

# The Kansas-Nebraska Act

The Kansas-Nebraska Act repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and altered the fate of slavery in the western territories.

## Overview

- The Kansas-Nebraska Act created two new territories, Kansas and Nebraska, within which the principle of popular sovereignty would apply, allowing the states themselves to determine their policy on slavery.
- The Act repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, which drew the horizontal line of slavery across the West along the 36° 30' parallel. This reopened the question of slavery's western expansion.
- The passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act induced party realignment and severe violence, furthering the sectional divide that ultimately erupted in the Civil War.

## The Kansas-Nebraska Act and popular sovereignty

In 1854, an uproar regarding the question of slavery in the newly acquired territory challenged the relative calm after the Compromise of 1850. The pressure on this question came primarily from northern farmers, who wanted the federal government to survey the land and put it up for sale. Promoters of a transcontinental railroad also pushed for this westward expansion.

Furthermore, many in the South were growing resentful of the [Missouri Compromise of 1820](#), which established the 36° 30' parallel as the geographical boundary of slavery. Slaveholders entrenched themselves in defense of their “way of life,” which depended on the ownership of slaves, while also claiming that prohibiting slavery's expansion ran counter to basic American property rights. They now contended that popular sovereignty should apply to all territories.

Meanwhile, some antislavery northerners wanted the West reserved for poor whites to go and seek opportunity. Radical abolitionists, however, alongside southern “fire-eaters,” envisioned the complete end of slavery, and a society of racial equality.

Democratic leaders sought to bind these disparate ideologies together. Illinois Democratic senator Stephen Douglas believed he had found a solution—the Kansas-Nebraska bill—that would promote party unity and also appease Southerners who detested the Missouri Compromise line. The act created two territories: Kansas, directly west of Missouri; and Nebraska, west of Iowa. The act applied the principle of **popular sovereignty**, dictating that the people of both territories would decide for themselves whether to adopt slavery. Most likely, Nebraska would enter as a free state and Kansas as a slave state. Since both territories fell above the 36° 30' line, the proposed bill would repeal the the Missouri Compromise of 1820.

After heated debates—many members carried a concealed revolver or a knife to the sessions—Congress narrowly passed the **Kansas-Nebraska Act**.

This led to a major party realignment as well as grave violence. The Democratic Party immediately divided along sectional lines, while the Whig party and Free-Soil Party both dissolved. Most importantly, the Act gave rise to the **Republican Party**, a new hodgepodge of northern Whigs, Democrats who shunned the Kansas-Nebraska Act, members of the Free-Soil Party, and assorted abolitionists who pledged to prevent slavery in the territories.

As a result, the Republican party became a solidly northern political organization, creating a new binary party system reflecting sectional fault lines along the question of slavery.

### **Bleeding Kansas: border ruffians, John Brown, and the caning of Charles Sumner**

Pro- and antislavery activists quickly flooded Kansas with the intention of influencing the popular-sovereignty ruling. Proslavery Missourians who crossed the border to vote in Kansas became known as **border ruffians**. Border ruffians helped secure a proslavery legislature which drafted a proslavery constitution known as the **Lecompton Constitution**. Meanwhile, anti-slavery activists established an extralegal regime of their own in Topeka.



Daguerreotype of John Brown.

John Brown, c. 1856. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

In 1856, clashes between antislavery Free-Soilers and border ruffians came to a head. A man named **John Brown**, along with his four sons and a small group of followers, heard the news that an antislavery activist had been attacked in Lawrence, Kansas. Brown, a strict Calvinist and staunch abolitionist, once remarked that “God had raised him up on purpose to break the jaws of the wicked.” Brown and his posse went to the homes of proslavery settlers near Pottawatomie Creek, announcing they were the “Northern Army” as they burst into the cabin of proslavery Tennessean James Doyle and abducted him and two of his sons. Owen and Salmon Brown hacked the sons to death with broadswords and John Brown shot a bullet into Doyle’s forehead. Brown then brutally executed two other nearby proslavery settlers. None of those executed owned slaves or were involved in the incident at Lawrence. Brown’s actions precipitated a new wave of violence; Kansas soon became known as “**Bleeding Kansas**.”

