

Chapter 95 - The Political Scene In 1840

Date: 1840

The South Faces A More Threatening Electoral Terrain

Heading into the 1840 presidential campaign it's clear that the plantation scions of the South have reasons to fear that their control over the workings of the federal government may be slipping away from them.

Their linchpin here for over fifty years has been the strength of the Democrat Party, flowing from Jefferson through Andrew Jackson, always attentive to tamping down any anti-slavery rumblings across the North.

But dissatisfaction with Jackson's hand-picked presidential successor, Martin Van Buren, has intensified, as the economic recession following the 1837 Bank Panic persists. It is evident in the 1838 mid-term election, where Henry Clay's Whig Party picks up seats in both chambers of Congress.

Electoral Trends In U.S. Congress

	1834	1836	1838
U.S. House			
Total # of Seats	240	240	240
Whigs	37%	41%	45%
Democratic	59	53	52
Other	4	6	3
U.S. Senate			
Total # of Seats	52	52	52
Whigs	31%	33%	42%
Democratic	59	67	58
Other	10	0	0
President	AJ	MVB	MVB

Even more ominous to the Southerners are the population shifts reported in the 1840 Census.

From the beginning, the South anticipated that its warmer, agriculturally friendlier climate would translate into a growing share of the total U.S. population, and hence increase its power in the U.S. House. Instead it is the North that expands, in response to the trend away from rural farming and toward a more diverse economy and big cities.

By 1840, 57% of all Americans are living in the “free states” of the North, while only 43% reside in the “slave states” of the South – and movement to the west only adds to this disparity.

Distribution Of US Population

	1790	1820	1840
Total Free States	50%	53%	57%
Northeast	50	45	40
Northwest	---	8	17
Total Slave States	50	47	43
Border	12	15	13
Old South	38	27	19
Southwest	---	5	11
Grand Total	100%	100%	100%

Since total seats in the House are allocated according to shares of the total population, this 57-43% split in 1840 is very troubling to the South.

It is accompanied by another worrisome signal, a sense that those with anti-slavery sentiments in the North may be coming together in an organized fashion for the first time.

While outspoken abolitionists like Lloyd Garrison are still viewed as “radicals,” the American Anti-Slavery Society they found in 1833 has some 1300 local chapters and a quarter of a million members enrolled by 1838.

If this movement continues to grow, the South fears that pressure will build in Congress to stop the future expansion of slavery.

As control of the U.S. House slips away, the South must rely on two other sources of political power to protect its interest. The first is the Senate, which stands evenly split in 1840 between Free vs. Slave states, based on a series of “gentlemen’s agreement” compromises to date.

Senate Make-Up In 1840

South – “Slave”	Border – “Slave”	Northeast – “Free”	North West – “Free”
1788 South Carolina	1787 Delaware	1787 Pennsylvania	1803 Ohio
1788 Georgia	1788 Maryland	1787 New Jersey	1816 Indiana
1788 Virginia	1792 Kentucky	1788 Connecticut	1818 Illinois
1789 North Carolina	1821 Missouri	1788 Massachusetts	1837 Michigan
1796 Tennessee		1788 New Hampshire	

1812 Louisiana		1788 New York	
1817 Mississippi		1790 Rhode Island	
1819 Alabama		1791 Vermont	
1836 Arkansas		1821 Maine	

The second Southern defense lies in trying to elect a President who will defend, not threaten, slavery.

Date: February 7, 1839

Clay’s “I’d Rather Be Right Than Be President” Speech Will Prove Prophetic

The Whig Party founder, Henry Clay, is convinced the time has come for him to save the country from the “tyrannies” of King Andrew Jackson and his successor. As he says, we will finally “see the Goths expelled from the Capitol.” And his confidence is high:

If we do not beat him (Van Buren), we deserve to be gibbeted.

For three decades, since becoming Speaker of the House in 1811, Clay has been the most dominant force in Congress, leading the debate on foreign policy, holding the nation together through political compromises, and seeking to strengthen its economy and infrastructure. His fierce belief in the centrality of the legislative branch has placed him in conflict with the imperial presidency of Andrew Jackson, and his Whig Party is dedicated to ending Democratic Party dominance.

Clay feels that the 1840 election will be his time to reach all of his lifelong goals.

While he has advanced the Whig Party cause by touting the economic promises of his “American System,” he has historically shied away from speaking directly about the issue of slavery – although it is well known that he currently owns forty-eight slaves who toil away on his Ashland plantation.

