

Spring 5-2-2019

James Buchanan and Ideals of Manhood in the Election of 1856

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James Buchanan and Ideals of Manhood in the Election of 1856

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History, Hunter College
The City University of New York

May 2, 2019

May 2, 2019

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James Buchanan and Ideals of Manhood in the Election of 1856

“No other man but Mr. Buchanan could have been elected with the opposition we have encountered at the North. He was the most suitable man for the times.”

Introduction

In 1995, Gail Bederman published her groundbreaking monograph *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. In this study she defined manhood not as “an unchanging essence inherent in all male-bodied humans” but as a “historical, ideological process” that is constantly being made and remade.¹ *Manliness and Civilization* investigated this historical process, specifically how late 19th and early 20th century Americans succeeded in redefining ideal manhood. In one case study, Bederman charted a process of American society moving from an ideal of manhood defined by self-restraint to one more in line with the active rough and tumble behavior epitomized by President Theodore Roosevelt.² Bederman charted how a young Roosevelt “masculinized his image” and transformed himself from an eastern elitist “Jane Dandy” to the “cowboy of the Dakotas.”³ Not only did TR remake his own image to fit this ideal of manhood, but he also encouraged other men to remake their manhood as well, concerned that their “fighting virtues” could be diminished by too much self-

¹ Gail Bederman, *Manliness & Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 6.

² Bederman, *Manliness*, 170-215.

³ Bederman, *Manliness*, 171.

restraint.⁴ Bederman argued that Roosevelt “urged the men of the American race to live the sort of life he had modeled for them: to be virile, vigorous, and manly, and to reject the over-civilized decadence by supporting a strenuously imperialistic foreign policy.”⁵ According to Bederman, it was not just personality traits that marked someone as upholding ideal manhood, but the policy positions they adopted as well.

Writing in 2008, historian Kevin Murphy built upon Bederman’s claims. In his book, *Political Manhood*, Murphy agreed that “by the turn of the twentieth-century, a red-blooded Rooseveltian model of masculinity proved ascendant and functioned as a prescriptive ideal for American men.”⁶ Further, Murphy argued that there were “competing ideologies of manhood” during the Progressive Era and that “the strenuous model [of manhood] was deployed in order to marginalize the careers and projects of political actors successfully stigmatized as weak and effeminate.”⁷ Not only was a new ideal of manhood being upheld, but it was being weaponized as well. There was a political cost to those who found themselves on the wrong side of the new ascendant ideal of manhood.

Crucial to Murphy’s study was the cultural construction of the homosexual identity during the Progressive Era.⁸ He maintained that the political actors of his study were able to be successfully stigmatized “through a powerful correlation of weakness and effeminacy with homosexuality at the turn of the century.”⁹

⁴ Bederman, *Manliness*, 185.

⁵ Bederman, *Manliness*, 188.

⁶ Kevin Murphy, *Political Manhood: Red Bloods, Mollycoddles, and the Politics of Progressive Era Reform*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 38.

⁷ Murphy, *Manhood*, 40.

⁸ Also see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

⁹ Murphy, *Manhood*, 41.

This study seeks to build upon the work of these scholars. If Bederman and Murphy's "continual, dynamic process" of defining manhood operated during the Progressive Era, this process should be observable during the Antebellum Era as well, before Theodore Roosevelt's strenuous life became ascendant and before a homosexual identity came into being.¹⁰ Further, as Murphy found during the Progressive Era, there is evidence that competing ideals of manhood were weaponized for political gain in the Antebellum Era as well. Before there was a homosexual label to threaten political actors with, how were ideals of manhood weaponized? Were these tactics successful?

Where Bederman used President Theodore Roosevelt (among others) as case studies, this paper will examine the competition between different ideals of manhood through the lens of the American presidential election of 1856, when the bachelor candidate James Buchanan defeated John Fremont at the polls. What role, if any, did Buchanan's bachelorhood play in the campaign? What can it tell us about ideals of manhood at the time?

A presidential election is a useful lens with which to uncover contemporary ideals of manhood. Inherently competitive, these contests provide numerous primary resources with which to evaluate how different campaigns navigated and weaponized ideals of manhood, as well as providing a clear winner among competing ideals. Presidential historian Jackson Katz wrote as much in his 2013 study *Leading Men: Presidential Campaigns and the Politics of Manhood*. According to Katz, "Presidential campaigns function as symbolic contests over competing definitions of 'real manhood,' and thus over what kind of man can, and should be, in charge."¹¹ Like Bederman, he also believed

¹⁰ Bederman, *Manliness*, 6.

¹¹ Jackson Katz, *Leading Men: Presidential Campaigns and the Politics of Manhood*. (Northampton: Interlink Publishing, 2013), 28.

that “this does not mean that image is everything and issues don’t matter. Voters make judgments about a candidate’s manhood based on both his personal attributes and his positions on certain key issues.”¹² Bederman saw imperialism as the political issue around which manhood was debated during the Progressive Era; in the Antebellum Era the key issue was the future of slavery.

Historian Michael D. Pierson examined the intersection of gender and politics during the Antebellum Era in his 2003 study entitled *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics*. Pierson’s monograph investigated the role gender ideals played within the Republican Party and its precursors going back to the 1830s. While being careful to note that disparate ideals of gender did not *cause* the Civil War, Pierson maintained that they certainly *contributed* to its outbreak. In his introduction Pierson argued that:

To be sure, political parties and voters cared about many issues; gender concerns were only a part of what made a person join one of the parties. But parties did consistently try to exploit the gender beliefs of their constituents as they carefully crafted campaign biographies, newspaper editorials, and the gendered division of labor at rallies to appeal to voters...Such dramatic social and rhetorical divisions on personal issues like gender roles and family structures helped to produce the image that two very different societies were in competition with each other. Driven apart by a host of legislative issues, the anti-slavery parties and the South were further separated by their gender politics. With moral and personal issues very much on the line, civil war was that much more imaginable for American voters and their families.¹³

Similarly, ideals of manhood were not the defining aspect of the election of 1856 but, as will be seen, they definitely played a significant role during the campaign. Pierson’s chapter on the election of 1856 is especially relevant to this paper. His investigation of

¹² Katz, *Leading Men*, 28.

¹³ Michael D. Pierson. *Free Hearts and Free Homes: Gender and American Antislavery Politics*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 40-41.

the campaign literature showed that the nascent Republican Party certainly saw Buchanan's distance from particular ideals of manhood as an exploitable issue that might make Fremont appear more attractive to voters by comparison. The focus of Pierson's monograph was on the antislavery parties though so it spent little time investigating how Buchanan and his supporters in the Democratic Party also "tried to exploit the gender beliefs of their constituents" in order to win the White House.¹⁴ Most examinations of the election paint the Democrats as only playing defense when it came to Buchanan and projections of ideal manhood. Campaign materials suggest a more complex story. Supporters of the Democratic nominee, as well as Buchanan himself, actively promoted their own distinct masculine ideal just as much as the Republicans promoted theirs.

Lastly, Lorien Foote's study of manhood during the Civil War, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army*, shared Pierson's conclusion that Northern and Southern states held competing gender ideals. Foote also claimed that there were competing ideals within just Northern states during the Civil War. Writing in 2010, she argued:

The relatively coherent manhood ideal of southern men for the most part stemmed from the centrality of slavery to southern society and reflected the south's more rural and traditional nature. Northerners, who experienced transformative social and economic changes during the antebellum era, developed a variety of manly ideals that reflected both the social diversity of the region and the new class structures that accompanied modern life.¹⁵

Using previously overlooked sources such as testimony during court martial proceedings within the army, Foote demonstrated that a robust debate existed among men throughout

¹⁴ Pierson, *Hearts*, 40.

¹⁵ Lorien Foote, *The Gentlemen and the Roughs: Violence, Honor, and Manhood in the Union Army*. (New York: New York University, 2010), 14-15.

the Northern states about what constituted ideal manhood just a few years after the election of 1856. The monograph's focus on the North (similar to Pierson's look at political parties that were antislavery) is particularly useful in relation to examining the election of 1856. While it is easy to understand why the South supported the Democratic ticket due to the party's support of slavery, it is less self-evident why enough Northern men backed the Democratic candidate to win him the election.

Foote also joined other gender scholars in admitting that, no matter the era under discussion, "all men cannot fit into the neat categories [that fellow historians] have devised."¹⁶ She did however join historian Amy Greenberg in arguing that "amid the cacophony of options, two were preeminent and competed for dominance." These terms are the *restrained man*, who valued self-control, and the *martial man* "who rejected the moral standards of restrained men and proved his manhood through physical domination."¹⁷

This paper supports those conclusions: while in general masculine ideals divided along sectional lines, ideals of manhood at this time were more contested among Americans who lived in the North compared to the South. The terms *restrained manhood* and *martial manhood* are somewhat reductive but still useful categories supported by primary scholarship. This paper will utilize these terms and argue that an examination of the presidential contest of 1856 suggests that while Southerners generally favored martial manhood, in the North there was a split that mostly fell across party lines: Democrats in the North favored a "restrained manhood" while their Republican opponents in the North rallied around the ideal of "martial manhood." In the end though

¹⁶ Foote, *Gentlemen*, 16.

¹⁷ Foote, *Gentlemen*, 16.

a majority of eligible voters both North and South preferred a restrained form of manhood in the White House, and this contributed to James Buchanan's victory in the presidential election of 1856.

The Election of 1856

It has been over 160 years since the American presidential election of 1856, and yet in all that time not a single scholarly monograph has been written on the topic. The absence of a stand-alone study is surprising. All transfers of power are historic by definition, but the election of 1856 was especially so. For one, it was the first presidential contest of the Third Party System (Democrats versus Republicans).¹⁸ The candidates themselves were also historic selections: the Democratic Party's choice was former Secretary of State James Buchanan of Pennsylvania, the only lifelong bachelor to be elected president in American history. For their first-ever presidential nominee the Republican Party selected famous explorer and former Senator from California, John Fremont. In addition, former President Millard Fillmore made American history by running for president again after being out of office for a term. He failed to garner much support as head of the American Party, a collection of National Whigs and the nativist,

¹⁸ Roy F. Nichols and Philip S. Klein, "Election of 1856: Emergence of the Republican Party" in *The Coming to Power: Critical Presidential Elections in American History*, Ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1972), 94.

anti-Catholic followers of the Know-Nothing movement, but he arguably played spoiler in a handful of states.¹⁹

The existence of scores of monographs devoted to the following presidential contest, the election of 1860, are justified by the fact that the result of that campaign led to secession and the official start of the American Civil War. But the country did not jump into the Civil War overnight. It was not harmony one day and Fort Sumter the next. There were already plenty of signs of national fracturing by 1856.

