



# VOTING FOR UNION: 160TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ELECTION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN

DANIEL BUSTILLO  
INSTITUTO FRANKLIN-UAH

As a nation, the United States has witnessed two critical periods in its history when the unity and coexistence of its people were at stake. The first took place just after the United States became a country. Following the Treaty of Paris of 1783, the first thirteen states, wary of increasing the central government's—Congress'—power and reluctant to cede many of their powers for the sake of the new nation, ratified the Articles of Confederation. The result was a weak and incapable Congress in charge of a nation choking on debt that nearly broke it into pieces. The second critical period took place roughly 80 years later, when, in 1861, the American Civil War broke out between the Northern states—the Union—and the Southern ones—the Confederacy. It was within this context that Abraham Lincoln, Sixteenth President of the United States and leader of the Union, emerged as the person responsible for restoring the ties that bound the American people together. Today, November 6th, we celebrate the 160th anniversary Lincoln's election to the presidency with an analysis of his judgments' impact on the final days of the Civil War as masterly portrayed in Steven Spielberg's film *Lincoln* (2012).

Since its founding, the United States' new democracy was threatened by persistent divisions between the American people over many issues. A particularly fierce topic of disagreement was the legality, and spread, of slavery. While it was widely opposed in the North, slavery remained a central economic institution in the South. Over the first half of the eighteenth century, as attempts to reconcile divisions failed, the antagonisms between the North and the South became more violent. In the end, eleven Southern states chose to secede from the Union and formed a Confederacy. War erupted soon after in 1861.

In January 1865, two months after Lincoln's presidential re-election, the War of Secession had reached its fourth year. The final days of the conflict are the focus of



Spielberg's *Lincoln*. After proposing a constitutional amendment to end slavery, a haunted Abraham Lincoln (Daniel Day-Lewis) struggles with a dilemma. On the one hand, if peace comes before the Thirteenth amendment is approved, a reincorporated South could reject it, preserving slavery. On the other hand, delaying peace until after ratification would condemn thousands of Union and Confederate soldiers to die unnecessarily. To complicate matters, the Senate had already passed the amendment, leaving the House of Representative to approve or reject it.

Despite the Republican majority in Congress—56% of the chamber—Lincoln and his partisan allies needed to work behind the scenes to assure enough affirmative Democrat votes, granting several favors to his political rivals in the process. Even some Republicans opposed Lincoln's proposition. The radical wing of the Republican Party, led by Thaddeus Stevens (Tommy Lee Jones), demanded Lincoln support racial equality and voting rights for black men: positions not shared by the rest of their party. Meanwhile, the Confederates also offered a compromise to end the war conditional upon keeping slavery.

Heated debates in the House followed backroom deal making. While some politicians saw peace as a necessary precursor to the law's passage, others believed the opposite. The amendment could help end the war, fostering peace. Lincoln strategically positioned himself between both sides; a tactic he successfully deployed as, in the end, the amendment was approved by a slim margin of two votes. Yet, the Confederates disapproved of the vote, claiming they would only negotiate peace under a written assurance that the Thirteen Amendment would not be ratified. Lincoln did not accept their condition.

Two months later, Confederate General Robert E. Lee (Christopher Boyer) presented his surrender, paving the way for the peaceful reincorporation of the rebellious states to the Union. However, Lincoln would not live to witness reunification. On April 15th, 1865, Lincoln was fatally shot by John Wilkes Booth at Ford Theatre in Washington D.C. Despite becoming the first U.S. president to be assassinated, Lincoln will forever be remembered as the leader who kept his people united at a critical point in the history of American democracy.

Spielberg, Steven, dir. 2012. *Lincoln*. Produced by Kathleen Kennedy & Steven Spielberg. Los Angeles, CA: 20th Century Studios.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Bustillo Hurtado, Daniel. 2020. "Voting for Union: 160th Anniversary of the Election of Abraham Lincoln." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published November 6.