



Social Choice and Southern Secession in the United States

Kelley O'Bryan Gary

Department of Economics, Washington University in St. Louis, USA
(email: kgary@wueconc.wustl.edu)

Abstract We have long known that collective decisions are determined not only by the underlying constellation of individual preferences, but also by the process – or rules and procedures – used to reach a decision. Outcomes may vary even while underlying individual preferences remain unchanged. This paper examines the influence of the various rules and procedures used to reach decisions on the matter of secession in the American South. I show that southern secession occurred, in part, because the decision processes were biased in favor of secession. By denying their respective electorates the opportunity to vote directly on the status quo of Union, by assiduously avoiding a collective “southern” solution, and by encouraging separate state secession in the states of the lower South, the most ardent secessionists prevailed where otherwise they may have failed.

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1. Introduction

“We know with some precision why the South seceded. The answer is obvious at first glance and remains clear upon deeper investigation – the South seceded because it saw in Lincoln a threat to the survival of slavery, the foundation of the Southern way of life.” While succinctly summarizing the consensus regarding the *motivation* of secessionists, Paludan’s (1972) conclusion is a non sequitur. Understanding the motive of southern secessionists tells us little about why the secession movement prevailed in some states and failed elsewhere. Many wealthy slave-owners opposed secession, viewing it as a revolutionary threat to their prosperous way of life. Alexander Hamilton Stephens declared:

When we and our posterity shall see our lovely South desolated by the demon of war which this act of yours will inevitably invite and call forth; when our green fields of waving harvests shall be trodden down by the murderous soldiery and fiery car of war sweeping over our land; our temples of justice laid in ashes; all the horrors and desolation of war upon us – who but this Convention will be held responsible for it? (Stephens 1861)

Jeremiah Clemens, a delegate to the Alabama secession convention, who had also opposed secession, now regarded it as a revolutionary and irrevocable fact:

I believe your Ordinance to be wrong – if I could defeat it, I would; but I know I cannot. It will pass, and when passed it becomes the act of the State of Alabama.... I am a son of Alabama; her destiny is mine; her enemies are mine. Acting upon the convictions of a lifetime, calmly and deliberately, I walk into revolution. (Smith 1975, p. 81).

The relevant, and unanswered, question remains – why did those advocating secession prevail in the lower South, and fail elsewhere, during the winter of 1860/1861? And why did some states of the upper South, but not others, later reconsider the matter, and reverse earlier decisions to forego secession? Coherent answers to these questions are obscured by 1) the lack of consensus regarding the popularity of secession, and 2) the focus on “southern secession”.

As William J. Donnelly (1965, p. 70) asserted: “though the question of southern support for secession begs a final, single answer, it affects and reflects interpretations of the Civil War and of southern society.” Nearly thirty years later, William W. Freehling (1994, p. 212, 298) concurred, finding that we “lack a modern synthesis” in regards to the popularity of secession.

The focus on “southern secession” also obfuscates our understanding of the 1860/1861 crises, for it was not the South that seceded. The South, and a political mechanism enabling southern secession, did not exist. Indeed, secessionists in every state of the lower South consistently and firmly refused to cooperate in the formation of any southern convention that would have facilitated a collective regional decision. Rather, it was South Carolina, and South Carolina alone – or to be even more precise, a special convention of the South Carolina people – that seceded. Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas also seceded in the following weeks (Fehrenbacher 1980, p. 5). Shortly thereafter, the respective electorates in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Missouri, and Arkansas, the state legislatures in Delaware and Kentucky, and the governor in Maryland rejected secession. Only later did Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas reconsider the matter and join the Confederacy. The relevant dates are listed in Table 1 and Table 2.

Whether symptom or cause of the frequent “southern secession” heuristic, the process through which these southern states reached a decision on the matter of

secession is largely unexamined. Process, however, may influence the outcome of a decision. The most basic conclusion of social choice theory is that collective decisions depend not only on the underlying constellation of individual preferences, but also on the process – or rules and procedures – used to reach a decision. Outcomes may vary even while underlying individual preferences remain unchanged. The process by which a decision is reached may then be said to determine the outcome (e.g., Hinich and Munger 1997, Shepsle and Bonchek 1997, Austen-Smith and Banks 2000).