In 1852 the Whig Party, the Democratic Party's main opposition since the days of Andrew Jackson, got clobbered at the polls due to an intraparty split over slavery. The loss proved permanent. Even though they had been one half of the stable two party system for multiple generations the Whigs never regained national political influence.²⁰ A number of political parties sprouted up to fill the vacuum, mostly at the state level at first. As these various parties began picking up seats in Congress, especially after the midterm elections of 1854, the increased number of agendas under separate banners caused even more dysfunction within the legislative branch. At the start of 1856 the House of Representatives struggled to complete even the most basic acts of governance as they entered the second month of "the longest and most contentious Speaker election in House history."²¹ As it prepared for the upcoming presidential election, the American Party, originally thought to be stronger competition for the Democratic Party than the new Republican Party, proved unable to avoid the same fate as the Whigs and also split over slavery (Anti-slavery "North Americans" mostly collaborated with Republicans

¹⁹ Nichols and Klein, "Election of 1856," 104.

²⁰ Elbert B. Smith. *The Presidency of James Buchanan*. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1975), 4.

²¹History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, "The Longest and Most Contentious Speaker Election in House History," <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1851-1900/The-longest-and-most-contentious-Speaker-election-in-its-history/>.

during the election while the Southerners returned to the Democratic Party).²² Then President Franklin Pierce sought reelection but was denied his own party's nomination. The country was so divided over the current occupant of the White House that the Democrats believed they had a better chance of holding on to the executive branch by ditching their current standard bearer and selecting a new man to run on an identical platform.

Most alarmingly, acts of political violence were on the rise. Just weeks before the national nominating conventions assembled in June of 1856, Democratic Congressman Preston Brooks of South Carolina used a cane to beat Republican Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts to the point of unconsciousness on the floor of the United States Senate. Brooks proudly boasted that the beating was in retaliation for a deliberately provocative and fiery speech Sumner gave attacking the institution of slavery and those who supported it.²³ During the denunciation Sumner also mocked the speech impediment that Democratic Senator Andrew Butler had recently developed after suffering a stroke, and insinuated that the soldiers from South Carolina who fought in the Revolutionary War had been cowards. In addition to representing South Carolina, Congressman Brooks was also Andrew Butler's cousin.²⁴

The speech and then the caning received substantial attention in the partisan press throughout the election campaign, creating what one historian of the Brooks/Sumner affair termed "the first national media circus."²⁵ While notable for its location and the people involved, the caning did not lead to anyone's death. The same cannot be said for

²² Nichols and Klein, "Election of 1856," 104.

²³ William James Hull Hoffer. *The Caning of Charles Sumner*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2010), 17.

²⁴ Hoffer, *Caning*, 16-30, 73.

²⁵ Hoffer, *Caning*, 9.

many of the violent acts that would take place across the Kansas Territory that year. Due to passage of the contentious Kansas-Nebraska Act, the policy of “popular sovereignty,” or local control over matters of slavery, had become law. This led to chaos and horrific acts of violence as armed proslavery and armed antislavery camps flooded into the future state, eventually creating two distinct territorial governments fighting one another for legitimacy.²⁶ By January of 1857 over two hundred Americans had been murdered by their fellow countrymen in Bleeding Kansas.²⁷ War may not have been officially declared but the violence had already begun.

The presidential election of 1856 happened amidst all of this national discord.

While Buchanan replaced Pierce as President the Democratic Party still remained in control of the White House. This has no doubt contributed to the relative lack of scholarly interest in the election. The majority of voters in 1856 chose the status quo while in 1860 they voted for change, and change elections typically generate more interest among historians. For the millions of men and women who participated in the campaign of 1856 though, who produced or read campaign literature, sang campaign songs at rallies, made passionate speeches at national conventions, and voted in state and national elections both for the winner and the opposition, the campaign and the election mattered in their own right, not just as a place holder for a more significant one to come later. 79% of the white men eligible to vote turned out on election day, the fourth highest percentage of the electorate to do so in American history. (This is almost as high as the consequential election of 1860 where 81% of eligible voters went to the polls.)²⁸ When one views the campaign from the immediacy of the eyes of the participants rather than

²⁶ Nichols and Klein, “Election of 1856,” 103.

²⁷ Hoffer, *Caning*, 67.

²⁸ Jean H. Baker, *James Buchanan*. (New York: Times Books, 2004), 179.

backwards from the critical change election of 1860, the election of 1856 proves itself to be a topic worthy of further examination by historians.

Rumors of Same-Sex Sexual Behavior

No examination of Buchanan and gender can escape the rumors regarding his sexual desires and behaviors. Recent popular interest in Buchanan centers around speculation that he may have been America's first "gay" president. More specifically, his intimate relationship with William Rufus King has been the subject of much gossip on the internet.³⁰ King was a prominent Southern Senator from Alabama who served as Franklin Pierce's vice president for six weeks before dying of tuberculosis in 1853. He was also a lifelong bachelor who lived with Buchanan for many years. What is known about the relationship these two men shared? How was this relationship received at the time, before the construction of a homosexual identity? Was it ever weaponized against Buchanan in the political realm?

A lot of unprovable conclusions have been drawn based upon the living arrangement of these two nineteenth-century public servants, similar to how rumors about Abraham Lincoln's sexual behavior have centered around the fact that he shared a bed with multiple men.³¹ This was a common practice during the nineteenth century though, especially for young traveling lawyers like Lincoln or unmarried men such as Buchanan

³⁰ A typical example can be read here: Timothy Cwiek, "James Buchanan: America's First Gay President?" *Washington Blade* (October 4th, 2011). <http://www.washingtonblade.com/2011/10/04/james-buchanan-america%E2%80%99s-first-gay-president/>

³¹ See C.A. Tripp. *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

and King.³² That being said, while many men at the time, even married men, lived together in boarding houses while in Washington, most of these men tended to live with fellow members of their own state's delegations. In fact, many representatives and senators from Buchanan's home state of Pennsylvania lived together during the time Buchanan was in Washington, but Buchanan lived with King instead. A senator from Pennsylvania and a senator from Alabama living together was far less typical, especially in the decade before the Civil War. And doing so for fifteen years was less common still.³³

So were King and Buchanan America's first gay vice-president and president? Many amateur bloggers argue yes, definitely, but they are not the only ones. Historian Dr. James Loewen, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, went so far as to write in 2012 that "There can be no doubt that James Buchanan was gay, before, during, and after his four years in the White House. Moreover, the nation knew it too--he was not far into the closet."³⁴

The choice of words in that statement are problematic for historians of sexuality because "gay," "the closet," and even "homosexual" are anachronistic terms when discussing antebellum America. As Murphy and others have shown, it was not until the latter decades of the nineteenth century that categories of identity based around one's choice of sexual partners became commonplace. As Jean Baker, the only academic biographer of Buchanan to address the rumors surrounding his sexuality to date, explained, "Men in Buchanan's time did not have sexual identities, although they did

³² Jean H. Baker, *James Buchanan*. (New York: Times Books, 2004), 110.

³³ Baker, *Buchanan*, 110.

³⁴ James Loewen, "Our First Real Gay President." *Salon* (May 14th, 2012).
https://www.salon.com/2012/05/14/our_real_first_gay_president/

have sexual behaviors.”³⁵ It is possible that Buchanan engaged in sexual behavior with other males but it strains credulity to argue that he would have identified as a distinct type of person because of that behavior. He could not label himself “gay” in 1856 anymore than he could label himself a “social justice warrior” or a “third-wave feminist.” None of these terms existed during his lifetime.

Did James Buchanan and William King engage in sexual behavior with each other then? Dr. Loewen and others who think they did all cite some iteration of the same three meager pieces of evidence: First, President Andrew Jackson once referred to Buchanan as “Aunt Nancy.” Second, King had a reputation of being a bit of dandy and was once called “Aunt Fancy.” Third, a congressman described the two bachelors as “Buchanan and his wife.”³⁶

These three asides, while intriguing to many, do not provide enough evidence to draw any scholarly conclusions regarding these men’s sexual practices. Taken together these comments do make it seem that these men were viewed as somehow defying gendered expectations, but this could be in reference to their status as bachelors, and/or to an unusually close platonic friendship between the two bureaucrats, rather than a sincere public admission that these men engaged in sexual behavior with one another.

Their surviving letters to each other also fail to provide any concrete evidence of a sexual relationship, although only a fraction of them remain. In a move that does more to fuel twenty-first century speculations than anything else, the nieces of Buchanan and King, Harriet Lane and Catherine Ellis, burned the bulk of their uncles’ correspondence

³⁵ Baker, *Buchanan*, 51. Also see Robert Strauss. *Worst. President. Ever.: James Buchanan, The POTUS Rating Game, and the Legacy of the Least of the Lesser Presidents*. (Guilford: Lyons Press, 2016), IX., and Murphy, *Manhood*, 36.

³⁶ Baker, *Buchanan*, 50.

to one another when Buchanan assumed the presidency.³⁷ One of the most cited surviving letters by those advocating a sexual relationship is one Buchanan wrote to King in 1844, during their separation from one another while King served abroad as the Minister to France. The current Senator from Pennsylvania wrote his absent roommate, “I am now solitary and alone, having no companion in the house with me. I have gone a wooing to several gentlemen, but have not succeeded with any one of them.”³⁸ The assumption of tone is key to understanding the meaning and intention of those words, and thus many people conclude whatever they would like. While some see a frank admission of a desire for same-sex sexual companionship, others argue that Buchanan was being light hearted and humorous with a platonic friend. As statements from the era go it was far less suggestive than the one from Abraham Lincoln’s grammar tutor (and bedmate), Billy Greene of New Salem, Illinois, who reportedly shared his view that Lincoln’s “thighs were as perfect as a human being could be.”³⁹ It is not currently possible to conclude whether the relationship between these two men had a sexual component.

Regardless, the relationship between Buchanan and King was relevant and deserves further study. From America’s founding to the election of Abraham Lincoln political compromises related to slavery helped preserve the union. The 3/5ths clause, the Missouri Compromise, the Compromise of 1850 and many others became policy not because of impersonal institutions but because of the actions, views, and relationships of individual human beings. Buchanan and King were part of the final generation of compromisers before the start of the Civil War. The political alliance between Doughfaces, like Buchanan, and Southern Unionists, like King, was key to the

³⁷ Baker, *Buchanan*, 51-52.

