

In the U.S. Civil War, did the Southern states secede because of slavery or because their notion of states' rights had been breached?

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One way to look at this question is to ask what percentage of a state's population was enslaved. According to the US census of 1860, the leader in the secession movement, South Carolina, held 57% of its population as slaves. It was quickly followed by Mississippi, in which over 55% of its population was enslaved. Thus, in the two states where secession sentiment was strongest, a majority of their populations were slaves.

The next four states to secede, which quickly joined South Carolina and Mississippi, in establishing the Confederate States of America, on February 4, 1861, held between 47% to 44% of their population as slaves: Florida [44%], Alabama [45%], Georgia [44%], and Louisiana [47%].

The last five states to secede, between February to May 1861, held only one third to one quarter of their population as slaves: Texas [30%], Virginia [31%], Arkansas [25%], Tennessee [25%], and North Carolina [33%].

Also of interest, the four slave states which did NOT secede all had less than twenty percent of their population enslaved: Kentucky [19%], Maryland [13%], Missouri [10%], and Delaware [2%].

Thus, what can clearly be seen from these statistics is an almost exact correlation between the percentage of enslaved persons in a state in the census of 1860, with that state's enthusiasm for leaving the United States and joining the rival Confederate States in 1861.

When Republican Party candidate Abraham Lincoln was elected as the first US President to state his opposition to the spread of slavery into any new

states, and his hope that slavery would be put on the road to eventual extinction, white Southerners who were committed to preserving slavery despaired of any hope for retaining their heretofore dominant position in the federal government.

When every Northern and Western state voted Republican in the 1860 election, Southern political leaders realized that, since the 15 slave states were not attracting as many immigrants as the 19 free states, white Southerners were doomed to become a permanent minority in the nation. It was this loss of their dominant political status in the federal government, what the historian Richard Hofstadter called "status anxiety," that propelled white Southerners toward secession.

Even though Lincoln had pledged during his 1860 campaign that he would not interfere with the institution of slavery in the states where it already existed, Southerners feared that he and future Republican presidents would choose anti-slavery judges who might declare slavery to be an unconstitutional violation of human rights. More immediately, slaveholders feared that Republicans would not enforce the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, which required federal law enforcement officials to hunt down escaping slaves and return them to their masters. And especially in the black-majority states of South Carolina and Mississippi, rumors grew in 1860 that enslaved persons would mount bloody slave revolts.

Secession was supported not only by most of the third of white Southern families who owned slaves, but also by an almost equal number of non-slaveholders who hoped to be able to purchase slaves in the future. It was this long-range fear that their slave-based labor system was threatened, combined with their immediate fear of the loss of their escaping slaves and, even worse, of bloody slave revolts, that led the majority of white Southerners to vote for leaving the Union in 1861.

At the same time, it should not be ignored that a strong minority of white Southerners opposed secession. A majority of whites in Missouri, Maryland, Delaware, and even Kentucky did not support the Confederacy. The western counties of Virginia "seceded" from Virginia after it voted to leave the

Union, and in 1863 was admitted as the anti-slavery state of West Virginia. Similarly, western North Carolina, east Tennessee, north Georgia, north Alabama, and the northwest half of Arkansas all had substantial opposition to the Confederacy. Large numbers of white Southerners opposed Confederate taxation and draft boards, deserted from Confederate armies, and even volunteered to fight for the Union. This substantial white minority, combined with widespread opposition to the Confederacy among African Americans [including nearly 200,000 black volunteers who served in the US Army and Navy] helped to defeat the Southern drive for independence. Southerners were far from united during the Civil War years.

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