So it was, I will argue, with secession in the winter of 1860/1861. A minority of the electorate propelled each state of the lower South out of the Union, as delegated majorities were manufactured in each of the respective secession conventions. By denying their respective electorates the opportunity to vote directly on the status quo of Union, and by assiduously avoiding a “southern” solution, secessionists prevailed where otherwise they would have failed. In contrast, the respective electorates of the upper South were allowed to vote directly on the status quo of Union, and did so affirmatively. However, by the act of secession, the states of the lower South created new majorities, new policies, and new expectations for those states remaining in the Union.

2. Popular or patriarchal movement

In the historiography of southern secession, the movement is alternately viewed as a slaveholder’s rebellion in which the southern populace was dragooned out of the Union, or as a populist revolution in which the people ran far ahead of their leaders (eg., Wooster 1961, Woods 1990). David M. Potter (1995, p. 208), for example, finds that:

... secession was not basically desired even by a majority in the lower South, and the secessionists succeeded less because of the intrinsic popularity of their program than because of the extreme skill with which they utilized an emergency psychology, the promptness with which they invoked unilateral action by individual states, and the firmness with which they refused to submit the question of secession to popular referenda.

In his later work Potter (1976, p. 501) backed away from this wholesale dismissal of secession’s popularity:

The secessionists realized that although their cause was a popular one, its ascendancy was transient. Delay, from their standpoint, was almost worse than opposition. They seized the momentum of a popular emotional reaction to Lincoln’s election and rode it through with astonishing speed. ... In all this, there was no conspiracy to thwart the

expressed will of any majority in any state. In fact, the populace was clamoring for action.

Others too believe secession to have been a popular movement in the states of the lower South. Daniel J. Crofts (1989, p. 53), for example, writes that in the lower South, support for secession “became fervent majority sentiment” and “[m]any who had long opposed secession either fell in with the popular current or did nothing to stop it.” Kenneth Stampp (1980, p. 238) finds “little reason to doubt that secession was the will of a substantial majority at the time the decision was made.” And Joseph R. Stromberg (1977, p. 32) regards southern secession as “the expressed will of a whole ‘section’ self-organized and claiming independence.”

A careful reading of the more focused state-level studies does little to clarify the question, for while each study is illuminating, the conclusions are not easily synthesized. Steven Channing (1970, p. 284–85) asserts “the people [of South Carolina] had indeed responded to Lincoln’s election with a ferocious roar ... secession *was* a popular revolution.” Johnson (1977) contends that the Georgia electorate was evenly divided, and perhaps opposed to secession, but once secession was an accomplished fact, conservative delegates to the Georgia secession convention seized the opportunity to solidify patriarchal rule. Thornton (1978) characterizes the Alabama secession movement as a popular revolution intended, in part, to protect yeomen farmers from the depredation of banking and corporate interests. These authors may well be correct in their divergent findings of popular support for secession. There is no *a priori* reason to believe that support for secession was invariant between the states of the lower South.

Missing from much of this debate is a careful examination of the data most likely to illuminate the question. Inferences drawn from the relevant election returns clearly indicate that secession was *not* popular throughout the lower South. The respective electorates in Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana were evenly divided, and perhaps opposed to secession (Gary 2003). The paucity of relevant data for Florida, South Carolina, and Texas compel an agnostic view of secessions’ popularity in these three states. In the remaining slave states, secession was largely, and unambiguously, unpopular.¹ Collectively, secession was not a popular movement.

Given the unpopularity of secession among the slave states, it is not surprising that each state legislature, and each state convention, in the lower South firmly resisted every proposal for a collective southern approach. Secession surely would have been delayed, and likely defeated, in a southern convention. The

¹ These states were Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia.

strategic aspects of choosing how to choose never lurked far beneath the surface. In Mississippi, for example, the editor of the *Natchez Free Trader* (1860, Dec. 12) writes:

They believe that if the Gulf States can be trapped into a Conference, they will feel themselves honor bound to abide by the result.... It is a scheme to dragoon the Gulf States into a conventicle where they will be overslaughtered by the numerical power of the others, and forced to acquiesce in their decision.

Regional differences were readily apparent along several policy dimensions. As one opponent of secession put it:

When Charleston demands free trade, and New Orleans a duty on sugar; and Kentucky and Missouri a duty on iron and hemp; when Louisiana, Mississippi and Missouri are taught to feel that theirs are democratic States, and South Carolina an oligarchical one.... The passions of the hour will soon pass away, and self-interest will dictate political action ... (Winchester 1860)

And as Edward Pessen (1980, p. 1119) has noted, similarities between “South” and “North are as apparent as differences between regions of the South.”