³⁸ Quoted in Strauss, *Worst*, 89-90.

³⁹ See C.A. Tripp, *The Intimate World of Abraham Lincoln*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005).

preservation of the union and the success of the Democratic Party in the Antebellum Era, including during the election of 1856. Understanding the warm personal relationship between two party leaders, one from the North and one from the South, can shine a light on our understanding of how the institution of slavery was accommodated in part due to the strength of specific relationships. Historians have studied Mary Todd Lincoln's skills as a hostess because of the effect they had in helping her husband achieve political goals, for example, and this is viewed as a valid and important subject of inquiry.⁴⁰

Understanding the effect William King's southern roots had on the views and policies of President Buchanan and his administration is equally valid and important. Historians will likely continue to disagree about the importance of confirming or disproving the sexual nature of their relationship, but historians should not dismiss this question of personal influence, regardless of the sex or gender of the historical actors involved. It is possible that the intimate relationship between King and Buchanan caused the latter to be more restrained in his political rhetoric or more eager to seek compromise with Southerners in general. More research on their relationship and its influence on antebellum politics is warranted.

This is easier said than done however. Loewen's second assertion, that the nation knew Buchanan and King had a sexual relationship, is worth consideration but also difficult to prove or disprove. In his famous study of same-sex sexual behavior in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century New York City, George Chauncey dismantled what he termed the myth of invisibility. In *Gay New York*, Chauncey convincingly argued that a subculture made up of multiple sexual identities and gender expressions not only

⁴⁰ Pierson, *Hearts*, 186. Also see Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 590-593.

existed in New York City as early as the 1880s, but it was a world that was highly visible to outsiders as well.⁴¹ The parameters of Chauncey's findings have been expanded beyond New York by studies such as *Men Like That* and *Wide Open Town*, to name just two examples.⁴² If Loewen was correct and there was public awareness of a sexual relationship between the two senators it would extend Chauncey's findings on the myth of invisibility from the 1880s to the Antebellum Era and from New York City all the way to the White House. Again though, the historical record does not currently provide sufficient evidence to be able to make that claim with any certainty.

Now, in times of political division and coarseness Americans often like to seek comfort in the past by imagining it as a more wholesome time than the present. Because of this many may be led into a false sense of certainty that the personal lives of candidates, especially surrounding topics of family life and sexuality, would have been deemed off limits in the public sphere during the 1850s. This argument is proposed by some who believe Buchanan's sexual practices could have been common knowledge but that no one dared mention that behavior publicly due to social codes that have since fallen away. The election of 1800, when Thomas Jefferson's sexual relationship with Sally Hemmings was widely spoken and printed about, and the election of 1828, when the non-stop reporting surrounding Andrew Jackson's wife Rachel's previous marriage was so caustic that it contributed to her death, are just two examples which show that belief to be nothing more than wishful thinking.⁴³ Even before the advent of the homosexual identity, personal and sexual relationships were weaponized in the political

⁴¹ Chauncey, *New York*, 2.

⁴² John Howard. *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Nan Alamilla Boyd. *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁴³ Norma Basch. "Marriage, Morals, and Politics in the Election of 1828." *The Journal of American History*. Vol. 8, No. 3 (1993): 890-918.

sphere. 1856 in particular was a year of intense political partisanship. The official Republican Party platform of 1856 remains the only platform in American history that resolved to punish the opposition party if put into power.⁴⁴ If Buchanan's sexual behavior was an open secret as Loewen claims, it would be very unusual for his opponents not to have attempted to use that behavior against him as had been done in prior American presidential elections and would occur later during the Progressive Era, as Murphy detailed in *Political Manhood*.

One claim that can be confidently made is that whatever was known about the two men and their relationship clearly did not limit their success in attaining impressive electoral and appointed offices. (Andrew Jackson may have called Buchanan Aunt Nancy, but he also felt comfortable naming him Minister to Russia.) Nor did it cause people to be reticent in mentioning the friendship they shared in public, even when Buchanan was a presidential contender. Based on the historical record, the Democratic press saw his relationship with William King as something voters would respond to positively. During the campaign, a frequently reprinted article entitled "Buchanan at Home" painted a picture of the interior of Wheatland, Buchanan's estate in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. While describing the estate, the author, Rushmore G. Horton, took time to note that he "was much gratified in finding in his library a likeness of the late Vice-President King, whom he loved (and who did not?). [Buchanan] declared that [King] was the purest public man that he ever knew, and that during his intimate acquaintance of

⁴⁴ "That all these things have been done with the knowledge, sanction, and procurement of the present National Administration; and that for this high crime against the Constitution, the Union, and humanity, we arraign that Administration, the President, his advisers, agents, supporters, apologists, and accessories, either before or after the fact, before the country and before the world; and that it is our fixed purpose to bring the actual perpetrators of these atrocious outrages and their accomplices to a sure...punishment thereafter."

thirty years he had never known him to perform a selfish act.”⁴⁵ Horton’s willingness to stretch the truth in order to praise Buchanan approached the point of absurdity: he described the candidate’s furniture as “non-ostentatious and democratic” for example. The author could have ignored the topic of the deceased King altogether. Instead he went out of his way to highlight and express approval of the two men’s intimate acquaintance of over 30 years.

The Buchanan/King relationship also received praise at the Democratic National Convention. After John Breckinridge was selected as the party’s vice-presidential nominee his description of King as “the intimate and confidential friend of James Buchanan” was reportedly met with applause by the assembled delegates.⁴⁶ No one ever weaponized his relationship with King, even those who never had anything nice to say about the future fifteenth president.

Nor was it only Buchanan who was well respected in public by his companions. When King passed away, multiple former colleagues went out on the Senate floor and not only praised King’s decades of public service but also the example he set for the nation’s children. Senator Lewis Cass took it even further saying, “In the whole range of American statesman there are few indeed to whom our youth can better look when seeking models of imitation and encouragement than to William R. King.”⁴⁷ Similar references were repeated multiple times by senators from various regions of the country. Even when acknowledging the occasion of these remarks, they could have praised his public accomplishments without celebrating his life as a moral example for the nation’s

⁴⁵ Rushmore Horton. “Buchanan at Home.” *New York Herald* (October 17, 1856.)

⁴⁶ Democratic National Convention, *Official Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention (1856)*, John G. Parkhurst, recording secretary, 63.

⁴⁷ US Congress, *Obituary Addresses on the Occasion of the death of Hon. William R. King of Alabama, Vice-President of the United States.* (Washington: R. Armstrong, 1854), 10, 16. Retrieved via LOC.gov.

youth. If Dr. Loewen is correct and it was common knowledge that Buchanan and King participated in a sexual relationship with one another, that would mean their fellow countrymen and women were much more tolerant of such behavior in the 1850s than has commonly been believed. Again, there is not conclusive evidence that that is the case.

Even taking all that into account however, historians cannot prove a negative. It is possible that no one at the time suspected an improper sexual relationship between the two friends. It is also possible that it was common knowledge that for some reason failed to make its way into the historical record in a conclusive manner. It could also be possible that the relationship was romantic but not sexual.

While it is unlikely that Buchanan will ever be able to be called our first “gay” president with any degree of certainty, what Buchanan’s election *can* tell those interested in investigating an atypical White House is that Americans in 1856 were willing to elect a bachelor, who dearly loved his same-sex companion, to serve as the chief executive.

Lacking a spouse, a status that was definitely public knowledge, clearly did not disqualify Buchanan from being a potentially effective president in the eyes of the voters: out of four million total votes he received a half million more than John Fremont, and a million more votes than former President Millard Fillmore, and both of those men were married.⁴⁸ Further, primary sources covering the election demonstrate that concern over the future of slavery and fears of national disunion played a defining role in the selection of James Buchanan much more than concern about the marital unions of any of the candidates.⁴⁹ When Buchanan’s bachelorhood was mentioned during the presidential

⁴⁸ Library of Congress, “The Election of 1856: A Resource Guide.” <https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/elections/election1856.html>.

⁴⁹ Nichols and Klein, “Election of 1856,” 98.

campaign it was never seen as disqualifying in and of itself, but was used to reinforce other pre-existing arguments both for and against a Buchanan presidency.

Pro-Buchanan Arguments: The Statesman from Pennsylvania Will Bring Peace

Supporters of Buchanan for president were not particularly effusive with their praise for the candidate himself. The pro-Buchanan *Pittsburg Morning Post* described their state's favorite son as "the most available and unobjectionable" option, echoing multiple editorials that praised the former Secretary of State as merely the "safest", "soundest", or "most prudent" choice.⁵⁰ The Democratic partisan press assured their readers that the "Old Public Functionary," as he was widely known, would make an "able" president.⁵¹ Campaign pamphlets barely disguised their lack of enthusiasm with sincere endorsements such as "Buchanan Will Make No Worse a President Than Franklin Pierce" and "Every Good Man Should Have His Turn."⁵² Henry Wise, the Governor of Virginia and one of Buchanan's most prominent surrogates during the campaign, said at a campaign rally that he was supporting the Democratic Party's nominee for president "because it was due to the man."⁵³ After the Buchanan campaign achieved victory on November 4, 1856, the brother of an incoming cabinet official praised the president-elect as "the most suitable man for the times."⁵⁴

⁵⁰ *Pittsburg Morning Post*, March 15, 1856.

⁵¹ Old Public Functionary was a nickname friends and foes alike used to describe Buchanan in the press. See Baker, *Buchanan*, 7.

⁵² Horace Greeley, *James Buchanan, His Doctrines and Policy as Exhibited by Himself and His Friends*. (New York: Greeley and McElrath, 1856), 10.

⁵³ Reprinted in Greeley, *Buchanan*, 11.

⁵⁴ Philip Klein. *President James Buchanan: A Biography*. (Falls Creek: Pennsylvania State University, 1962), 260.

If not popular enthusiasm then, what led to Buchanan's electoral victory in 1856?

Much like Pierson's argument regarding the influence of gender ideals on the outbreak of the Civil War, socially constructed gender ideology was not the sole reason the electorate chose Buchanan, but evidence suggests it was a contributing factor in the decision. Voters in 1856 did not consider the policy differences between the parties one day and whether or not the candidates met their definition of ideal manhood on another day however. As Katz and Bederman argued, manhood was being simultaneously evaluated from both the personal attributes of the candidates and the policy positions they held. Therefore, an investigation into the period's ideals of manhood will be included alongside more traditional political campaign analysis, more in line with the way the electorate experienced it.

