



Dude, Where's My Candidate?: Lincoln, the Ballot, and the Election of 1860

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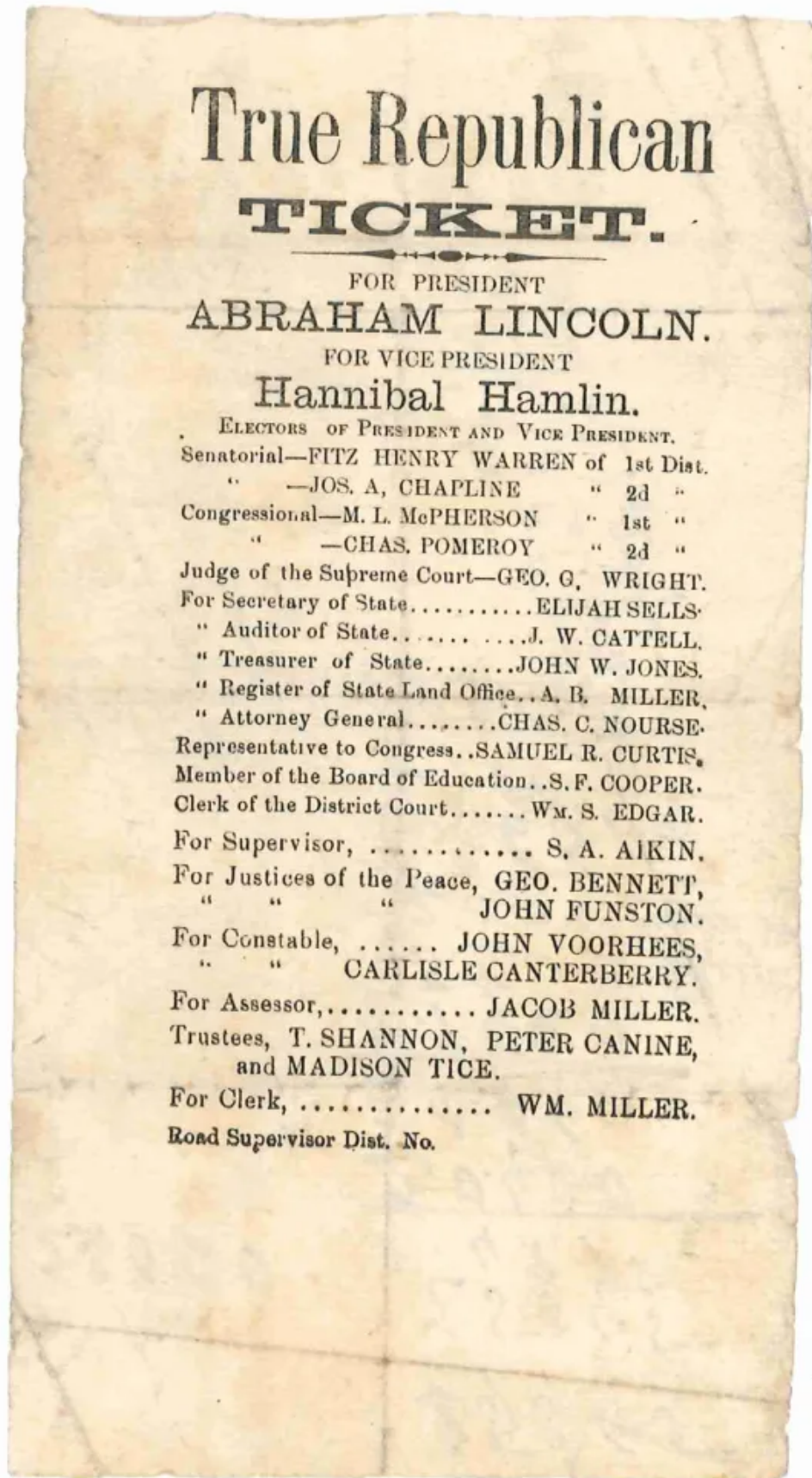
Growing up in Colorado, I became accustomed to my home state being largely irrelevant to the national news cycle. This pattern has begun to change in recent years, however, as the Centennial State has asserted itself as a critical player in

national politics. On Tuesday, December 19, 2023, Colorado's Supreme Court affirmed its willingness to make political waves with a ruling declaring that Donald J. Trump, the 45th President of the United States, is disqualified from holding federal office because he engaged in "insurrection" against the United States in the lead up to the events of January 6, 2021. As a result, as of this writing, Trump will not be eligible to appear on the ballot for Colorado's Republican Primary in March.

Astute students of the history of the American Civil War likely woke up this morning eager to remind their friends and family that this is not the first time a presidential candidate has been excluded from the ballot: Abraham Lincoln, after all, did not appear on the ballot in 10 Southern states during the election of 1860. But the comparison is deeply flawed — and a reminder of the pitfalls of drawing easy links between the past and the present. Here's why:

Until the turn of the twentieth century, there were no secret ballots in the United States — in fact, there were not really ballots at all. Rather, voters would submit a "party ticket" at their local polling place, under the watchful eyes of election officials. These party tickets listed the candidates for a single political party — for federal, state, and local offices — and voters would simply deposit the ticket for the party they wished to support in their local ballot box. This is where we get the phrase "voting a straight ticket" or a straight party vote. The opposing candidates were not listed on the same ticket and there was no version of a ballot that allowed voters to split their votes among multiple political parties.

As historian Michael Holt notes in his excellent *The Election of 1860* (The University Press of Kansas, 2017), presidential candidates in the nineteenth century "were utterly dependent on their party organizations to have any chance of election." "Parties had the obligation of printing their own ballots and then distributing them to thousands of polling places so that voters could hand them to election judges for deposit in ballot boxes."



The Iowa Republican Party ticket for the election of 1860.

So, when we say Lincoln was not “on the ballot” in ten Southern states, what we are really saying is that the Republican Party did not distribute ballots to voters in those states — because the Republican Party did not believe they would receive a significant number of votes in places such as Alabama, South Carolina, or Mississippi. It was a waste of time and resources to send thousands of Lincoln ballots to the South, just to have them sit in unopened boxes on election day.

What is more, Republicans in 1860 knew that they did not need any Southern states to achieve victory in the electoral college, so long as their ticket could garner enough votes in the North and West — staving off three challengers in the form of Stephen Douglas, John Bell, and John C. Breckinridge. There were 303 electoral college votes up for grabs and 61 belonged to the 10 states where Lincoln did not send tickets — only 20% of the overall total of available votes. There was simply no need to send tickets to states that were not going to return Republican electors. Lincoln won 180 electoral college votes — 28 more than the 152 that he needed to carry him to the White House, with the majority coming from populous states such as New York, Pennsylvania, and Ohio.

And therein lies the danger in drawing parallels between past and present. Unlike Colorado’s prohibition in the case of former president Trump, no southern states in 1860 ruled that Lincoln could not appear on the ballot. The Republican Party simply decided not to run their railsplitter in Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.

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