3. Manufactured and exaggerated majorities

In the first six states to secede – South Carolina, Florida, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana – the respective electorates were not allowed to choose between secession and the status quo of remaining within the Union.² The voters’ only participation in the decision process was to elect delegates to specially called secession conventions. Moreover, none of the institutional safeguards to constitutional amendments in these states – separated powers, intervening elections, and legislative super-majorities – were required of the ordinances of secession. Because the status quo of Union was not voted last, as it would have been had popular referenda been required or allowed, it is possible that an outcome not preferred to Union (by majority rule) was achieved through careful choice of the decision process. A referendum on secession would have effectively represented a vote between the status quo of continued union and secession.

² Texas, the seventh state to secede did allow a vote on the status quo, but only after seizing agenda control from a governor opposed to secession and adopting an ordinance of secession in an extralegal secession convention called for and organized by the secessionists themselves. Twenty-five percent of the counties did not participate in the election for delegates to this extralegal convention.

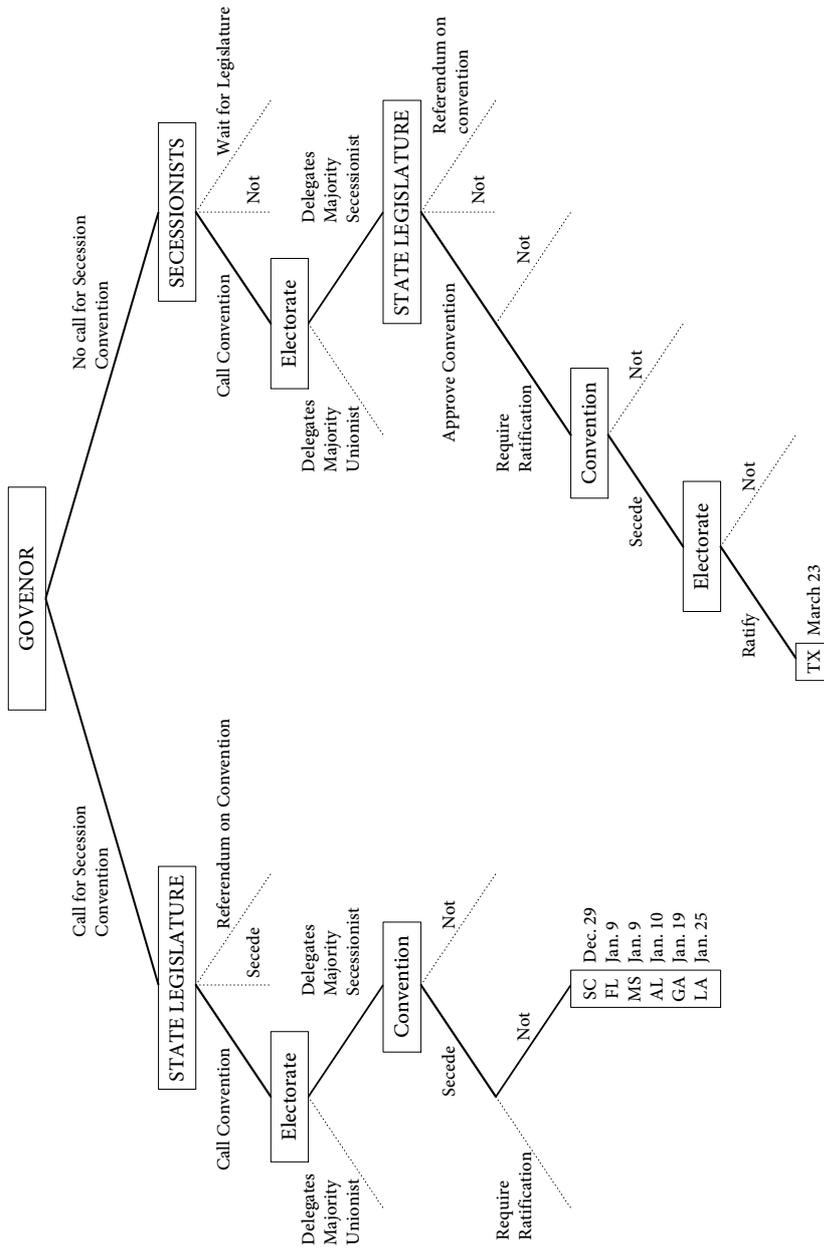


Figure 1

State	Popular Support for Secession	Secession Percentage in Convention	Date of Secession
Alabama	50 %	55%	January 10, 1861
Florida	NA	60%	January 9, 1861
Georgia	49 %	55%	January 19, 1861
Louisiana	51%	60%	January 25, 1861
Mississippi	51 %	71%	January 9, 1861
South Carolina	NA	NA	December 20, 1860
Texas	NA	83%	February 1, 1861