First, any contemplation of who would be the Democratic Party's standard bearer had to include Buchanan simply because no one else at the time came close to matching his decades of experience on the national and international stage. One biographer has argued that, with the possible exception of James Madison, "no president had ever come to the office with more impressive credentials. Nor, to this day, has any matched the range of Buchanan's public positions."⁵⁵ It is undeniably true that the man who often ranks as the worst American President of all time was, at least on paper, one of the most qualified people ever to be nominated for the job.⁵⁶

A successful lawyer by trade, Buchanan's public life started at 23 when he became the youngest member of the Pennsylvania State Assembly. He entered national politics with a ten-year stint in the U.S. House of Representatives before being plucked

⁵⁵ Baker, *Buchanan*, 5.

⁵⁶ Andrew Soergel and Jay Tolson. "The 10 Worst Presidents." *US News & World Report* (December 31st 2014). <https://www.usnews.com/news/special-reports/the-worst-presidents/slideshows/the-10-worst-presidents?slide=12>.

by Andrew Jackson to serve as the U.S. Minister to Russia. Upon completion of that high-profile diplomatic position, Buchanan served in the United States Senate from 1834 to 1845, where he wielded substantial influence as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. In 1845 he joined President Polk's cabinet as Secretary of State during a period that saw the annexation of Texas, war with Mexico, and a boundary dispute with Great Britain over the Oregon territory. Buchanan was twice offered a seat on the United States Supreme Court from two different Presidents (he turned down both offers in order to pursue the presidency) as well as an offer to come out of "retirement" to serve as Minister to England during President Pierce's tenure (which he did accept). In addition, he was a serious contender for the Democratic Party's nomination in 1844 and 1848, and in 1852 had led the voting on 34 ballots before, at the urging of Buchanan's people, the deadlocked convention began throwing his support over to Pierce.⁵⁷

Buchanan's experience received frequent mention during the Democratic National Convention when the time came to select a candidate for President. Unlike conventions today where the nominee has often been unofficially selected months in advance, in 1856 the nominee was truly selected at the convention. Multiple speakers at the party's nominating convention in Cincinnati mentioned Buchanan's "most enlarged experience" and "preeminent qualifications" when attempting to persuade others to back the former Pennsylvania senator as their nominee. Supporters frequently stressed Buchanan's "many years of patriotic service." John Breckenridge, the Democratic Party's nominee for vice president, endorsed his running mate by referring to him as "the tried statesman of Pennsylvania."⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Baker, *Buchanan*, 5-8. Strauss, *Worst*, XIII, 99.

⁵⁸ Parkhurst, *Democrat National Convention*, 55-58.

At least equally important to Buchanan's selection by the Democratic Party because he was a *tried statesman* of Pennsylvania was the fact that he was a tried statesman of *Pennsylvania*. Political operatives from both parties recognized Pennsylvania as the defining contest of the 1856 presidential election due to its twenty-seven electoral votes.⁵⁹

The Republican opposition met shortly after James Buchanan secured his nomination at the Democratic National Convention, and they highlighted the importance of the Keystone State to the outcome of the election even more than the Democrats had. One of the clearest admissions of the importance of Pennsylvania in the election of 1856 was the location the Republicans picked for their party's first ever presidential nominating convention: Philadelphia. While this was a fitting symbolic choice for the burgeoning party, laying the groundwork for a victory in Pennsylvania also made practical electoral sense.⁶⁰

Although they had made exceptional gains in state offices in the two years since the party had formed, Republicans were in fact a sectional party at this time and knew they would earn few if any electoral votes from Southern states. (This turned out to be an accurate assessment: forget about states, Fremont carried zero *counties* south of the Mason-Dixon line.)⁶¹

This sectional party had many advantages in the presidential contest of 1856, however. For one the population of the Northern states overwhelmed the Southern states by a ratio of 2:1. This gave the states in the North higher numbers of presidential electors on average than in the South. At this time the state of Texas only contributed half the

⁵⁹ Klein, *Buchanan*, 259.

⁶⁰ Klein, *Buchanan*, 259.

⁶¹ Nichols and Klein, "Election of 1856," 116.

electoral votes that the state of Maine did, for example. The largest electoral prizes of the South were South Carolina and Georgia, with only ten votes a piece in the Electoral College.⁶² The Republicans were right to believe that if they could claim a few border states they could have won the election without carrying a single Southern state, or more likely, they would have thrown the election to the House of Representatives by keeping Buchanan from winning an electoral college majority.

Buchanan himself now headed a party that, for all the Democratic claims of being the only remaining national party, was also becoming increasingly sectional. There were 296 votes in the Electoral College at this time, meaning 149 electoral votes would win the presidency. Both parties believed that about seventy of those votes were up for grabs, especially in states such as Pennsylvania (27 votes), Indiana (13), and Illinois (11). New York, the largest electoral prize in the country (35), was deemed safely in Republican hands.⁶³ If Republicans won the second largest prize, Pennsylvania, and nine other votes from any swing state, they could have won the White House on their first attempt. By nominating native Pennsylvanian and favorite son James Buchanan as their nominee however, the Democrats purposely made the largest toss-up electoral prize in the country more likely to fall into their column.

In addition to location, the Republican National Committee's choice of timing for their convention also exposed their belief that Pennsylvania was going to be the site of a crucial and competitive campaign. The national committee chose to hold their convention so it overlapped with the Republican Party's Pennsylvania State Convention, also happening in Philadelphia, allowing the state and national campaign workers to

⁶² "1856 Presidential Election," https://www.270towin.com/1856_Election/.

⁶³ "1856 Presidential Election," https://www.270towin.com/1856_Election/.

better coordinate their efforts.⁶⁴ Having finished up their work at the state convention, the members walked over to the national convention and asked to be admitted. When the chair of the national convention turned this request over to the delegates, a representative from the New Hampshire delegation replied that they were willing to give up their seats for the Pennsylvania delegates, or even “hold those who wish to be admitted in our laps rather than they should be excluded.”⁶⁵

Later, when the Know Nothing Party sent a message to the convention showing their support however, it sparked two days of debate on whether or not the notice should even be acknowledged.⁶⁶ Clearly not everyone was automatically welcomed in; the inclusion of the state delegates was a strategic move. In fact, for some delegates hesitancy to acknowledge the Know Nothings came from a fear of alienating the large number of German-Americans living in states like Pennsylvania. Towards the end of the convention they had just such a person, a German-born American citizen, address the crowd to push back against their fears about losing Pennsylvania due to the German vote. This man reassured the crowd, saying, “I love Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania was the first to take me to her arms...I am sorry to hear any one even doubt of the certainty of Pennsylvania for freedom in the coming election.”⁶⁷

Further, Pennsylvania proved to be on the minds of the Republican delegates not just when discussing whom they wanted to include at their convention, but also when they were choosing who was going to oppose Buchanan in the general election. Fremont was the likely favorite, but there were other contenders. Salmon Chase had successfully

⁶⁴ Nichols and Klein, “Election of 1856,” 107.

⁶⁵ Horace Greeley, *Proceedings of the First Three Republican National Conventions of 1856, 1860, and 1864*. (Minneapolis: C.W. Johnson, 1893), 23.

⁶⁶ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 56.

⁶⁷ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 75.

united a coalition of Republicans, former Whigs, and Know Nothings to win the governorship of Ohio and hoped to ride a similar fusion ticket to the White House. He inspired little popular enthusiasm, however, and had few friends among the new party's leadership. William Seward of New York was likely the strongest anti-slavery politician at the convention, but he was deemed a risky choice for some delegates due to his previous disavowal of the Know Nothings. Additionally, Seward's friends advised he wait until 1860 when, they believed, the chance for a Republican win was more likely. Also in the mix was the moderate Judge John McLean of Ohio, the favorite of the Pennsylvania delegation.⁶⁸

The centrality of Pennsylvania to the outcome of the election was addressed in multiple nominating speeches. A New York delegate in favor of Seward urged everyone to compromise on a candidate who could win. After praising Seward as "the best representative of our principles" he declared, "because we are told that he cannot carry Pennsylvania, we at once sacrifice him upon the body of the opposition (cheers)."⁶⁹ Upon realizing that McLean did not have substantial support at the convention compared to Fremont, his spokesperson, Judge Rufus Spaulding, read a letter written by McLean withdrawing his name from consideration. Following this announcement, a delegate from Pennsylvania asked to address the crowd. He lamented that "the only name which could have saved Pennsylvania had been withdrawn" and although he would vote for whatever ticket the party settled on, he "feared that as a consequence they would lose Pennsylvania by 50,000 votes." According to the official proceeding printed by the Republican National Committee this was met with loud boos and groaning, indicating

⁶⁸ Ruhl J. Bartlett, *John C. Fremont and the Republican Party*. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1930), 24.

⁶⁹ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 47.

that the crowd understood the stakes inherent in losing Pennsylvania's electoral votes.⁷⁰ A New York delegate took the stage and tried to give time for everyone to reassess now that the most likely candidate to please the Pennsylvanians had removed himself from consideration. He proposed that "for the purpose of giving time for consultation—especially with the Pennsylvanians—I move that the convention take a recess until five o'clock this afternoon." The New York delegates' proposal was approved. The business of nominating a president was put on hold due to the importance of the Pennsylvania delegation.

When the group reassembled at five that evening there was dramatic news: McLean had withdrawn his concession. Apparently enough people had been scared by the threat of losing Pennsylvania's electoral votes to reconsider his nomination. Then the voting began. Fremont carried the majority of the votes on the first ballot, earning 359 votes to Mclean's 190. The nomination now seemed destined to be Fremont's: the candidate with the next highest tally after Mclean was Charles Sumner with 2 votes, and that was mostly a symbolic show of support for the Senator who had been beaten with a cane on the Senate floor by Preston Brooks a few weeks earlier. A new round of voting started in an attempt to give Fremont a unanimous vote of approval from the convention. Every state but two cast all of their votes for Fremont: Ohio and Pennsylvania. McLean's home state of Ohio gave him 14 of their 69 votes with the rest going to Fremont. In a more concerning turn, Pennsylvania gave nearly a third of their votes to McLean.⁷¹ As a consolation, the convention catered to the wishes of the Pennsylvanians one more time by nominating McLean's choice, young William Dayton of New Jersey, for Vice President.

⁷⁰ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 51.

⁷¹ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 58.

As the Republican National Convention came to a close, both parties had demonstrated the centrality of Pennsylvania to the upcoming national contest. Buchanan's status as a native son of Pennsylvania contributed significantly to his selection as the Democratic nominee.

