SECESSION AND THE UNION IN TENNESSEE AND KENTUCKY: 
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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Introduction

On May 6, 1861, Tennessee withdrew from the United States and joined the Confederacy. Two weeks later, Kentucky proclaimed neutrality. County-level analysis yields an understanding of the political landscape within the two states during the Civil War.¹

Physical Similarities

Both states contain a part of the Gulf Coast Plain. These western counties were purchased in 1818 from the Chickasaw Indians by Andrew Jackson and lie west of the Tennessee River. Blessed with a relatively long growing season, they would exhibit in general much support for secession.

An interior low plateau stretches from the Ohio River southward into Alabama and is known as the Highland Rim in Tennessee and the Pennyroyal in Kentucky. Superimposed on this region are the Nashville and Bluegrass basins. These were prosperous regions and home to a planter aristocracy.

The Cumberland Plateau portions of the two states were sparsely populated. This area seldom experienced economic activity beyond subsistence farming. It was here that the least interest in the preservation of slavery could be found. Significantly, this area is much broader in east-west extent in Kentucky than in Tennessee.

East of the Cumberland Plateau in the Volunteer State are two more physical regions. These, the ridge and valley province of central Appalachia and the Unaka (Great Smoky) Mountains, do not extend into Kentucky.²

Secession in Tennessee

In both states, enthusiasm for secession diminished eastward. It is possible to categorize counties' sentiments and thus gain a detailed knowledge of the 1861-1865 political landscape. Secession was promoted by two events occurring over a span of just more than five months in 1860-61. The election of a Republican president, given that party's opposition to the further spread of slavery, enabled extremists in seven Southern states to accomplish
withdrawal from the Union by February 1861. South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas then quickly formed the Confederate States of America. There were Tennesseans (and Kentuckians) who unsuccessfully advocated similar action in their states during this first rush to secession. 

In Tennessee, Governor Isham G. Harris prodded the legislature to schedule a referendum on a sovereignty convention. Such a gathering, if called, could remove the state from the Union. To the governor's dismay, however, Volunteer State voters defeated a convention call on February 9, 1961. Despite unhappiness with Abraham Lincoln's election victory, the apparent consensus was that his term would expire in four years, at which time he could be defeated in a bid for re-election. Voters did not consider the outcome of the presidential election alone to be sufficient cause to leave the Union. A spatial analysis of the February balloting reveals significant variation in sentiment west to east. Eleven of fifteen West Tennessee counties submitting returns wanted a convention call, but twenty-seven of twenty-nine at the other end of the state opposed it. Middle Tennessee was the most evenly-divided grand division. There, twenty counties favored and thirteen rejected the call.

President Abraham Lincoln's plea for troops subsequent to the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter triggered a second impulse to secession. In the eight slave states which had not seen fit to sever the ties of union over Lincoln's mere election, the question was now re-examined. Would Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, Delaware, Missouri, Arkansas, Kentucky, or Tennessee submit to what was being described in the South as coercion?

Governor Harris angrily refused to abide such an effort. Believing that Tennesseans now preferred joining the Confederacy to preserving the Union by force, he promoted a renewed effort to depart from the United States. This culminated in another referendum four months after the initial defeat of the convention call. This time Tennessee voters were directly asked if they favored or opposed "separation." The result of this second election, June 6, 1861, approved exiting the Union. A comparison of the February and June returns reveals that there was little change in opinion in either the west or the east. The former remained in tune with secession, although Weakley, Carroll, Henderson, Decatur, and Hardin counties did defeat the proposal and went on to provide significant numbers of recruits for the Union Army. In the east, only five counties (Rhea, Meigs, Polk, Monroe, and Sullivan) favored abandoning the old flag. It was in Middle Tennessee where the greatest shift in opinion occurred. There, twelve counties that opposed a convention call in February, suggesting a reluctance to secede then, approved secession in June. These twelve (Jackson, Overton, Wilson, Smith, Putnam, Williamson, Rutherford, DeKalb, White, Cannon, Bedford, and Coffee) had the balance of power as they accounted for the different outcomes of the two elections.

Secession in Kentucky

Unlike its neighbor to the south, Kentucky's state government never approved an act of secession, placing it alongside Missouri, Maryland, and Delaware as slave states whose constituted governments declined to secede. In the Bluegrass State, however, an extra-constitutional secession associated with the Russellville Convention was recognized by the Confederacy.

The governor, Beriah Magoffin, was an advocate of secession. Opposing him was an anti-secession majority in the legislature. When the States of the Deep South began their exodus, a special legislative session was called by Magoffin to promote a sovereignty convention. This was defeated by Unionist legislators who feared a convention might result in Kentucky secession. Unionists opposed a referendum on the convention call because without it
there was no danger of the state's seceding. An affirmative vote on the referendum, conversely, suggests secession sympathies. Delegates from the seven coastal plain (Jackson Purchase) counties all favored the referendum, while those from central (Pennyroyal and Bluegrass) counties opposed the referendum. Cumberland Plateau counties were evenly divided on the question.8

At this early stage of the secession crisis, it may now be noted that Kentucky Unionists had blocked a statewide referendum. Their counterparts in Tennessee, while unable to accomplish such a block, were nonetheless heartened when the state's electorate spurned an opportunity to convene a sovereignty convention.9