The controversy over Kansas also prompted the caning of Senator Charles Sumner on Congress floor in 1856. Sumner’s “Crime against Kansas” speech went much further than politics and prompted the attack. He insulted proslavery men, namely Senator Andrew Butler, by comparing slavery to prostitution: “Of course [Butler] has chosen a mistress to whom he has made his vows, and who, though ugly to others, is always lovely to him; though polluted in the sight of the world, is chaste in his sight. I mean the harlot Slavery.”

Because Butler was aged, it was his nephew, Senator Preston Brooks, who sought rectification for Sumner’s call out against his family and southern chivalry and beat Sumner with a cane. The caning left Sumner incapacitated physically and mentally for a long period of time. Many in the South rejoiced over Brooks’s defense of slavery, southern society, and family honor, and sent him hundreds of canes to replace the one he had broken assaulting Sumner.

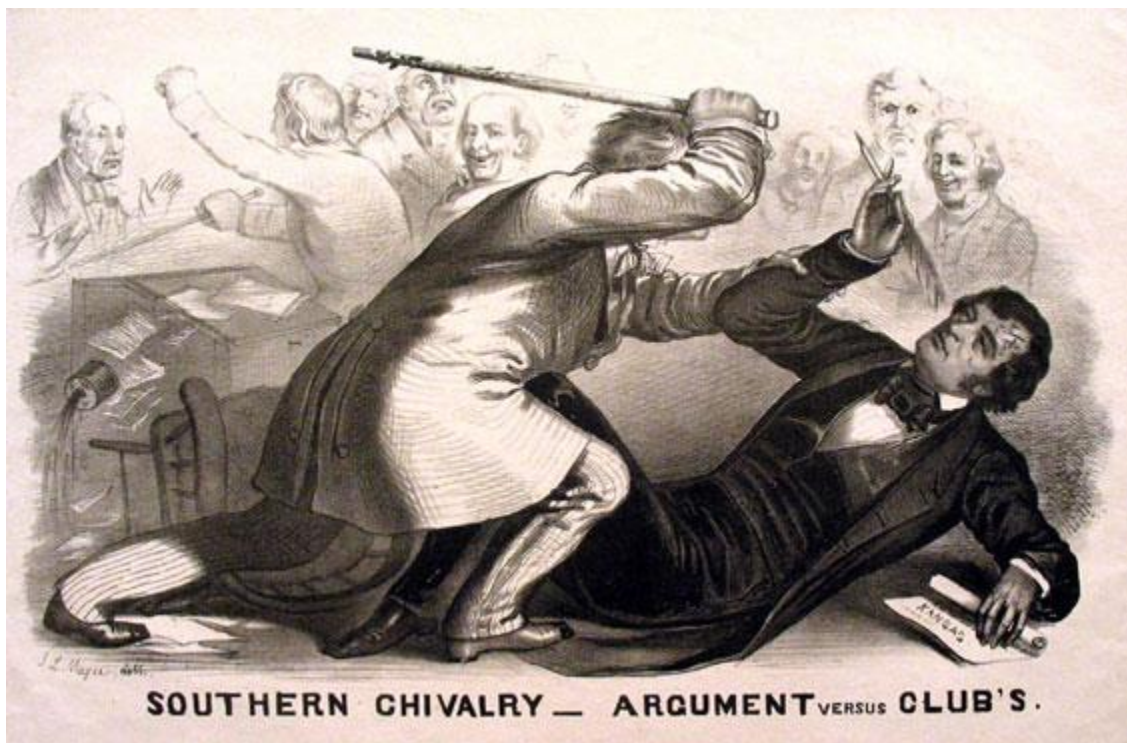


Illustration of Preston Brooks attacking a prostrate Charles Sumner with a cane while members of Congress look on. The caption reads "Southern Chivalry - Argument versus Club's."

Print depicting Preston Brooks attacking Charles Sumner, 1856. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act reopened the question of slavery in the Western territory, reigniting fervor surrounding slavery's future within Southern slaveholders, abolitionists, and Northerners alike. It also inspired new radicalism and violence, both in Kansas and in Congress, foreshadowing the [Civil War](#).

**What do you think?**

How did the formation of the Republican party reflect increasingly polarized American sentiments regarding slavery?

How did increasing radicalism and violence in Kansas foreshadow future conflict?

Take a look at the illustration of Preston Brooks attacking Charles Sumner. Whose side do you think the artist was on? Why?