A third key factor in Buchanan winning the election of 1856 was his absence during the recent controversies surrounding the extension of slavery in the United States. As Minister to England Buchanan served abroad from 1853 to 1856, conveniently absent when the passage of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act divided the nation. This act called for local control over the status of slavery, allowing for the possible extension of slavery not just in the new territory out west but also in places north of the Mason Dixon line where the peculiar institution had previously been banned by law. The Republican Party made opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act a central tenet of their party, and by doing so achieved impressive electoral wins during the midterm elections of 1854, winning elections in all but four states and causing Democrats to lose control of the House of Representatives.⁷² Due to his administration's support of the divisive legislation, worried Democrats refused to re-nominate President Franklin Pierce for a second term, fearing he was too unpopular to win reelection. Buchanan's other main competition for the nomination, Illinois' Stephen Douglas, had written and introduced the bill into the Senate, and thus was also too tied up in the recent controversies to gain the support of two-thirds of the delegates at the Democratic National Convention either, particularly due to holdouts from the North.⁷³

⁷² Nichols and Klein, "Election of 1856," 101.

⁷³ Hoffer, *Caning*, 106-107.

In fact, when the *Pittsburg Morning Post* praised Buchanan for being “unobjectionable” they argued he was unobjectionable specifically because he had not been around for “many of the recent disturbing issues.”⁷⁴ The *Pittsfield Sun* supported his nomination as well because he was “not mixed up with the modern strifes.”⁷⁵ A campaign pamphlet celebrated that Buchanan’s service abroad “presented the advantage of being more recently out of the fierce conflicts which the Democracy has waged against a dangerous and powerful faction.”⁷⁶ All Buchanan’s major biographers agree that not having been at the center of the previous years’ political fights played a decisive role in his selection as the party’s standard bearer.⁷⁷

Buchanan’s personality and temperament were also commented on by many as a reason he was the right man for the times. In a campaign speech on June 13th Virginia Governor Henry Wise argued that “to settle this sectional strife, no man could bring so much Northern strength to unite with the South in defense of the Constitution and the Union as James Buchanan has brought and can bring.” Buchanan would unite the country and settle the sectional strife that was already a national reality in 1856. Part of this was due to his policy positions. Since Buchanan supported popular sovereignty just as his predecessor Franklin Pierce did, Wise predicted that if Buchanan won the election “then we may regard the doctrine and the practice as settled and sanctioned, and the South may feel safe, and the North be content to abide by the Constitution as it is.” But Wise continued, saying that Buchanan *himself* “had healing in his wings...to compose

⁷⁴ *Pittsburg Morning Post*, February 26, 1856.

⁷⁵ *Pittsfield Sun*, July 24, 1856.

⁷⁶ Greeley, *Buchanan*, 62.

⁷⁷ Strauss, *Worst*, 134. Klein, *Buchanan*, 104. Nichols and Klein, “Election of 1856,” 109.

these strifes.”⁷⁸ Buchanan would “settle sectional strife” by uniting Americans through policy positions, but also because of the type of man that he was.

Buchanan’s personal temperament, as described by Wise and others, fits the definition of Amy Greenberg’s “restrained manhood,” particularly as it relates to restraint and self-control. Greenberg described a “restrained man” as someone who exhibited “self-restraint and moral self-discipline” in contrast to someone who glorified “physical, often bloody cultural expressions.”⁷⁹ In other words, a “restrained man” was someone who had the self-control to resist getting into a fight.

In his campaign speech, Wise called Buchanan “civil in every sense,” and as a “civilian and statesman of experience,” Wise noted approvingly that Buchanan had always been both “prudent” and “cautious.” Wise returned to this theme later in the speech when he argued that Buchanan’s “soft, winning, gentle, forbearing” nature enforced his belief that “he is the man to turn away wrath.” Another prominent Democrat who supported Buchanan for president, Senator Thomas Hart Benton, similarly described Buchanan as “never a leading man in any high sense, but eminently a man of peace.”⁸⁰

Over and over again Democrats in the north praised Buchanan in similar language to that used by Wise and Benton. The *Erie Observer* argued Buchanan would make a great choice because he was a “wise and cautious statesman.”⁸¹ A lengthy pro-Buchanan campaign pamphlet distributed in the North spent a lot of space depicting their nominee as fitting the ideal of a self-restrained man. After describing the democratic nominee’s childhood in Pennsylvania, the author explicitly noted, “Here in the humble home

⁷⁸ Reprinted in Greeley, *Buchanan*, 11.

⁷⁹ Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 10.

⁸⁰ Smith, *Presidency*, 5.

⁸¹ “Buchanan and Dallas,” *Erie Observer*, April 5th, 1856.

[Buchanan] first learned the lessons of self-control.” Later Buchanan received praise for his “mild and impressive manners” and his “great tact and sagacity.” The future president himself was quoted extensively during the campaign advocating for a restrained type of manhood for the country: “Would to Heaven that the spirit of mutual forbearance and brotherly love, which presided at [America’s] birth, could once more be restored to bless the land!”⁸² Lastly, the pamphlet went even further by celebrating the fact that Buchanan had endured a lifetime in politics without “souring a disposition which is feminine in its delicacy, its gentle courtesy, its patient kindness” before arguing that “James Buchanan is the man for the times.” Being delicate, courteous, and kind to the point of seeming feminine was something that Buchanan backers expressed as necessary for the next male leader of the nation.

Calls for restraint were being made in reaction to the rise in political violence. Benton voiced the fears of many Americans in 1856 when he said, “We are treading upon a volcano that is liable at any moment to burst forth and overwhelm the nation.”⁸³ Within a climate of growing tension, where even prominent senior politicians were voicing fears that events might quickly erupt and create an unprecedented national crisis, a man with a personality who could “turn away wrath” was seen as desirable in a President. Even if not viewed as a “leading man”, Buchanan’s supporters championed a “soft and forbearing” type of man who would not fight, but thanks to his restrained temperament, bring peace to a divided nation.

When viewed from this context, the newspaper endorsements that called him the “safest”, “soundest”, and “most prudent” choice for president now seem meant to be

⁸² Nichols and Klein, “Election of 1856,” 112.

⁸³ *New York Tribune*, August 18, 1856

higher praise than might be initially assumed. Just as Pierson demonstrated that Fremont and his supporters “tried to exploit the gender beliefs of their constituents” in order to win the White House, Buchanan and his supporters were engaged in the same activity, just with a different image of the ideal man. And, as Pierson also argued in *Free Hearts and Free Homes*, while this depiction of Buchanan as an ideal example of restrained, even feminine, manhood was not the sole *cause* of the election’s outcome, primary research indicates that it was one of the contributing factors at play.

Now, while enough voters believed Buchanan was the right man for the times to hand him the presidency, there were also millions of Americans who hoped someone else would win the election.

Anti-Buchanan Arguments: A Spectrum of Martial Manhood

While Buchanan’s distance from the political controversies that occurred in the years preceding the election of 1856 made him an attractive candidate to Northern Democrats, that distance caused southern delegates at the Democratic National Convention to prefer other men to lead their party. Further, these preferences and the language they used to contrast Buchanan and his Democratic rivals reveals competing definitions of manhood between Northern and Southern delegates within the same party.

The hope that Buchanan could be a unifying figure helped him gain the most votes on the first ballot, thirteen more than the sitting president and over one hundred more than Senator Stephen Douglas.⁸⁴ When it became clear after subsequent balloting that Pierce would not be able to win the requisite support the majority of Pierce’s

⁸⁴ Parkhurst, *Democrat National Convention*, 51.

supporters switched over to Douglas. It took seventeen ballots for Buchanan to clinch the nomination, mostly due to Pierce and Douglas holdouts from states in the deep South.⁸⁵ Buchanan's reputation as a friend to Southern interests and defender of the institution of slavery was well established. It is understandable that in the climate of the 1856 election some in the South might not trust a northern candidate's loyalty to their interests regardless of their record, but these same people had no problem backing New Hampshire's Pierce and Illinois' Douglas. So why did Southern delegates prefer Pierce and Douglas if there was essentially no difference in where the candidates stood on the issues?

The answer appears to be the reverse of why so many Northern delegates thought he was the right choice: because Pierce and Douglas had been at the forefront of the political fights of the last few years. Southern delegates saw them as fighters, and that is what they wanted. Once Douglas withdrew and it became clear that Buchanan was going to win the nomination, each state that had backed other candidates switched their vote over to Buchanan so he would receive unanimous support from the convention. A delegate from North Carolina explained his delegation's previous votes against Buchanan in language that would be echoed by many other state delegations. He explained that their support for Pierce was in appreciation for the "bold and manly stand taken by his administration in...upholding the rights of all the states in this union."⁸⁶ They then had switched over to Douglas out of "high appreciation of the eminent services rendered to his country" by the "gallant leader" of the Kansas and Nebraska Bill.⁸⁷ While they now fully supported James Buchanan as the nominee they had voted differently earlier

⁸⁵ Parkhurst, *Democrat National Convention*, 57.

⁸⁶ Parkhurst, *Democrat National Convention*, 49.

⁸⁷ Parkhurst, *Democrat National Convention*, 50.

because “pending his stay in Europe events transpired which identified Messrs. Pierce and Douglas more prominently than others with certain leading issues before the country, and we respect their services in that...”⁸⁸

What catches one’s eye when searching the record for historic ideals of manhood is the way the three men are consistently described in similar language in all of these explanatory statements. Georgia also praised Douglas for how he “manfully battled for great constitutional and conservative principles” but when they turned their focus to the nominee all they could muster was to reassure those present that they had “a warm and cordial Southern heart for James Buchanan.”⁸⁹

Missouri explained how Douglas had “endeared himself to the state of Missouri and the whole country in manfully standing up for all the great principles of the Constitution...and the moral heroism with which he has constantly met and vanquished the enemies of our peace, and the enemies of our Union, but since he has directed his friends to withdraw his name...” they would now support “a statesman of the greatest talents and ability.” They continued by cheering Buchanan’s “ability and sagacity as a diplomatist.”⁹⁰

State after state drew a contrast between the two contenders for the nomination who had participated in “manly battle” and the skills or “abilities” of a great “statesman.” According to the words chosen to describe the candidates there was a nearly unanimous consensus among the Southern delegates of the Democratic National Convention that there was a difference between being “manly” like Pierce and Douglas, a designation that appears to be aligned with taking action and defeating enemies, and being a restrained

⁸⁸ Parkhurst, *Democrat National Convention*, 50.

