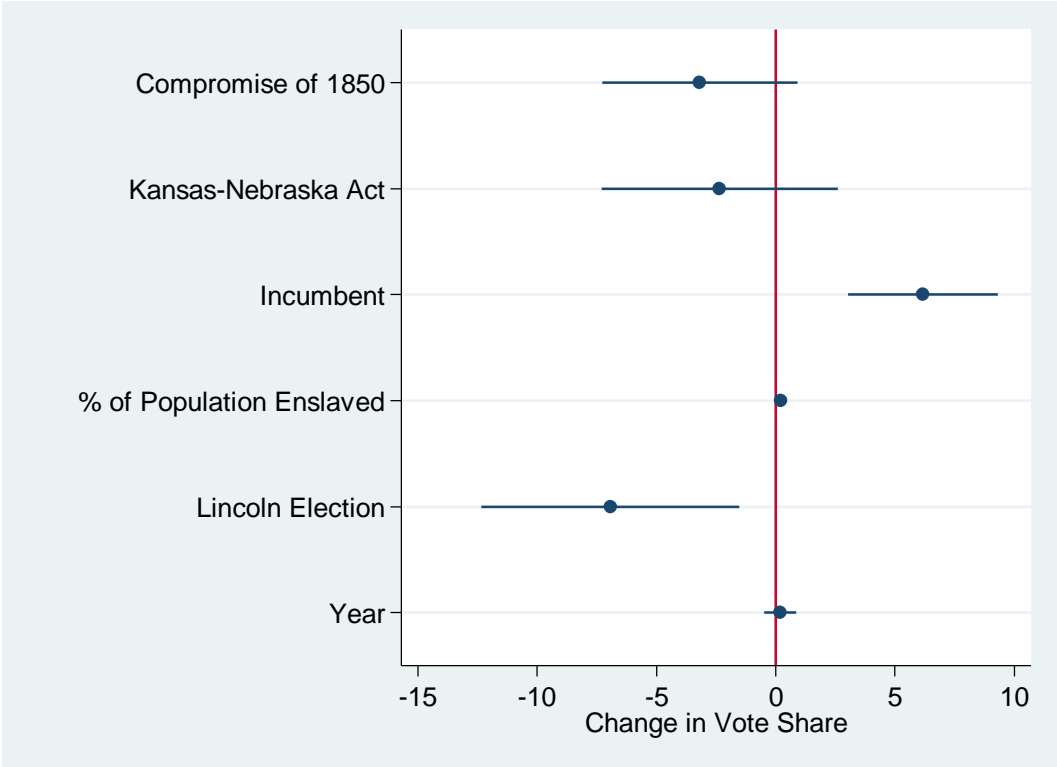


Figure 3: Visualization of Influence of Selected Variables on Liberty/Free Soil Gubernatorial Vote Share (%)

