

Walter Williams essay at quora.com May 4, 20023 in response to the question:

How did Lincoln's election to office cause the American Civil War?

First, it is not technically correct that Lincoln's election "caused" the Civil War. The election was in November 1860, but the Civil War did not begin until April 1861. During the six months after Lincoln's election, there was no war.

It is correct, however, to state that the 1860 elections caused the states of the Deep South to secede. The issue of secession must be considered separately from the outbreak of war. South Carolina led the way in December, followed a few weeks later by Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. On February 4, 1861, delegates from these states proclaimed the establishment of the Confederate States of America as an independent nation.

But there was no war.

US President James Buchanan tried to keep the peace during his final months in office. He criticized secession, but he hoped moderates from both North and South would reach a compromise. Buchanan wanted incentives to be offered to the seven seceded states so they would voluntarily return to the Union in peace. Several compromises were suggested by various leaders, but Buchanan was frustrated that no agreement seemed close to adoption.

What must be kept in mind is that the election of 1860 is an important turning point in American history, not only because of the election of Abraham Lincoln, but also because the new Republican Party's candidates formed a majority of elected members in Congress. Republicans had practically no votes in the South, and Lincoln's name was not even on the ballot in some Southern states. Nevertheless. Northerners and Westerners outvoted the South for the first time.

The results of the 1860s elections were a reflection of the fact that the non-slave states of the North and West were growing much more rapidly than the South. This growth spurt was due to the arrival of massive numbers of European immigrants, mostly from impoverished areas of Ireland, Britain, Scandinavia, and Germany. Relatively few of these immigrants moved to the South. Many avoided the South because they despised slavery. But even those who had no strong feelings about slavery had difficulty finding jobs in the South. In the slave economies, most of the

labor was done by black people, and there was little opportunity for immigrants to start with unskilled labor jobs and then move up to the established class. In contrast, immigrants prospered in the booming territories of the North and West.

In the fifteen years before the Civil War, all new states admitted into the United States were in the North or West. Every one of them applied for statehood with a state constitution that made slavery illegal. These new states (with their year of admission to the Union) were: Iowa (1846), Wisconsin (1848), California (1850), Minnesota (1858), and Oregon (1859). Though “Bleeding Kansas” was torn apart in the mid-1850s due to conflicts between pro-slavery and anti-slavery settlers, the anti-slavery faction ultimately won. Slavery was prohibited in the state constitution that was submitted to Congress when Kansas was admitted as a new state on January 29, 1861.

This was a big change in American history. Previously, the United States were originally balanced with an equal number of slave and free states. This meant that in the legislative branch the Senate was guaranteed to be balanced, and even the House of Representatives was not stridently anti-slavery. Many of the most prominent leaders in Congress were white Southerners. In the executive branch, Southerners had been central figures in presidential cabinets, and many presidents were themselves from the South. For the judicial branch, Presidents from both the South and the North took pains to appoint many white Southerners to federal judgeships and to the Supreme Court. Thus, from the nation’s founding, white Southern politicians had been central to all operations of the US government.

However, with the 1860 election it became clear that white Southerners had lost their prominence. In fact, because so few Southerners were Republican they were now basically cut out of the new Republican administration entirely. Top Southern leaders lamented their lack of access to power, and they even feared that the Lincoln administration would use its patronage power to hire only anti-slavery men for government jobs. For the first time in American history, white Southerners felt like a permanent outvoted minority.

The 1860 Republican Party platform called for major federal investments in infrastructure. Because most Southerners had voted against these types of “internal improvements,” Southern leaders feared that Congress might pass a law to reduce the economic impact of slavery, by using Southern tax dollars to purchase African American slaves. These government-owned slaves could then be used to build a Transcontinental Railroad, or to improve the nation’s river ports and seacoast harbors, and with a presidential promise that when the project was finished the workers would become freedmen.

Southern slaveholders who were previously at the top of society, were alarmed by any threat to their economic and social prestige.

Even though Lincoln promised not to interfere with slavery in states where it already existed, he might appoint anti-slavery men as judges and justices on the Supreme Court. Rich slaveowners were terrified that a Republican Congress might eventually restrict or even abolish the interstate sale of enslaved persons across state lines. Or, they feared, Republicans might pass a federal tax on slaves or on large plantations.