Table 1 Secession sentiment in the lower South

Several opportunities for such a vote were called for but deliberately avoided (e.g. referenda on calling the conventions, referenda on the matter of secession, ratification of ordinances passed by the conventions).

In each of the first six states to secede, the bicameral state legislature adopted legislation calling for a unicameral “convention of the people.” Representation to the secession conventions was apportioned in a manner similar to the apportionment of the respective state legislatures (that is, malapportioned), with a delegate to the convention assigned for each legislative seat. Moreover, the vast majority of the electoral districts were multi-member winner-take-all electoral districts, an electoral arrangement which is well suited to producing exaggerated or manufactured majorities. Indeed, such institutions are often adopted for precisely this purpose (e.g., Kousser 1999). The decision processes in the states of the lower South are summarized in Figure 1, and are explained more fully in the paragraphs to follow.

The date of secession, estimates of popular support for secession, and secession strength in the conventions are shown in Table 1. As can be seen in the table, secessionists were able to manufacture a solid majority of delegates in each of the conventions in the lower South even though the electorate was near evenly divided on the matter in each state.

3.1 *Georgia*

Having effectively thwarted a southern secession movement in 1850, Georgia radicals attempted to upstage South Carolina for pride of place in 1860. Julian Hartridge, on November 12, sponsored a resolution in the Georgia House calling for the state to “resume the position of an independent sovereignty.” In the ensuing debate T.R.R. Cobb (1860) encouraged the legislature to act immediately

rather than “wait till the grog-shops and cross-roads shall send up a discordant voice from a divided people.” Opposition to this precipitous move for secession was led by Alexander Hamilton Stephens, the future Vice President of the Confederacy, Herschel V. Johnson, who had been Stephen Douglas’ running mate in the 1860 presidential election, and state senator Ben Hill.

Though not lacking for able leadership, the opposition’s lone victory was to bury Hartridge’s amendment in committee, and delay secession until a special convention of the people could be elected. Every other maneuver aimed at delay or defeat of secession was rejected. Importantly, Ben Hill and his Senate colleagues repeatedly failed in their efforts to secure a policy of cooperation with other states in a Southern convention. Hill is said to have remarked that the votes “rejecting all propositions for cooperation ... will be regarded by our sister Southern states as the opinion of this body that Georgia is opposed to the policy of cooperation” (Bates, 1953, p. 460).

Official returns from the election for delegates are not available, but we know a great deal about this election (e.g., Bates 1953, Johnson 1977, Wooster 1962). Delegates to the Georgia Secession Convention were elected in multi-member districts, with each county electing either two or three delegates. A total of 299 delegates were elected from Georgia’s 132 counties. Each county comprised an electoral district, and opposing factions competed in 111 counties. Twenty-one counties were uncontested (that is, only one faction nominated a slate of candidates in these counties).

As indicated in Table 1 above, fewer votes were cast for candidates pledged to immediate secession, but the secession coalition held a solid majority in the convention. Votes on important preliminary motions revealed a majority of 164 – 133 for secession (Wooster, 1962). Only forty-nine percent (49%) of the electorate cast a ballot for a secession candidate, yet 55% of the delegates favored immediate separate state secession. While Governor Joseph Brown characterized the election as a sweeping victory for the secessionists, a motion to have the official election returns published was defeated in the convention (Johnson, 1977).

Following the election, the chosen delegates convened as scheduled. Delegates pledged to immediate separate state secession won the early ballots for leadership positions, and controlled the convention from the start. The secessionist leadership in the convention then resisted collaboration with the greater South just as firmly as had the state legislature. Herschel V. Johnson’s amendment calling for a Southern convention and collaboration was defeated 166 – 130. Ben Hill was rebuffed by a similar vote when he again proposed Johnson’s amendment. With all available dilatory tactics exhausted, the ordinance of secession was passed by a vote of 208 – 89, as many opposition delegates joined the secessionists to give the appearance of state unity.

