

Lincoln-Douglas Debates - Freeport (1858)

Senatorial Candidate Abraham Lincoln

Historical Background

In 1858 Abraham Lincoln of the Republican Party and Senator Stephen Douglas of the Democratic Party crisscrossed Illinois giving speeches supportive of their party for the upcoming state legislative election. The result of the election would have great personal significance for each man, as the party victorious in the state legislative elections would elect a Senator of its own party; each man was the nominee of his respective party. Lincoln pursued a clever strategy. Each time incumbent Sen. Douglas spoke, Lincoln would travel to the same place few days later to reply to his more illustrious rival. Eventually Douglas sought to make a joint appearance with Lincoln and the two set up seven such occasions with rules designed to counter Lincoln's tactics. Rather than giving Lincoln the last word perpetually, in the first debate Douglas spoke first for an hour, Lincoln could answer for an hour and a half and Douglas could offer a rebuttal for half an hour. For the second debate at Freeport, the order was reversed. A huge crowd of thousands gathered to hear the speeches.

Historical Significance

The Lincoln-Douglas debates, as a whole, are significant for their great rhetorical and substantive quality, the engagement of masses of ordinary citizens in political debate and the great importance of the subjects that were debated. They provide an example and perhaps an ideal of the type of debate that can elevate democratic politics and provide true choice between alternatives to the governed. Despite the length and complexity of the speeches, the notes taken by journalists at the events indicate a high level of interest and interaction with the two candidates and their key points throughout the debates. When one candidate was thought to have made a particularly good comeback or retort to his rival the audience responded with the type of reaction is now heard at sporting events: thunderous applause, taunts, and cheers like "hit him again!" In particular, the Freeport debate is significant for Abraham Lincoln's allegation that the Dred Scott Decision represented an outward manifestation of an insidious slave power conspiracy. Further, by answering Douglas' pointed questions from their previous debate, he hoped to show that the Republican Party's platform was consistent and principled without being extreme.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: sectionalism, partisanship, Democrats and Republicans, election politics, "slave power," free soil, abolitionism, party platform

Learning objectives: On completion of this unit, students will be able to:

- describe how Senators were elected before the 17th Amendment;
- analyze and describe rhetorical strategies used in the Lincoln-Douglas debate;
- describe the conflict between Republicans and Democrats in the late 1850s;
- define a political party platform and explain why platforms are important;
- describe the importance of the Lincoln-Douglas debates for subsequent U.S. History.

Questions to Explore

Abraham Lincoln first answers Senator Douglas' questions by saying that he is pledged to do none of the extreme things that Douglas has described. As he later goes into greater depth answering each of the questions, it becomes clear that things are more complex. In fact it seems clear that Lincoln personally and politically endorses several of the positions that he is not "pledged" to. What role does such political doubletalk play in electoral campaigns for political office? Is this kind of speech unavoidable? Does it have any benefits or does political speech come at the expense of truth more broadly considered?

Lincoln accuses the Supreme Court, the Congress, and the President with complicity in a conspiracy to make slavery possible in every state of the Union. Do candidates for public office have special duties or responsibilities to be measured in their criticisms of their opponents? Or does the marketplace of ideas prosper by the articulation and defense of any idea, regardless of its slanderous potential?

Abraham Lincoln goes to great lengths to downplay any abolitionist policies or preferences that he possesses. However, Lincoln as President would become known as the Great Emancipator. This suggests, though by no means proves, that Lincoln personally held views different from those that he shared with listeners in this and other debates. To what extent should politicians and candidates for office share their honest opinions about issues and controversies? Can a candidate even be elected if he is always completely sincere in his speeches? What are the disadvantages and advantages of adapting one's message for one's audience?

Lincoln and his colleagues are consistently addressed as "Black Republicans" by Senator Douglas. How does Lincoln respond to this name? How should he have responded? How would you respond in a similar situation?