⁸⁹ Parkhurst, *Democrat National Convention*, 52.

⁹⁰ Parkhurst, *Democrat National Convention*, 54.

statesman like Buchanan who could adequately preside over the nation's affairs as a peaceful Chief Magistrate. The language used repeatedly connected the ideal of manhood to people who embraced conflict. Men were not afraid to stand up and fight others. Rather than being restrained like a statesman and seek civil compromise, men "do battle" for what they believe in.

Southern Democrats preferred men like Douglas and Pierce who were closer to their ideal of a combative, or martial, masculinity. In reality all three of the top contenders for the Democratic nomination were Northern statesmen who better fit Amy Greenberg's definition of restrained manhood—none of them committed acts of physical domination against their political opponents. Categories of gender are never absolute however, and although they did not literally commit acts of violence they were still viewed as fighters. Rather than view masculine ideals as distinct, rigid categories, a spectrum may be more useful here. On one end were reserved diplomats like Buchanan, peaceful and full of tact, but missing in action. Fiery and combative politicians like Douglas and Pierce were still reserved but exhibited more martial manhood than Buchanan by dominating others politically and winning contentious legislative battles. Men like Preston Brooks, a man who famously committed an actual act of physical domination, more strongly exemplified the ideal of martial manhood. While Brooks did not compete with Buchanan for the nomination, his centrality to a national debate about ideal manhood during the heat of the campaign makes him an illuminating subject of inquiry when considering views on gender in the election of 1856.

Much has been written about the Brooks/Sumner caning, but there has been little focus on how this affair impacted the 1856 presidential election specifically. Most secondary literature either explores one topic or the other, as if they had little to do with

one another. One biographer does note it occurred close to the nomination of Buchanan but does not elaborate.⁹¹

Evidence suggests that the caning inflamed passions across the nation though, and more specifically it served as a focal point for Republicans at campaign rallies throughout the general election.

Republican rallies were known for their boisterousness. According to historian Philip Klein, Republicans at this time were much younger on average than members of the Democratic Party, and mostly made up of individuals seeking to overthrow the status quo. He described Republicans as “young reformers and dedicated crusaders, a group which was, in contrast to others...committed, enthusiastic, passionate, optimistic, uncompromising, and imbued with a sense of religious mission.”⁹² Perhaps it is unsurprising then that Republican rallies were loud and emotional events, with lots of marching, singing, and public processions. Republican campaign songs sought to excite passion among the young people turning out at the rallies.⁹³ The inclusion of Brooks in multiple Republican campaign songs is evidence that Brooks and his actions stirred passions across the country during the election of 1856, while simultaneously providing further evidence of how ideals of manhood differed across the country. Many anti-Buchanan songs have verses that also reference Brooks with lyrics such as “And with them we’ll beat old Buchan!/ Yes, rout the whole gang, from Douglas to Brooks/Who’d subdue us with canes...” or this one sung to the tune of Auld Lange Syne: “The South may send her champions out/Her cowards armed with canes/The freemen of the North fear not/Her tyrants or her chains.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Baker, *Buchanan*, 171.

⁹² Klein, *Buchanan*, 260.

⁹³ Nichols and Klein, “Election of 1856,” 107.

⁹⁴ *New York Herald*, July 14th, 1856.

Beyond these references however there were also multiple songs exclusively devoted to the topic of Preston Brooks. One song that went to the tune of a popular campaign song from a previous presidential campaign (“Tippecanoe and Tyler Too”) asked “Have you heard of P.S. Brooks, Brooks, Brooks/With his gutta percha cane?/For he struck a blow, laid our champion low/But it roused the nation for once and again/And it’ll take a mighty big cane, cane cane/Slavery’s cause to gain.” Another song labeled him “Bully Brooks” and condemned how “He thoroughly had learned the knack/Of welting Sambo’s tawny back.../ But tiring of this pleasant game/And bent on varying the same/He form’d a safe and easy plan/To flog a harmless Free-State man...”⁹⁵ These songs were not sung in South Carolina, the only state Preston Brooks was on the ballot.⁹⁶ They were sung in the North during political rallies for the presidential campaign. Besides Fremont and Buchanan no other man had as many campaign songs devoted entirely to them, including the candidate for the American Party, former President Millard Fillmore. The inclusion of Brooks and this incident of physical domination in so many of these songs supports the conclusion that the caning was an influential element of the 1856 presidential contest.

In his monograph on the cane attack, historian William Hoffer detailed how responses to the affair were not just seen at campaign rallies, but they dominated the partisan press as well. He termed it “the first national media circus” and noted that the coverage remained constant from the day after the attack on May 22, 1856, all the way through the election in November.⁹⁷ Responses, Hoffer found, were sharply divided by region. Through his research of newspapers in 1856 he found that “editorials in the

⁹⁵ *New York Herald*, July 14th, 1856.

⁹⁶ Six months after the caning incident Brooks won reelection to his House seat.

⁹⁷ Hoffer, *Caning*, 9.

North and border states agreed that the attack was ‘brutal,’ inappropriate in its location, and improper. Northern language was more condemnatory of Brooks as a ‘brute’ and exculpatory of Sumner’s use of language in the ‘Crime against Kansas’ speech.

Democratic commentaries tended to focus more on what Sumner had done to provoke it.”⁹⁸

An examination of newspapers does indeed show that trend. One Northern newspaper editorialized that “the spirit of ruffianism exhibited by Brooks cannot be too highly censured” while another mocked Brooks, claiming that “brute force was resorted to, to accomplish by the blows of a club what they could not do by the power of intellect.”⁹⁹ The use of physical dominance made Brooks a ruffian, comparable to the unmannered men pouring into Kansas and causing unlawful violence, men commonly referred to at the time as “border ruffians.”¹⁰⁰ According to commentators in the North Brooks was not an ideal man because of his successful dominance of another person. In fact, resorting to violence made him something less than a man; it made him a brute.

Brooks’ manhood was challenged by a Boston paper one day after the attack: “The member from South Carolina transgressed every rule of honor which should animate or restrain one gentleman in his connections with another in his ruffian assault upon Mr. Sumner. There is no chivalry in a brute. There is no manliness in a scoundrel.”¹⁰¹ A man’s honor was tied to how restrained he could be. Failing to restrain himself from committing an act of violence made him less than a man, it made him a brute.

⁹⁸ Hoffer, *Caning*, 97.

⁹⁹ *Morning Express* (Buffalo, New York), May 24th, 1856.

¹⁰⁰ Nichols and Klein, “Election of 1856,” 102.

¹⁰¹ *Courier* (Boston, Massachusetts), May 23rd, 1856.

In contrast, Southern Democrats, much as they honored Pierce and Douglas for their willingness to fight rhetorically and legislatively for policy positions, also praised Brooks for his willingness to resort to a physical method of control. After it was reported that Brooks had broken his cane during the assault, Southern supporters sent dozens of canes to the Congressman, some with inscriptions such as “Hit him again” and “knock-down arguments.”¹⁰² Editorials maintained that it was Sumner in fact who failed to meet a masculine ideal by, in a widely reprinted phrase, “bellowing like a calf” after he had been struck down.¹⁰³ Not only could he not adequately defend himself in a fight, these Southerners argued, but also he was as pathetic as a weak animal being slaughtered once the blows had been struck. Similar to the use of the word “brute” to imply that Brooks was somehow less than a full man, the frequent comparisons of Sumner to a calf sought to depict him as failing to meet the requirements of ideal manhood. Some papers went further and mocked the perceived delicate sensitivities of Northern Republican men in general, as well as accusing Sumner of faking the extent of his injuries for sympathy. A paper out of Richmond, Virginia was perhaps the bluntest when it wrote, “Fanatics of the male gender, and weak-minded woman and silly children, are horribly affected at the thought of blood oozing out from a pin scratch. And Sumner is wily politician enough to take advantage of this little fact.”¹⁰⁴ Men who could get upset over the sight of blood were categorized with the women and children, and this time associations with femininity were not viewed as admirable. According to what was written in Southern newspapers, a real man was a fighter who was not afraid of spilt blood.

¹⁰² Hoffer, *Caning*, 102.

¹⁰³ Hoffer, *Caning*, 99.

¹⁰⁴ Hoffer, *Caning*, 100.

The solid support Brooks had throughout the South supports Foote's conclusion that "martial manhood" was an ideal broadly held throughout the South at this time. But what about the doughfaces, the Southern-sympathizing Northern Democrats from states like Pennsylvania who proved crucial to Buchanan's victory in 1856? How did they react to this caning?

Consistent with the ideals they held up in praise of Buchanan, Northern Democrats mostly called for restraint in the aftermath of the caning. They did not praise Brooks for his attack but they also thought Sumner had been indelicate in his speech and thus provoked Brooks. Their argument was neither man had conducted himself well. The *New York Tribune* reported that Buchanan himself viewed the incident this way. After a Northern man from Illinois, W.W. Sterling, gave a speech condemning "the attack of Canine Brooks upon the noble Sumner for defending freedom," he found himself sitting next to the current Democratic nominee. The reporter for the *Tribune* claimed he overheard Buchanan disagreeing with Sterling's framing of the caning. While he agreed that "Mr. Brooks was indelicate" he lectured Sterling, saying, "My young friend, you only look upon the dark side of the picture. Mr. Sumner's speech was the most vulgar tirade of abuse ever delivered in a deliberative body."¹⁰⁵ The statesman did not care for the violence, but he also felt the need to condemn the lack of tact exhibited by the senator from Massachusetts. While the validity of this source relies on the honesty of the reporter, no one from the Buchanan camp ever disavowed this statement. Doing so would have been politically unwise since the majority of Northern Democrats appeared to agree with this assessment. Also, both sides being to blame helped make the argument that a peaceful candidate like Buchanan was the right man for the times. Both Brooks and

¹⁰⁵ *New York Tribune*, July 24th, 1856.

Sumner were unable to show the restraint necessary to keep their passions from leading to violent conflict. Unlike Buchanan, these men lacked the ability to turn away wrath. While most Southern Democrats viewed Brooks an ideal man, for Northern Democrats the caning affair highlighted the need for a man of peace like Buchanan to preside over the country.