The opposition’s last gasp – a motion to require popular ratification of the or-

dinance of secession – failed by an unrecorded margin. William Martin, who had authored the motion for popular ratification, declared: "...the people of Georgia, in convention assembled, have decided.... We bow with filial obedience to that sovereignty...." (from Johnson 1977, p. 122). Martin, like other opposition delegates in the Georgia convention, was unwilling to further risk his reputation by insisting upon the distinction between a delegated majority and a majority of the electorate.

3.2 *Alabama*

As in Georgia, a majority of the electorate voting in contested districts opposed immediate separate state secession, as only forty-eight percent (48%) of these voters cast a ballot for a secession candidate. Nevertheless, 55% of the delegates in the state convention favored immediate separate state secession. Furthermore, while differences of opinion were apparent in almost every county, the state was geographically divided. Only one county in north Alabama elected a candidate pledged to immediate secession, and only one county in south Alabama elected a candidate opposed to immediate secession.

Upon winning leadership positions in the convention, the secession coalition resisted both a southern convention and popular sovereignty. Jeremiah Clemens' proposal for popular referenda was tabled by a vote of 54 – 46, and later defeated by a vote of 54 – 45. A resolution advocating a southern solution was defeated 54 – 45 by the same coalition. When voting on final passage of the secession ordinance, several opposition delegates joined with the secession coalition to provide a 61 – 39 margin of victory (see Smith 1975, p. 81).

3.3 *Louisiana*

The official election returns from the Louisiana election for delegates were not published until *one hundred and nine* years after secession was accomplished.¹ (Dew 1970). Among contested districts the electorate was near evenly divided with slightly more than 50% favoring secession. However, the apportionment of representation effectively over-represented areas with a high slave population, and sharply limited the representation of New Orleans.

Excluding New Orleans, less than 130 total votes separated those in favor and

¹ The *New Orleans Daily Delta*, a secessionist newspaper, did publish results aggregated at the district level. The "official" returns report fewer votes for the secessionist candidates than were reported in the *Delta*.

those opposed to secession. Given the apportionment of representation and districting in these areas, secessionist delegates elected outside New Orleans enjoyed a 47 – 36 advantage. Had representation been apportioned on the basis of eligible voters (and all else remained the same) then those *opposed* to secession would have held the majority of the seats outside New Orleans. Secessionists then would have held 18 seats, to the opposition's 40 seats. This peculiar outcome occurs because the apportionment formula effectively transferred seats from New Orleans to areas dominated by those supporting secession. Excluding the New Orleans delegates, the secession coalition enjoyed a majority in the convention *only* because of the apportionment scheme.

To the surprise of nearly everyone, secessionist voters narrowly prevailed in New Orleans. While polling only approximately 500 more votes than the opposition, delegates pledged to immediate secession claimed 15 of the 20 seats apportioned to the city. And 91% of the eligible voters in New Orleans did not participate in the election. Given the closeness of the election, it is reasonable to surmise that a more equitable apportionment formula may have increased turnout and altered the outcome of the election in New Orleans. Despite increasingly voluminous rumblings of a secessionist coup, the secession coalition defeated a resolution to publish the election returns. The same coalition also refused, by a vote of 73 – 23, to require popular ratification of the ordinance of secession (Shugg, 1939, p. 163).

3.4 *South Carolina*

Representation in the South Carolina legislature, as in the secession convention, was apportioned on the basis of white population and taxes paid. This apportionment scheme ensured that the wealthy low-country areas were represented in disproportionate numbers. Apportionment may have played an important role in South Carolina because the state constitution required a 2/3 majority of the legislature to call a special convention such as the secession convention. It is not clear that a 2/3 majority would have obtained in more fairly apportioned legislature. An unfettered secessionist majority was enabled to brush aside numerous opposition maneuvers aimed at delay and defeat of the secession movement. Each opposition proposal, save one, was defeated. The oppositions lone victory helped set the date for the election of delegates at December 6 rather than November 22. Among the other defeated proposals were plans calling for “southern” cooperation and collaboration.²

² South Carolina *House Journal*, 1860 p. 8, 18–19; South Carolina *Senate Journal*, 1860 p. 14–15.

Little is known about the results in the South Carolina *election for delegates*; neither the official election returns nor comprehensive accounts of the election returns exist. We do know that many of the electoral districts offered only a secessionist slate of delegates, and that the secession convention was comprised, almost exclusively, of delegates pledged to immediate secession. Lillian Kibler (1938, p. 362, note 102), noting that the majority of those entitled to suffrage did not vote in some districts, suggests that unionists and conservatives refrained from voting in the election because they knew the convention would be dominated by secessionists.

