

# LINCOLN LORE

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## THE APPROVAL VOTE FOR LINCOLN IN 1854

The fact is not widely circulated that Abraham Lincoln was elected to the Illinois Legislature for the fifth time on November 7, 1854. Most of the Lincoln biographies mention but four successful attempts on his part to gain a seat in that body. It was just one hundred years ago this present election week that a significant vote of the people was cast for him in Sangamon County and it seems an appropriate time to call attention to this little known political episode. On the occasion of Lincoln's previous election to the legislature in 1840 he polled the least number of votes cast for any of the five successful Whig candidates of which he was one.

However on election day, November 7, 1854 running for the same office in the same county, he received the largest number of votes polled by a candidate for any office. This achievement we have chosen to designate as the "approval vote for Lincoln in 1854." It might be called the "go" sign for his return to politics after the long intermission.

It must have been with some apprehension at least that Lincoln allowed his name to be used as a candidate for the legislature in 1854, after having been out of politics for a period of time. Undoubtedly he recalled that when he formerly ran for Congress accusations of a personal nature were brought against him which were absent in former contests for a seat in the legislature. After he married the socially prominent Mary Todd, many of the voters associated him with the aristocracy. Now that he is again on the political track, he must have observed the approaching reaction to his candidacy with interest. As the November days approached he was able to observe the increased interest in his speeches. There was some assurance at least, that his old vote getting power may not have diminished. He was busy in the canvass right up to the Sunday before the election on the following Tuesday, November 7. The *Quincy Whig* stated with reference to Lincoln's speech there on November 1st: "Mr. Lincoln left a most favorable impression upon those who heard him. He is one of the 'truly great men' in Illinois."

In the meantime however, he must have raised his political sights a little higher. Horace White of the *Chicago Journal* wrote to him on October 25 about the probabilities of the election by the Illinois Legislature of a Whig senator. This is the portion of White's letter that made Lincoln sit up and take notice.

"To come at the point at once; (I don't know whether Mr. Lincoln wrote to you about it or not) the Whigs are bound to elect a U. S. Senator in place of Shields. Chicago has five votes in the Legislature and influences a great many more in Northern Illinois. Part of our Representatives in the next Assembly will be Whigs, part Free-Soilers and part Anti-Nebraska Democrats. These Democrats might bolt at the nomination of a Whig for the Senate. It would be unprecedented if they didn't. The idea is to have you go to Chicago and make a speech. You will have a crowd of from eight to ten or fifteen thousand and the result will be that the people will demand of their Representatives to elect a Whig Senator. What might be doubtful otherwise will thus be rendered certain."

The large popular vote which Lincoln received on November 7 must have convinced him of his popularity

among the voters, and a day or two later when he learned that an anti-Nebraska legislature had been elected, the possibility of the selection of a Whig for the Senate as proposed by Horace White brought forth an immediate reaction. Lincoln left Springfield "at daylight" for Clinton the day after the election and on December 10 in that DeWitt county seat town wrote to Charles Hoyt at Aurora, Illinois that: "Some friends here are really for me for the Senate." On the following day he advised Jacob Hardin of Paris, Illinois, "Could you not make a mark with him (newly elected Whig of Edgar county) for me, for U. S. Senator?—I really think I have some chance."

One of the other friends to whom Lincoln wrote on November 10 was E. N. Powell of Peoria. He answered Lincoln's letter on November 16 assuring Lincoln of his support and then made this observation:

"But allow me to call your attention to a matter connected with the subject of your letter well worthy of your attention and perhaps immediate action. You I see have been elected as a member of the Legislature. Allow me to call your attention to the 7th Section of the 3rd Article of our new Constitution which makes you ineligible for the Senate of the U. S. Now if you decline accepting the seat in the legislature and so notify the Governor and have a new Election this will save your bacon. I merely suggest this as worthy of your immediate consideration. It has been talked of here amongst some of us as your being the Choice for Senator And the fact of your ineligibility has been mentioned which will have a tendency to injure your prospects unless it is removed immediately. Let me hear from you on the receipt of this letter on this point. Are you not ineligible if you take your Seat? Can you not decline Serving before you take your Seat and have another Election and save yourself? Be sure to write me immediately."

Lincoln replied to Powell in these words: "Acting on your advice, and my own judgment, I have declined accepting the office of Representative of this county. I only allowed myself to be elected because it was supposed my doing so would help Yates."

Lincoln sent a letter dated Nov. 25, 1854 to N. W. Matheny, clerk of the Sangamon County in which he advised Matheny as follows:

Sir: I hereby decline to accept the office of Representative in the General Assembly, for the said county of Sangamon, to which office I am reported to have been elected on the 7th. of Novr. Inst. I therefore desire that you notify the Governor of this vacancy, in order that legal steps be taken to fill the same. Your Obt. Servt.  
A. Lincoln—"

A special election was held on December 23 to fill the post in the legislature which Lincoln had rejected. N. M. Broadwell was the Whig candidate and Jonathan McDaniel the Democratic representative. Broadwell, the Whig, was defeated by McDaniel, the Democrat. The fact that Lincoln in the regular election had polled the largest number of votes cast and whereas the Whig that tried to succeed him was not able to beat his Democrat opponent, must have given Lincoln further reason to conclude that his approval vote in 1854 assured him of his ability to gather votes on a direct appeal to the people.