Intriguingly, while Republican newspapers focused on how “unmanly” Brook’s actions were, there was an electrifying moment at the Republican National Convention that depicted respect for the ideal of “martial manhood.” In a moment not mentioned in the secondary literature, one speech demonstrated that celebrations of violence were not strictly limited to those who lived in the South. At the Republican National Convention, a speaker elicited some of the most intense cheering of the entire proceedings when giving a passionate response to reported threats made by Southern congressmen against their Northern colleagues should they vote to expel Brooks from the House of Representatives for his caning of Sumner. While lengthy, the excerpt below deserves to be quoted in full due to how forcefully it contradicts the notion that martial manhood was strictly a southern ideal:

I see by telegraphic dispatches from Washington that the announcement is made when that question comes up in the House the Southern gentlemen are to make threats and perhaps to execute them. [Shouts of let them dare.] Gentlemen, I believe that the men who represent you have made up their minds. [Vociferous cheers/cries of Good! Bravo!] I believe they have made up their minds to go where duty requires them to go, vote as duty requires them to vote; and I believe they have made up their minds to defend their persons and their lives whenever [tremendous and long cheering] whenever, wherever, however, by whomsoever assailed [great cheering]. No gentlemen, threats will not silence the freemen of the North. We know we have behind us fifteen millions of freemen [cheers]—we know that if we fail in the exercise of our constitutional duties, and in defense of our constitutional rights, that gallant and true men all over the North will step into our places, and fill them better than we can do. [loud cheers] Gentlemen, trouble yourselves with no anxiety about affairs in Washington. We will take care of ourselves [thundering cheers] We want

to have it known all over the land that the representatives of the Northern freemen are ready to take care of themselves in the performance of their duty [cheers]. But while we make that resolution and adhere to it, in God's name, gentlemen of the North, resolve to do your duty and to blot out the Slave Power of the country [cheers].¹⁰⁶

No calls for preservation of the union or restraint were uttered in this well received speech, but instead a call was made at a national convention made up of Northern delegates, not just to defeat their opponents politically, but to “blot the slave power out of the country” entirely. Unlike the restrained Buchanan, who would fail to do his duty and stand up to the slave power, these Northern freemen were not going to be controlled by threats, but instead were going to speak their mind, vote, and even fight if necessary.

A promotion of “martial manhood” also occurred during the nomination of potential Republican candidates for vice-president, but the tone was more humorous. While the eventual pick would be William Dayton, there was substantial interest in a former congressman named Abraham Lincoln. The delegate from Lincoln's adopted state of Illinois praised the future president's physical vigor by describing him as being in “the prime of his life—about fifty-five years of age—and enjoying remarkably good health.” While he was actually 47 at the time of the convention, he was in good health, a legitimate issue when considering whom to pick as a vice-president. It shifted unquestionably into the territory of “martial manhood” when Judge Spaulding called out to the speaker, “Can he fight?” Lincoln's nominator shouted back, “Yes! Have I not told you he was born in Kentucky? [Applause.] He's strong mentally, he's strong physically, he's strong in every way.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 33.

¹⁰⁷ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 61.

These celebrations of “martial manhood” at the Republican National Convention fit in with Foote’s research into ideals of manhood within the Union Army during the official Civil War. A key aspect of the Republican speaker’s willingness to commit violence is that it would be done “to defend their persons and their lives.”¹⁰⁸ In her monograph Foote disproves what she calls a “common misconception among scholars who study manhood in the nineteenth century,” namely historians who tend to “emphasize the contrast between self-controlled northern manhood and passionate southern manhood.”¹⁰⁹ She found that Northern men justified passionate outbursts of physical dominance if the person was defending himself or if an aggressor interfered with their ability to perform their official duties. This overlooked moment at the Republican National Convention, along with campaign songs that condemn “Bully Brooks” for his act of physical dominance while simultaneously promising to “rout the whole gang” in return, shows that some support for “martial manhood” was present in the Northern states at least half a decade before the war as well. While conceptions of manhood were broadly sectional, closer scrutiny reveals that there were some shared ideals between North and South. Northern Democrats on the whole still favored restraint, and their candidate won the election of 1856. With “martial manhood” being cheered on by both Republicans and the majority of Democrats, however, perhaps it was already too late to contain the violence for long, even with a peacemaker as president.

Anti-Buchanan Arguments II: A Lack of Manly Independence

¹⁰⁸ Foote, *Gentlemen*, 19.

¹⁰⁹ Foote, *Gentlemen*, 20.

While Buchanan's failure to adequately perform "martial manhood" actually helped him win the Democratic nomination, it also made him less attractive as a presidential contender to many Americans, particularly in the South, who wanted a fighter in the White House. This was not the only way Buchanan was seen as not achieving ideal manhood however. During the campaign the future president was consistently attacked by Republicans in the North through convention speeches, campaign songs, and political cartoons for lacking what can be termed manly independence.

The first Republican National Convention met in Philadelphia in June of 1856, eleven days after the Democratic party nominated Buchanan and less than a month after the caning of Charles Sumner. The first mention of Buchanan at the convention contrasted his private character and his policy positions. The President of the RNC, Robert Emmet of New York, had been a lifelong Democrat who recently joined the Republican Party in response to passage of the Kansas/Nebraska Act. Emmet admitted to the assembled crowd that "I have known honorable James Buchanan for forty years and upwards, intimately" even going so far as to say that "some of the dearest and most cherished recollections of my life are connected with my associations with him."¹¹⁰ The speaker maintained that he "would defend [Buchanan's] personal character if assailed" and was only motivated by objections to "his political character—if I were not in deadly hostility to that, I would not be here."¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 17.

¹¹¹ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 17.

Objections to Buchanan's personal character were expressed at the Republican National Convention however. Additionally, the policy positions that the convention President objected to were used to define and then condemn the type of man Buchanan supposedly was. When examined together these statements reveal a pattern that is helpful in further understanding ideals of manhood in the lead-up to the Civil War.

Emmet continued speaking. At first, he did in fact keep his comments focused on policy: Buchanan had been a staunch advocate for the Missouri Compromise as late as 1848, but by 1850 abandoned that stance in support of the Compromise of 1850 which rendered the previous compromise null and void. However, the condemnation of Buchanan's policy change soon took on a personal character. Emmet accused "the honorable James Buchanan of having shown a want of firmness, a want of self-reliance, a want of adhesion of principle, and an over-zealous devotion to party in several aspects of his life."¹¹² Much like the Southern delegates at the Democratic National Convention, the speaker did not see Buchanan as someone willing to do battle for core principles. Instead of being firm in his beliefs, he was soft. Instead of being guided by principle he was over-zealous, or over-emotional, in devotion to his party.

Buchanan opened himself up to this attack with one of the only public statements he issued during the entire campaign. Following the protocol of the time, delegates from the convention traveled to their nominee's home in Lancaster, Pennsylvania to formally announce that he had been selected as their candidate for President. In response Buchanan released a public statement where he fully endorsed the platform that came out of the convention in Cincinnati. He went even further by saying "I have been placed upon a platform of which I most heartily approve, and that can speak for me. Being the

¹¹² Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 18.

representative of the great Democratic Party, and not simply James Buchanan, I must square my own conduct according to the platform of that party, and insert no new plank, nor take one from it.”¹¹³ This was likely a statement meant to reassure his tepid Southern supporters in the Democratic Party. It proved to be a winning strategy for at least some of these men. Preston Brooks admitted, “Mr. Buchanan was neither my first nor second choice for the Presidency,” but because he unequivocally endorsed the Cincinnati platform without reservation, Brooks supported him, explaining that he “could not be unfaithful to the man without treachery to the principles he represents.”¹¹⁴

This stance did not escape condemnation however. While no Republican at the convention mentioned Buchanan’s bachelor status, his lack of independence was the chief attack made against him by numerous state delegations. One speaker personally denigrated the Democratic nominee for:

acknowledging that he is no longer James Buchanan, a free agent, with the right of expressing whatever will or opinion he may have of his own; but that he is bound to that platform, and to every plank of it, and that he has no right or power to remove or alter one plank of it—an admission that he has allowed himself to be chained to the Juggernaut of Slavery, and he allows himself to be dragged headlong by it. [Loud Cheers.] I make all allowance, fellow citizens, for the impossibility of a man in this country, who is a politician, who is a party man, of his having his own will, and carrying it out in all respects. It is, I allow, impossible.”¹¹⁵

By portraying a party man as someone who by definition lacked the independence necessary to achieve ideal manhood, this speaker turned the “statesman” label meant as a compliment by Buchanan’s Democratic Party colleagues into an insult. The implicit statement is that Fremont’s lack of political experience, which could be viewed as a

¹¹³ Greeley, *Buchanan*, 14.

¹¹⁴ Greeley, *Buchanan*, 15.

¹¹⁵ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 18, 31.

liability in a presidential contest, actually made him an independent man unencumbered by any interests, particularly the interests of party and of slaveholders.

Attacks on Buchanan's independence continued throughout the convention. A third delegate denigrated Buchanan for "being willing to humiliate himself in the dust before the cart of slavery, and to consent to be made the instrument of perpetuating and extending its rule."¹¹⁶ The metaphor of an animal pulling a cart implied that Buchanan is no man but a beast of burden being used in service of the slave power. The Republican delegates from Pennsylvania knocked his lack of manly independence while again arguing he was only chosen as the nominee because of electoral math. "But the slave power wanted a tool," the Pennsylvania delegate said, "it wanted the vote of a northern state, and it cast its eye to Pennsylvania and James Buchanan."¹¹⁷ Again, Buchanan is less than a man, nothing but a mere instrument or tool. The Democratic Party's nominee's manhood was called into question because his positions revealed him to be too dependent and submissive to others.

Nor was it only at the conventions that this argument against Buchanan was made. Numerous Republican campaign songs also derided the lack of manhood they saw evident in Buchanan's refusal to stand up to the slave power. One song argued that when Buchanan had "grown old his party thought/they'd take Uncle James by the nose/And put him up in a fight they fought/With slavery's host of foes."¹¹⁸ The Democratic Party was leading Buchanan, not the other way around, according to this song. Another song referred to Buchanan as "slavery's hack" who had "no spine in his back." Shortly before election day, yet another song announced that, "We cannot vote for Buchanan/In a few

¹¹⁶ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 29.

¹¹⁷ Greeley, *Republican National Convention*, 33.