On February 7, 1839, he decides to remedy this in a landmark speech to the Senate, titled “Petitions for the Abolition of Slavery.” As usual, his analysis is pristine and prescient, with main points as follows:

- Slavery has been a long-standing moral stain on the nation.
- It is understandable that Abolitionist’s wish to put an end to it.
- However, this wish is both impractical and dangerous.
- Abolition would devastate the South’s cotton economy.
- It would threaten social control and the safety of the white population.

- In turn abolition would encourage a fearful South to secede from the Union.

Before the speech, Clay reviews the remarks with a Southern friend, Senator William Preston of South Carolina, who warns him that it will lead to attacks from those on both sides of the issue. Clay's response to Preston defines the speech for all time:

I trust the sentiments and opinions, and I'd rather be right than be President.

Preston's assessment will prove right.

Much to Clay's chagrin, the arch pro-slavery Democrat, Calhoun, immediately praises the speech on the senate floor! This only reinforces the belief among Northern "Conscience Whigs" that Clay has simply offered one more lame slave owner's defense of the status quo.

At the same time, many Southern Whigs are offended by his labeling slavery a "moral stain" and by the notion that he "understands the abolitionist's cause."

Time: May 5-6, 1839

The Democrats Renominate Van Buren

Sensing an uphill battle, the Democrats hold an early convention, on May 5-6, 1839 in Baltimore.

Once there, Van Buren demonstrates that he remains in firm control of the Party apparatus by winning nomination on the first ballot.

The delegates do, however, signal a small slavery-related mutiny by refusing to support Van Buren's current Vice-President, Richard Mentor Johnson.

Southerners oppose him for having maintained an open liaison with his now deceased slave, Julia Chinn. Some Northern opponents object to having any slave owner on their ticket.

When the two sides fail to agree on an alternative, Van Buren is left to run by himself.

Date: December 4-7, 1839

The Whigs Nominate William Henry Harrison

On December 4, 1839, the “Democratic Whig National Convention” opens in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. By this time, the race is down to three men, after Daniel Webster, hated broadly, drops out. All three have won early national fame going way back to their roles in the War of 1812:

- Clay, whose war-hawk stance prompted the conflict, and who negotiated the peace treaty ending it;
- General Winfield Scott, whose gallantry in battle helps secure Ft. George in 1813; and
- General William Henry Harrison, victor at Tippecanoe in 1811 and over Tecumseh in 1813.

Ten months after Clay’s controversial speech on slavery, several elements within his party join hands to oppose his candidacy.

The Anti-Masonic wing, notably Thurlow Weed of New York and Thad Stevens of Pennsylvania, attack him, first for refusing to renounce his Grand Master status in the Kentucky Lodge, then as a two-time loser. As the acerbic Stevens says:

Clay is a Mason and a loser.

They are joined by a cadre of New Englanders who still hold a grudge against Clay for failing to aggressively support Daniel Webster’s nomination in 1836.

Clay’s campaign managers also underestimate Harrison’s strength among the various factions in the Whig coalition. Veterans of the Indian wars remain loyal to “Old Tip.” He is no Freemason. His record of winning seven states in the 1836 election proves his popular potential. And his geographical reach extends from his birthplace in Virginia, to his time spent as Governor of the Indiana Territory, to his adopted state of Ohio.

After the first ballot is cast, Clay holds a slim lead, when his opponents pounce.

New Yorkers such as Weed and Henry Seward believe that Clay will lose to Van Buren, and, on the second ballot, they peel away his support in Connecticut and Michigan in favor of Scott, their temporary “blocking candidate.” Then Stevens, spreads a false rumor among Southern delegations that Scott supports abolition, and they swing to Harrison, putting him over the top on the third ballot.

1839 Whig Nomination Voting

Ballot	Clay	Harrison	Scott
1	103	91	57
2	95	91	68
3	90	148	16

Harrison is not chosen until midnight on December 6, at which time the weary crowd begins to search for a way to console their deeply disappointed party founder, and to insure unity going forward.

They explore naming one of Clay's supporters to the ticket as Vice President, but all three men – John Clayton, Benjamin Leigh and Reverdy Johnson – decline.

On the following day, the delegates settle on their “General plus a Southerner” strategy by selecting the Virginian, John Tyler, to run with Harrison. This is Tyler's second official appearance on a Whig ticket, having previously run for Vice-President with two of the Whig's “four regional candidates” in 1836.

His choice, apparently a trivial afterthought, will soon boomerang on the Whigs in a profound way.