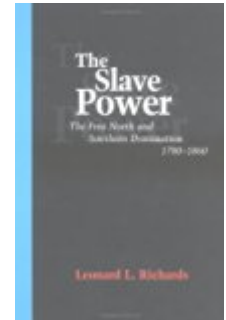


Leonard L. Richards. *The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination, 1780-1860.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000. x + 228 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-2600-4.



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The Slave Power

No unifying principle more effectively energized the insurgent Republican party of the 1850s than the concept of the Slave Power. The thrust of this brief, but engagingly written, study by Leonard Richards is to demonstrate that Northerners had good reason to believe in the existence of a Slave Power. After an historiographically oriented opening chapter, he lays out the evidence in seven succeeding chapters of slaveholder dominance of the federal government from its very inception in the Philadelphia Convention of 1787 to the secession crisis of 1860-61. This dominance was especially noteworthy in the sixty-two years down to the Compromise of 1850. During this period, slaveholding Southerners controlled the presidency for fifty years; they held such key congressional positions of power as speakers of the House, chairmen of the House Ways and Means Committee, and presidents pro tem of the senate two-thirds of the time; they accounted for just under 60 percent of all Supreme Court justices; and they received (relative to the South's free popula-

tion) twice as many major cabinet and diplomatic appointments as Northerners.

Just how Southern politicians fashioned and maintained such overwhelming dominance at the federal level lies at the heart of Richards's study. The structuring of power calibrated at the Constitutional Convention provides part of the answer. The stipulation that all states would have an equal voice in the Senate, a provision adopted at the behest of the predominately Northern small states, not the slaveholding ones, soon became a main prop for Southern political power. Contrary to the expectations of the delegates at Philadelphia, non-slaveholding states and territories outpaced slaveholding areas in population growth. Combined with a conscious and successful effort down to 1850 to maintain a parity between free and slave states (even at the expedient of admitting to statehood slaveholding territories with a far smaller free population than their Northern counterparts), the result was a structural impediment to the full expression of Northern voting power. For example, as the abolitionist William Jay pointed out in the 1850s, six slave states, with twelve sena-

tors, had an "aggregate free population of 189,791 less than Pennsylvania" (p. 49).

The South's other constitutional advantage stemmed from the three-fifths clause, the stipulation that slaves were to be counted as three fifths of free persons in apportioning direct taxes and seats in the House of Representatives. Since the federal government rarely resorted to direct taxes, the fiscal impact of this clause was minimal, but its political impact was enormous. On average, the slave states received in each decade one-third more members in the House than their free population alone would warrant. Moreover, these additional seats translated into more Southern votes in the electoral college. In the Adams-Jefferson election of 1800, these votes accounted for the margin of Jefferson's victory.

Although not as readily apparent, the three-fifths clause was also fundamental to Southern control of party politics. The dominant parties throughout most of the antebellum period were the Jeffersonian Republicans and the Jacksonian Democrats. The power base of both was firmly rooted in the South, and Northern members jockeyed among themselves to curry patronage and other political favors from party caucuses and national conventions and administrations in which slaveholders, their unity and influence enhanced by the three-fifths clause, maintained controlling leverage over party affairs.

As the Southern share of seats in the House steadily dropped from 46 percent in 1790 to 35 percent in 1860, so-called doughfaces (the label goes back to the belittling rhetoric of John Randolph of Roanoke in the debates over the Missouri Compromise)--Northerners who sided with the slave South on divisive sectional issues--became increasingly crucial to the securing of Southern political goals at the national level. Without their votes slaveholders would not have emerged victorious on such measures as the gag rule in the late 1830s to silence abolitionist petitions, the admission of Texas to the Union in 1845, the imposition

of a stringent new fugitive slave law in 1850, and the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 that repealed the prohibition in the Missouri Compromise on slavery in the territories.

In what stands as his freshest and most innovative contribution, Richards provides the best analysis to date of the doughfaces and their shifting composition. After constructing a database of 320 Northern congressmen who voted with the South on major sectional issues between 1820 and 1860, he shows that the vast majority of these doughfaces--all but ten--came out of the Jeffersonian Republican or Democratic parties. In contrast to their Federalist or Whig colleagues, these congressmen had to maneuver within the structural constraints of Southern dominance of their parties and answer to more racist constituencies.

Richards follows up this analysis with a finely nuanced examination of the impact of antislavery agitation and organizational strength on the sectional leanings of Northern Democrats. By so doing, he is able to explain the shift of New Englanders and Van Buren's Bucktails out of the pro-Southern camp in the 1830s and their replacement in the mid-1840s as stalwart Southern supporters by Democrats representing Pennsylvania, New Jersey, and the Old Northwest. The inroads of abolitionism and free soilism in New England and upstate New York forced now vulnerable Democrats in these regions to demonstrate that they too would take a stand against a "slave oligarchy" threatening Northern white liberties. Finally, by the late 1850s even western Democrats led by Stephen A. Douglas drew a line at Southern attempts to dictate party policy on the slavery issue. Lincoln's Republicans, by fusing the Federalist-Whig view of the Slave Power dating to Jefferson's presidency with that of Free Soil Democrats who traced it to the late Jacksonian period, were now the North's majority party. Rather than accepting the coming of a Republican administration in 1860-61, slaveholders launched the secession movement.

Richards is superb in depicting a Slave Power construct grounded in Northern frustrations over Southern dominance of the national political arena. Where he has fallen short is in linking his political analysis with the social and economic changes in the free states that were integral by mid-century to the increasing willingness of Northern whites to embrace the conspiratorial imagery that was so central to the explanatory persuasiveness of the Slave Power model. In short, what is largely missing is the Slave Power as an ideological construct that provided Northerners with symbols and metaphors for making sense out of their world. Too casually dismissing the approach of David Brion Davis in *The Slave Power Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style* (Baton Rouge, 1969), Richards has highlighted the political side of the Slave Power at the expense of its emotional appeal.

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