Lincoln's call for volunteers in the aftermath of Fort Sumter put Kentucky Unionists on the defensive. The strategy they adopted at this point became a passive one. Rather than seek a ringing affirmation of union, they opted for much less, a position of neutrality. This would at least keep Kentucky from considering an ordinance of secession in the near term. Once intense secession spirit had waned, neutrality could evolve into Unionism. Significantly, the state's secessionists were the ones who opposed the neutrality resolution adopted May 16, 1861. Geographic analysis of this final action taken by the legislature reveals that the greatest opposition to neutrality came from the (Western) First Congressional District counties, proclaimed by Lincoln to be in rebellion on September 1, 1861. The fact that Kentucky, in contrast to Tennessee, was never to vote in a statewide election on secession necessitates the establishment of another criterion for determining wartime allegiance--spatial variation in volunteering for service in the Union Army. Illinois (12.56%) led the free states in percentage of its population volunteering, and New Jersey (8.95%) was lowest. Tennessee had a 3.19% rate of Union volunteering, highest among the seceded states. Fulton, Hickman, Calloway, Union, McCracken, Graves, Livingston, and Ballard counties had less than 2% of the total white population in Union service. At the other extreme, Ohio, Russell, Greenup, Monroe, Boyd, Metcalfe, Lewis, Carter, McLean, Jackson, Clinton, Clay, Estill, and Owsley counties contributed over 10% of their population to the effort to preserve the Union.10

Extremely Unionists or extremely secessionists counties in the two states may thus be identified on the basis of a referendum (Tennessee) or military service (Kentucky). At the polls thirty-one of eighty-one Tennessee counties, primarily in the eastern grand division, opposed withdrawal from the United States; in Kentucky twenty-seven counties, primarily in the eastern end of the state, supported the Union Army with higher percentages of Union volunteers than that of the northern state, New Jersey, which had the lowest rate of voluntary enlistment.

Forty-four other Tennessee counties approved secession by more than two-thirds margin. In seventeen other Kentucky counties, extreme secessionism was inferred--less than 3% of the total white population voluntarily enlisting in the Union army.

**Contributing Factors**

Antebellum partisan beliefs attributed to one party or the other could be expected to be important in determining Civil War allegiances. In the upper South, Whigs are seldom among the secession extremists. Henry Clay's party included among its adherents John Bell in Tennessee and John J. Crittenden in Kentucky, both of whom displayed a great attachment to the Union. Andrew Jackson's party, in contrast, was led in 1861 by Beriah Magoffin in Kentucky and Isham G. Harris in Tennessee, both ardent secessionists.11
Accordingly, the most strongly Union counties would be likely to have a Whig background, while in the counties most enthusiastic for secession, a Democratic orientation would be evident. In order to classify counties, a mean percentage of the popular vote won by Democratic candidates over seven consecutive Presidential elections 1836 through 1860 was calculated. This permits labeling of some counties as strongly Democratic (54% or more) or strongly Whig (46% or less).

In Tennessee twenty-two of twenty-eight Democratic counties supported secession, and twenty-one of thirty-eight strongly Whig counties demurred. It should be noted, however, that several West Tennessee Whig counties (Lauderdale, Fayette, Perry, Haywood, McNairy, Shelby, Dyer, Gibson, and Madison) voted for secession, while some East Tennessee Democratic counties (Hancock, Greene, Washington, and Bradley) were opposed.

The Kentucky political landscape looked similar. Eight of the most strongly secessionist counties (Calloway, Morgan, Hickman, Owen, Graves, Trimble, Scott, and Fulton) had Democratic histories, while only three others (Livingston, McCracken, and Henderson) came from Whig ranks. A consideration of the nine most Unionist counties (Monroe, Wayne, Estill, Grayson, Greenup, Ohio, McLean, Jackson, and Carter) reveals that all but the last named were Whig counties.

Another factor in differing wartime allegiances involved slaveowning. It is to be expected that counties with little interest in slaveowning would have exhibited little support for secession. To measure this relationship, three categories of slave holding were developed: (1) Counties with at least one potential voter in four owning slaves included those areas where slavery was most entrenched, (2) Counties with between one in six and one in four potential voters owning slaves comprised areas of significant interest in slaveowning although to a lesser degree than in (1) above, and (3) Counties with fewer than one in six potential voters owning slaves encompassed the areas with least attachment to slavery.12

In Tennessee, of the forty-four counties where the vote for secession was by at least a two to one margin, thirty were in the top two categories of slaveowning described. Fourteen of the seventeen Kentucky counties with lowest levels of Union volunteering fell in one of the two higher categories of slaveowning. Of the extremely Unionist Kentucky counties (which sent higher percentages of population to the Union Army than did New Jersey), twenty-three had the lowest level of interest in slaveowning (less than one in six potential voters owning slaves). In Tennessee, of the thirty-one counties voting against secession, twenty-seven exhibited the lowest levels of interest in slaveowning.

Summary and Conclusions

Despite the fact that at the state level Tennessee did and Kentucky did not pass ordinances of secession, the neighboring states reacted similarly to the Civil War. In both states, the closer one approached the Mississippi River, the more support there was for disunion. Whig areas and areas of limited interest in slaveowning were more Unionist in both states. Satisfactory understanding of the 1861-1865 political geography in the two states is attained only by studying differences in behavior at the county level.
**NOTES**


2. Oswald Schmidt, *The United States: an Overview of the Physical and Cultural Landscape* (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt, 1972), 12-16; Corlew 149; Clark 6.


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4 *Nashville Union and American* 5 March 1861.

5 Eaton, 15-50.

6 *Nashville Union and American* 25 June 1861.

7 *Louisville Courier* 21 November 1861.


9 Corlew 289-291; *Nashville Union and American* 12 November 1861.