The big sticking point was that Republicans refused to back away from their party's platform to abolish slavery in all US Territories. They focused on Washington, D.C., Indian Territory, and New Mexico Territory, but also pledged to oppose the spread of slavery to any territories that might be added to the United States in the future. Republican opposition killed Southern expansionists' hopes to purchase or invade the slaveholding Spanish colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico, or to take over lands in the free nations of Mexico and Central America, in order to re-establish slavery there.

When Lincoln was inaugurated on March 4, 1861, he pled for peace in his First Inaugural Address. He pledged not to take military action against the secessionists, and told them, "there will be no war unless you yourselves are the aggressor." There was no war during the first six weeks of his presidency. But, as food was running out for the small federal garrison at Fort Sumter, when Lincoln sent a ship to re-supply it, Confederate batteries began a bombardment. That attack, begun by secessionists on April 12, is when the American Civil War began.

Many of those Congressmen (this was before women could vote in the USA, so only males were elected) were much more strongly opposed to slavery than Lincoln. While Lincoln wanted only to prevent the spread of slavery in the territories, many Republicans in Congress wanted to attack slavery in the Southern states as well.

The South had tangible reasons to fear the loss of their main source of wealth.

In addition, one of the things which white Southerners feared was that a Republican-dominated Congress would repeal, or at least weaken, the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. This law required local law enforcement officials to assist federal agents who were trying to capture escaped slaves for return to their owner. Many Northerners detested their own local participation in the brutality that occurred when black people who had managed to escape the South were now

cruelly placed in chains for a return to the South. Northerners felt they might not be able to prevent federal officials from capturing escaped slaves, but they sure as hell did not want their local sheriff (whose salary they paid, by local taxes) to be spending their time chasing slaves. Many local sheriffs ran for office, on the platform that they would focus on keeping their locale safe from local crimes and would never waste time catching escaped slaves. The election of anti-slavery local officials in the North and West greatly alarmed the South.

Publication of Harriett Beecher Stowe's novel UNCLE TOM'S CABIN, was a best seller in the North and West, and had a big impact on public opinion in the 1850s. Its description of the cruelties of slavery and of the horrid journey that escaping slaves went through to gain freedom, really brought the issue to the minds of many. More Northern locales passed "personal liberty laws" which prevented their local or state officials from assisting in the arrest of black people who were thought to be escaped slaves. While many of those arrested were in fact escaping slaves, there were also other black people who had been born free in Northern states, but who were still arrested and sent South on the basis of false testimony by whites that they were an escaped slave. These tragedies infuriated Northerners who increasingly thought slavery was a barbaric institution and should be destroyed.

White Southern apologists for slavery insisted that enslaved Africans were happy and content with their position as slaves. But the fact that Southern politicians gave high priority to federal support for the Fugitive Slave Act proves that they did recognize that enslaved persons were not happy, and that many would risk their life to escape bondage.

When Republicans gained so much strength in the Congressional elections of 1860, many white Southerners feared their slave property (which in many cases was the majority of their wealth) would escape. Fear of this sharp loss of wealth was a major reason the states of the Deep South seceded.

White Southerners grew up in a society which taught them that Africans were an inferior race, almost not human at all, and so they felt no more moral objection to holding black people in chains as they would in chaining up a horse or cow. Both Africans and cows were their property, and they could not understand why Northerners would object. After all, they reasoned, Southerners would not object if a horse ran away from a Northern owner, since that horse was the property of the person. The belief in white supremacy, with its corollary that saw Africans as inferior, was the justification used for slavery. That was the mindset of the Southern establishment.

In 1860, white Southerners were upset not only about the fear of loss of their wealth, due to slaves escaping. They were even more unnerved by fears of slave revolts. In 1860, rumors of plots by blacks to slaughter whites swept through the South. The example of a bloody revolt by slaves, during the Haitian Revolution, was at the forefront of slaveowners' psychic nightmares. These fears demonstrate the untruthfulness of Southern propaganda that the slaves were happy and content. Happy slaves do not risk their life to escape or to revolt.

Thus, Southern leaders correctly understood that the massive immigration into the Northern and Western states would lead directly to the admission of more non-slaveholding states. Without much increase in population, the Southern states would become a permanent minority. This would mark their loss of power in Congress.

But alarm about the loss of Southern power in the federal government, and about slave escapes and slave revolts were the main fears.

Thus, a majority of white Southerners in the Deep South states voted to leave the United States as a result of Republican victories in the election of November 1860. They correctly saw a Republican-majority Congress as a threat to their political power and their way of life. Slavery, and the political power that it gave to the large-landholding planter class, was central to the secession movement of December 1860 to February 1861.