The duly elected delegates assembled in Columbia, adjourned to Charleston, and on December 20, 1860 unanimously passed an ordinance of secession. On this basis, it is frequently assumed that secession was popular in South Carolina. Steven Channing (1970, p. 284–85) asserts that “secession *was* a popular revolution.” Manisha Sinha (2000, p. 221–22) plays along with the assumption of a secessionist majority. Secession, we are told, arose from the “determination of the state’s political elite, the lack of organized opposition, an apparent disunionist majority among the citizenry, tactics of intimidation and terror, and the hopeless apathy of outnumbered unionists.” A retrospective secessionist majority seems to have been conjured into existence, largely on the basis of long practiced assumption. Secessionists may have formed a majority of the electorate; no direct evidence indicates this to be so.

Whatever the case, secession was not so popular in South Carolina that secessionists risked either debate or popular democracy. Alfred Aldrich, a South Carolina secessionist, seems to agree:

I do not believe the common people understand it, in fact, I know that they do not understand it; but whoever waited for the common people when a great move was to be made. We must make the move & force them to follow. This is the way of all revolutions & all great achievements, & he who waits until the mind of every body is made up will wait forever & never do any thing. (quoted from Channing 1970, p. 163.).

4. Popular veto in upper south

In contrast to the process of secession within the lower South, the respective state legislatures of North Carolina, Tennessee and Arkansas submitted the question of holding a secession convention to popular referenda, while simultaneously allowing voters to select delegates to the convention, contingent upon approval of the convention. This allowed voters the opportunity to maintain the status quo of remaining within the Union. In each of these three states the electorate selected a majority of “Unionist” delegates, and in North Carolina and Tennessee, the voters chose *not* to hold a convention.

State	Date (1861)	Event	Union Majority
Delaware	January	Resolution condemning secession passed	21-0 (House) 5-3 (Senate)
Virginia	February 4	Unionists win delegate count	105–45
Tennessee	February 9	Secession Convention Rejected	69,675 – 57,798
Arkansas	February 18	Unionists win delegate count	39–35
North Carolina	February 28	Secession Convention Rejected	47,333 – 46,671
Kentucky	March 16	Strict neutrality provision passed	69-26 (House) 13-9 (Senate)
Missouri	March 19	Resolution declaring no adequate cause to secede passed by convention	90 – 1

Table 2 Secession rejected in the upper South

In Arkansas, while voters approved the secession convention, the elected delegates repeatedly defeated resolutions intended to secure secession. After much strategic maneuvering, the Arkansas convention passed a resolution calling for a popular referendum on the question of secession, and adjourned the convention (though reserving the right for the convention's elected president to call the convention back into session) (Woods 1987).

In Virginia, the state legislature called for a special secession convention, allowing voters to choose delegates *and* decide if actions of the convention would be subject to ratification by the electorate. The Virginia electorate chose a majority of Unionist delegates and stipulated that any action of the convention be submitted to a popular referendum. Secessionists in the convention were neither able to secure an ordinance of secession in the Virginia convention nor refer the matter of secession back to the electorate. The proposal to refer the matter of secession back to the electorate was defeated, by a vote of 95–45 (Wooster, 1962).

In Missouri, the state legislature called for the election of delegates to a special secession convention, and *required* that any action of the convention be subject to ratification by the electorate. The Missouri convention subsequently, by a vote of 90–1, adopted a resolution declaring that no adequate cause for leaving the Union existed. In Kentucky and Delaware, no special secession conventions were called, and the respective state legislatures considered a number of secession related initiatives, with each declining to join the lower southern states in seceding from the Union. In Maryland, the state legislature was not in session, and the governor refused to call a special session for the purpose of addressing secession. (Wooster, 1962). Table 2 summarizes the relevant secession votes within the states of the upper South. The decision processes are summarized in Figure 2.