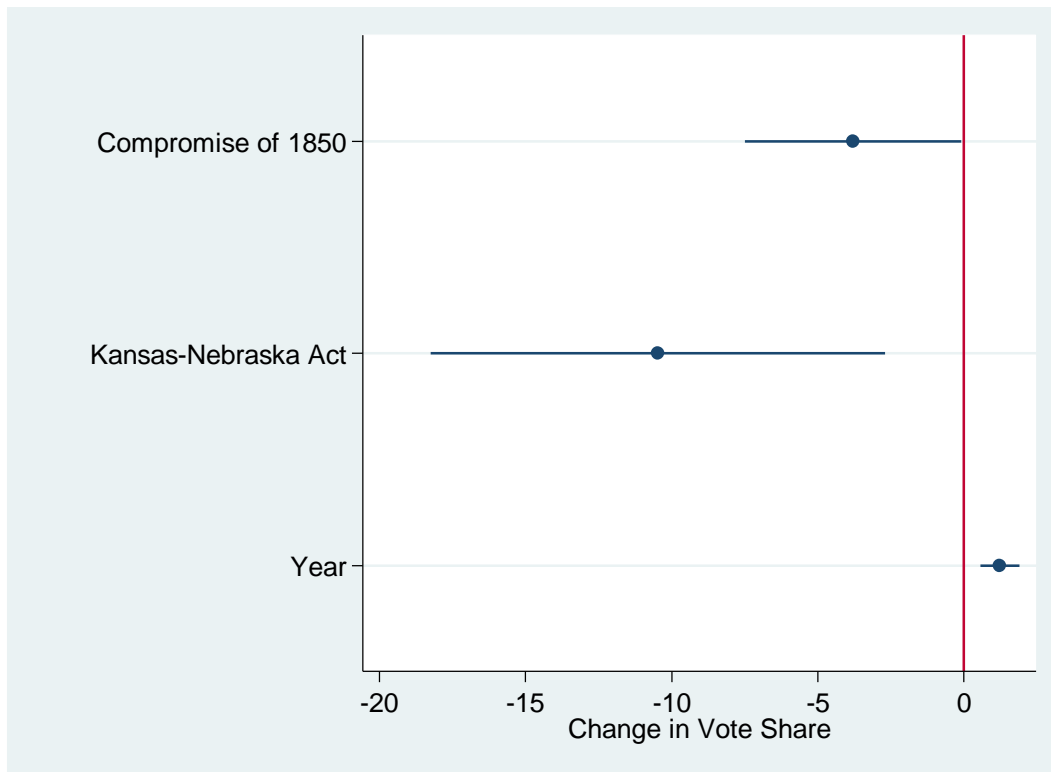


Table 2: Gubernatorial Vote Share by Partisan Grouping by Region

| Variable/Partisan Grouping | Northern Whigs | Southern Whigs | Northern Democrats | Southern Democrats |
|----------------------------|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Fugitive Slave Act | 2.45 (1.62) | -0.97 (2.14) | -0.92 (2.13) | -6.77* (3.58) |
| Kansas-Nebraska Act | -14.47** (5.70) | 1.20 (2.61) | -4.57 (3.10) | 1.20 (4.17) |
| Incumbency | 2.51 (1.72) | 0.77 (0.83) | 3.88** (1.55) | 8.35** (3.21) |
| Slave Percentage | -32.95 (47.86) | -0.96 (1.19) | -12.78 (45.66) | -0.20 (1.31) |
| Year | -0.90*** (0.21) | -0.38* (0.20) | -0.05 (0.38) | 0.56 (0.57) |
| Lincoln Election | ^ | 1.15 (1.35) | -2.97 (2.53) | -15.40** (5.21) |
| Observations | 144 | 62 | 216 | 106 |

^ = no observations meet the condition where this variable is present or there are no pre-treatment observations for the variable; hence, results are not reported.

***critical value = 0.01; **critical value = 0.05; *critical value = 0.10

Table 3: Replication of Table 1 with Addition of American-Know Nothing Variable

| Variable/Partisan Grouping | Whig | Democrat | Liberty/Free-Soil | Republican |
|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Fugitive Slave Act | 1.35 (1.41) | -3.18 (1.99) | -5.58** (2.04) | ^ |
| Kansas-Nebraska Act | -11.75* (5.89) | -2.36 (2.30) | -7.53** (2.95) | ^ |
| Incumbency | 3.11* (1.65) | 6.16*** (1.55) | ^ | 3.84 (3.16) |
| Slave Percentage | -0.44*** (0.10) | 0.21*** (0.01) | 10.75 (45.31) | -3.40** (1.23) |
| Year | -0.67*** (0.17) | 0.19 (0.32) | 1.40*** (0.36) | 0.23 (1.50) |
| Lincoln Election | 15.41*** (5.44) | -6.91** (3.06) | ^ | -2.84 (5.27) |
| American-Know Nothing | -7.91* (4.58) | 0.03 (1.78) | -7.78*** (1.46) | -14.23** (5.26) |
| Observations | 206 | 324 | 101 | 59 |

^ = no observations meet the condition where this variable is present or there are no pre-treatment observations for the variable; hence, results are not reported.

***critical value = 0.01; **critical value = 0.05; *critical value = 0.10

Table 4: Replication of Table 2 with the Addition of the American-Know Nothing Variable

| Variable/Partisan Grouping | Northern Whigs | Southern Whigs | Northern Democrats | Southern Democrats |
|----------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Fugitive Slave Act | 1.79 (1.60) | -1.13 (2.21) | -0.91 (2.15) | -5.91 (3.53) |
| Kansas-Nebraska Act | -12.18* (6.04) | 1.25 (2.63) | -4.69 (2.84) | 4.35 (4.00) |
| Incumbency | 3.63* (1.95) | 0.75 (0.86) | 3.84** (1.53) | 8.52** (3.63) |
| Slave Percentage | -35.42 (47.56) | -0.96 (9.20) | -12.67 (46.01) | -0.29 (1.29) |
| Year | -0.78*** (0.23) | -0.37* (0.20) | -0.06 (0.39) | 0.43 (0.58) |
| Lincoln Election | ^ | 1.11 (1.38) | -2.82 (2.81) | -17.81** (6.19) |
| American-Know Nothing | -7.78 (5.01) | -4.64*** (0.65) | 0.40 (1.72) | -4.21 (4.20) |
| Observations | 144 | 62 | 216 | 106 |

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