



The Presidential Election of 1864 in Kentucky

The Kentucky presidential vote in 1864 was a defeat for President Lincoln, but not a total rejection, as in 1860. Why this was so is not entirely clear. But the split between “Union” and “Peace” Democrats that would characterize that vote was already evident when Kentuckians went to the polls in the state elections of August 1863. The fault line centered on the Emancipation Proclamation and rumors of African American enlistments in Kentucky. But prevailing Union loyalty, the self-removal of many Confederates from the state, and military proscription of many southern sympathizers from voter lists, also worked to secure the governorship, the state legislature, and all congressional seats for the “Union” Democrats.

By summer 1864, persistent guerrilla warfare, emancipation policy, and the official extension of black enlistments to Kentucky caused a further realignment, as a growing number of Unconditional Unionists, led by Robert J. Breckinridge and Green Clay Smith, urged Kentuckians to accept the end of slavery as a fait accompli necessary for victory on the battlefield and restoration of the Union. “Let us submit to what we can not avoid,” Breckinridge had argued. This vocal minority, whose members would later emerge as the first “Republicans” in Kentucky, opposed Conservative Unionists (a coalition of Union and Peace Democrats), who called for “the Union as it was.” The combative Democratic Convention of May 25, 1864, officially confirmed the split, with Unconditional Unionists supporting both the administration and Lincoln’s renomination.

On election day, Lincoln failed to win a majority of eligible Kentucky voters, who numbered just over 92,000, or 54,000 fewer than in 1860, and who preferred the Democratic candidate, George C. McClellan, by a ratio of 2.3 to 1. Yet, compared to 1860, Lincoln had fared considerably better, receiving over 27,000 Kentucky votes, or 30.2 percent of the vote (compared to 1,364 votes, or 0.9 percent, in 1860). Of 101 Kentucky counties reporting, Lincoln carried twenty-five—the most populous of these being Fayette, Campbell, and Pulaski counties.

Compared to 1860, the results of the 1864 presidential election in Kentucky reflected a dramatically different political environment brought on by the war and military occupation. To be sure, Lincoln might have fared better in the November election in Kentucky but for the misjudgments and ineptitude of generals like Stephen G. Burbridge, especially the infamous “hog swindle” of October 1864. But what is most surprising is that Lincoln did as well as he did in his native state. Whether the Lincoln vote signified Unconditional Unionism or traditional Whig nationalism, this strain of Kentucky politics would prove short-lived.

“Rally around the flag,” *Harper’s Weekly*, October 1, 1864
Collections of the Kentucky Historical Society