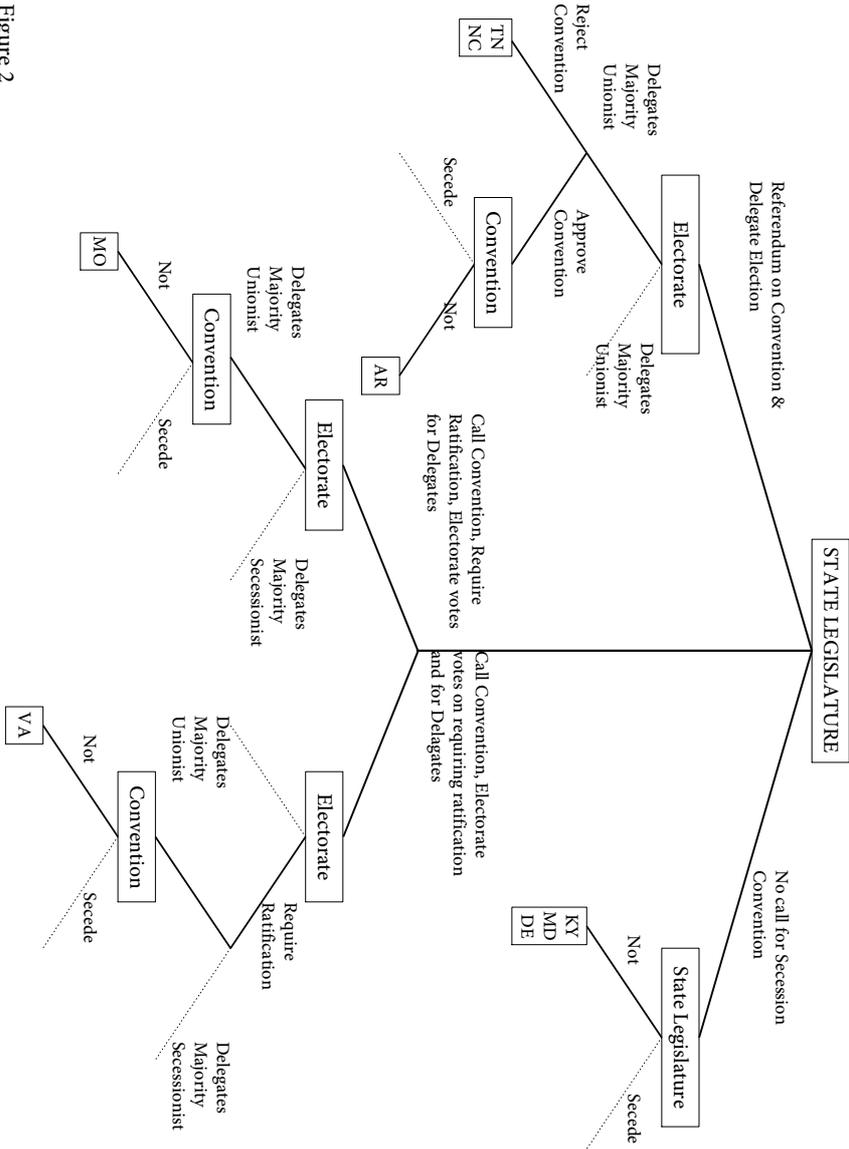


Figure 2

5. Secession reconsidered

The withdrawal of the lower South created new U.S. congressional majorities that could exercise authority in ways antagonistic to the remaining southern states. Not surprisingly, the eight slave states remaining in the Union were soon confronted with new policies, and new expectations for future policy changes. After the secession of the lower South, and before the secession of the upper South, Kansas was admitted to the Union, and the Colorado, Dakota, and Nevada territories were organized as U.S. territories. The perpetuation of an unfettered Republican majority, through the creation of “rotten boroughs”, had begun (Stewart and Weingast, 1992).

Edmund Ruffin, a Virginia secessionist and Southern nationalist, had presciently forecast this eventuality. Believing Virginia would never lead in the secession movement, Ruffin suggested

the impetus would have to come from states in the deep south, five or six of which should “declare their independence of, and secession from, the present Federal government.” The nonseceding slave states would soon discover themselves a powerless minority in the old Union and choose to join in the “new Southern Confederacy”. (quoted from Crofts 1989, p. 91–92)

Prior to the secession of the lower South any change in the status quo of slavery was sharply limited by sectional parity in the Senate. However, after the secession of the lower South, the Republican party controlled both branches of Congress, as well as the Presidency. As Ruffin had presciently forecast, the sudden consolidation of effective political power in Republican hands precipitated the unraveling of the Union. Changes in policy that may have arisen slowly over time were made suddenly possible. As Weingast (1998, p. 150) notes, anti-slavery measures had passed on many occasions in the U.S. House of Representatives only to be rebuffed in the Senate. The withdrawal of seven southern states meant that such measures could now be expected to pass in both the House and Senate. The states of the upper South were, on the issue of slavery, a powerless minority.

Historical accounts frequently assert that Lincoln’s decision to “coerce” the lower South caused the upper South to reconsider earlier decisions to forego secession. These accounts are based largely on impressionistic evidence, and do not delve deeply into the dynamics of the late spring secession decisions in the upper South.¹ By emphasizing the notion of southern fraternity, such accounts ignore

¹ James M. Woods (1987), Daniel J. Crofts (1989), and Marc W. Kruman (1983) pen excellent narratives of the secession crisis in Arkansas, Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee. However, each study provides relatively scant coverage for the period following the events of Fort Sumter.

or minimize changes in the strategic environment that effected the choices of the remaining slave states. And while southern fraternity and other-regarding preferences surely played some role in the upper South's decision to reconsider secession, it is unlikely that these states failed to recognize the new veto points and expected future movements of the status quo. Only in Virginia did the conflict at Fort Sumter and Lincoln's subsequent call for arms precipitate an immediate movement for secession. Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee appear to have responded more to Virginia's secession and the unraveling of the Union than to the events of Fort Sumter and Lincoln's call for arms.

In Virginia the previously elected secession convention continued to control the agenda, and was subsequently called into session. On April 17, five days after Fort Sumter was fired on, the convention adopted an ordinance of secession, and as required by the state legislature, submitted the ordinance for popular ratification. The Virginia electorate subsequently approved the ordinance.

The Arkansas convention was not in session, and the acting president, a Unionist, did not call the convention into session for over three weeks. The convention was only called into session when news of Virginia's secession arrived in Arkansas. Apparently, conservative opponents of secession in Arkansas were swayed more by Virginia's decision, than by solidarity with southern combatants in South Carolina. On the morning of May 6 the Arkansas convention assembled, and an ordinance of secession was passed in the afternoon. The Arkansas ordinance was not subject to popular ratification; indeed, the Arkansas convention cancelled the referendum on secession to which Unionist delegates, when in the majority, had acquiesced (see Woods 1987 and Lewis 1947).

In North Carolina, voters had previously rejected the idea of holding a secession convention. The Governor and state Legislature thus controlled the agenda. As in Arkansas, the conservative opponents of secession appear to have responded more to Virginia's secession than to the events of Fort Sumter. On May 1, the North Carolina state Legislature passed a resolution calling a special secession convention and establishing procedures for the election of delegates to the convention. On May 13 the election for delegates was held, and on May 20 the delegates convened and adopted an ordinance of secession. The ordinance was not subject to ratification by the electorate. (Kruman 1983).

In Tennessee, where voters had previously rejected the state legislature's invitation to hold a secession convention, the state legislature drafted an ordinance of secession and submitted it to the electorate for ratification. In a vote which neatly divided eastern Tennessee (against secession) from middle and western Tennessee (for secession), the ordinance was ratified, and the eleven states of the Confederacy were out of the Union (Crofts 1989).

6. Conclusion

While we know that institutional rules and procedures often influence social choices, previous studies of southern secession have not carefully examined this influence. As explained above, we know the relevant election data indicates that secession was not a popular “southern” movement, and that southern secession occurred, in part, because the decision processes were biased in favor of secession. By denying their respective electorates the opportunity to vote directly on the status quo of Union, by assiduously avoiding a collective “southern” solution, and by encouraging separate state secession in the states of the lower South, the most committed secessionists prevailed where otherwise they may have failed.

Yet a deeper mystery remains. While the most ardent secessionists adeptly manipulated the decision processes to achieve secession, we know that secession resulted in tremendous loss of property and life for some of the secessionists individually and for the South as a whole. (e.g., Goldin and Lewis 1975). Rational choice accounts posit that a course of action is chosen over another because the *outcome* that is believed to follow from the chosen course is preferred to the outcome(s) believed to follow from the alternative course(s) of action. (e.g., Ferejohn and Satz 1994). While the psychology, beliefs, and *individual* interests of those advocating secession is certainly worthy of careful study, the limits of the present paper are to examine the *collective* decision for secession. This decision arose from an institutional environment that granted the most ardent secessionists a first-mover advantage (resulting in the unraveling of the Union), and allowed minorities to impose their most preferred course of action as the social choice of all.

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