¹¹⁸ *New York Herald*, July 14th, 1856.

days, in a few days/Because he is not a freeman.” By saying Buchanan was not a freeman, the lyricist of this song, and everyone who sang it, was saying that Buchanan was equal to a slave, and therefore not an ideal man. One Republican campaign song made the connection they saw between doing the bidding of the slave power and becoming a slave oneself even more explicitly: “For freedom is dear—Southerners can’t rule here/For we’re not their niggers, that’s very clear/For we’re not their niggers, that’s very clear!/For they can’t govern us, that’s so, so, so!/For they shan’t govern us, that’s so!”¹¹⁹ The song implied that if one lacked mastery over oneself, if one was governed by Southerners, meaning the slave power, one lacked a defining characteristic of a freeman. At this time ideal manhood was something only white men could claim; in fact manhood was defined by the exclusion of those who could not claim independence over themselves: women, children, and slaves.¹²⁰ Whereas Murphy argued that during the Progressive Era the homosexual other was used as a foil to help define manhood through excluding those who were deemed unmanly, in the Antebellum Era the unmanly and dependent other was a slave.¹²¹ This was true in the North as much as the South. The above song demonstrates a fear that the Southern slave power is trying to take away Northern white men’s independence. They allowed themselves to be governed by Southern interests they would be reduced to the status of slaves, a change that they resist throughout the song. According to them Buchanan lacked the manly independence necessary to protect not just his own, but their manhood as well.

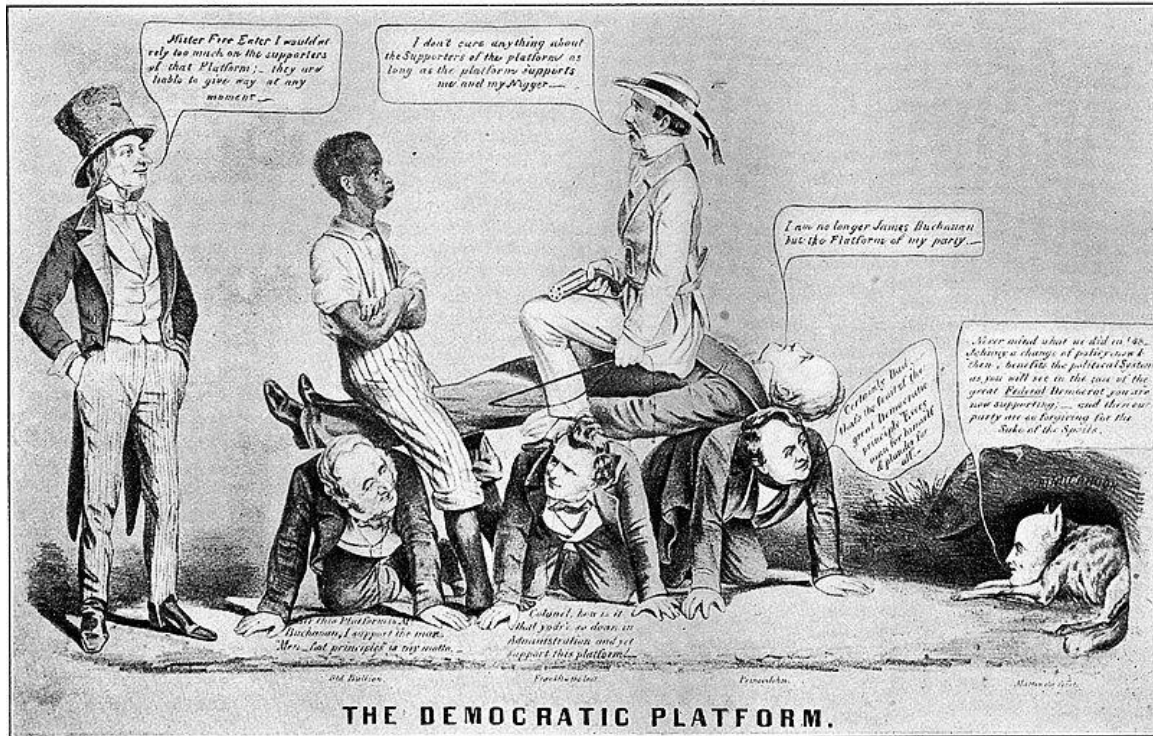
Anti-Buchanan political cartoons published during the campaign are a third primary source available to historians that showed Northerners criticizing Buchanan’s lack of

¹¹⁹ *New York Herald*, July 14, 1856.

¹²⁰ Eric Foner. *The Story of American Freedom*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998),

¹²¹ Murphy, *Manhood*, 41.

mastery over himself and insinuated that that lack of self-mastery made him less of a man. One of the less subtle ones showed Buchanan lying down horizontally and serving as a literal platform:¹²²



The nominee is propped up by prominent Doughfaces like Pierce and Senator Thomas Hart Benton, and via a speech bubble is saying, “I am no longer James Buchanan but the platform of my party.” A slave and his owner are sitting on top of platform-Buchanan, literally being supported by him. The slave owner is holding a whip in one hand and a gun in the other, and his speech bubble says, “I don’t care anything about the supporters of the platform as long as their platform supports me and my nigger.”¹²³ The

¹²² N. Currier and Louis Maurer. *The Democratic Platform*. United States, 1856. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/91795206/>

¹²³ N. Currier and Louis Maurer. *The Democratic Platform*. United States, 1856. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/91795206/>.

argument of the image was that the slave owner was the one with the power, the Doughfaces on their hands and knees were the base of his support, and Buchanan, servile to the wishes of both those under him and above him, was practically irrelevant. If he were removed from the image the slave owner and his slave would just be sitting on the other Democrats. In this image he was portrayed as literally not a man, just a plank to support those who control him. More frequently than any other attack against his manhood, Buchanan's lack of independence was discussed seriously in conventions, and mocked through numerous campaign songs and editorial cartoons. This argument implied that Buchanan's manhood could be determined via his party devotion, just as it was thought that the type of man he was could reveal the policies he would pursue as President of the United States.

The Role of Buchanan's Bachelorhood

While his lack of mastery over himself was the chief complaint made against Buchanan during the election, his bachelor status did receive some attention during the campaign as well.

Interestingly, there is only one recorded instance of the speakers at either national convention mentioning Buchanan's bachelorhood. As already mentioned, no statement was made about it at the Republican National Convention, when delegates already knew that their nominee would be running against Buchanan. The only speaker who addressed the subject at the Democratic National Convention did so in the speech immediately following Buchanan's official clinching of the nomination. Colonel Samuel Black of Pennsylvania, coming to the close of a speech praising his party's nominee, said, "Mr.

Buchanan, we confess, is a bachelor. But the reason is a complete vindication as will, I am sure, satisfy every gentleman here present. It is this—as soon as James Buchanan was old enough to marry, he became wedded to the Constitution of his country, and the laws of Pennsylvania do not allow a man to have more than one wife.”¹²⁴ While meant as a humorous remark Black also demonstrated political savvy. Calling one an adherent to the Constitution, especially in front of the Southern-dominated Democratic Party, was a loaded choice of words akin to describing someone as being for “state’s rights” during the Civil Rights Era one hundred years later. Colonel Black’s statement essentially said, “Do not worry about the particulars of the man; he is for our policies.” This was another way of saying what Buchanan himself said to the electorate: do not worry about who I am as a person, I am for the Democratic Party’s platform. For Democrats like Preston Brooks in the South, and to crucial Northern democrats in states like Pennsylvania, this proved to be a winning argument. The need to “vindicate” Buchanan’s bachelorhood with a satisfactory reason suggests an awareness that his single status was a defiance of norms that could potentially make their candidate vulnerable, but not to the extent that the topic could not be joked about. Perhaps doing so was a conscious attempt to minimize the damage the issue could bring to the campaign by framing it as a trivial. Based on the election results it appears the majority of the electorate agreed with that assessment.

In contrast with the conventions however, both Buchanan’s and Fremont’s marital status received attention in campaign biographies, in Republican campaign songs, and in the partisan press. The Fremont campaign publicly celebrated their candidate’s marriage with Jesse Fremont, daughter of one of the most famous Democratic senators of the age,

¹²⁴ Parkhurst, *Democrat National Convention*, 59.

Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri. Decades earlier Fremont and 17-year-old Jesse Benton had caused a national scandal when they eloped against the wishes of her powerful father. Benton eventually gave in to his daughter's refusal to part with Fremont, allowed the young couple to live in his house, and used his connections to secure employment for the Pathfinder, as he was known, getting him a job surveying land out west. In 1856 this family squabble became front-page news again when Thomas Hart Benton endorsed and campaigned for Buchanan over his own son-in-law.¹²⁵ In *Free Hearts and Free Homes* Pierson argued that the elopement with Jessie “enabled Republicans to fashion John into a model of idealized masculinity.”¹²⁶ Unlike Colonel Black talking about Buchanan's marital status, Fremont's supporters did not feel the need to make jokes about his elopement. Rather than an embarrassing scandal from Fremont's past that should be avoided, Republican speakers like Kansas Governor Charles Robinson argued that, “the man who dared to take the responsibility of captivating and running away with Jessie Benton in defiance of [her father]—such a man will not hesitate to take the responsibility to wipe out the policy and corruptions of Frank Pierce from the White House.”¹²⁷ In other words, Fremont's marriage, and specifically the manly qualities he demonstrated by eloping with Jessie, would have positive policy implications. Unlike Buchanan, a tool of the slave power, Congressman Burlingame of Massachusetts claimed that John and Jessie's elopement demonstrated that the Republican candidate “was a man who could not be driven, who could not be scared.”¹²⁸ The argument to voters was that just as he had stood up to Senator Benton, Fremont was manly and independent enough to stand up

¹²⁵ Candice Shy Hooper, *Lincoln's General's Wives: Four Women Who Influenced the Civil War—for Better and for Worse*. (Kent: Kent State University Press, 2016), 41.

¹²⁶ Pierson, *Hearts*, 138.

¹²⁷ Pierson, *Hearts*, 139-140.

¹²⁸ *New York Daily Tribune*, September 25, 1856.

to the slave power and those Doughface Northerners and Southern politicians who, in their view, supported the slave power under the guise of preserving the national union between the states. It is likely the effectiveness of the argument was enhanced by those inclined to believe it by the fact that Senator Benton himself was one of those politicians. Fremont would not be a tool like Buchanan; he would continue to be a freeman of action who was brave enough to take what he wanted. Supporters of Fremont argued that his demonstration of manly action and independence served as a window into the kind of policies he would implement as President of the United States.

Members of Congress were not the only ones who felt they could extrapolate what kind of men the candidates were based on their marital statuses. While the majority of German and Irish immigrants continued to give their support to the Democratic Party in 1856, at least some found the difference in marital status worthy of consideration when casting their vote. At a meeting of Germans in New York City, a speaker voiced the question, “Shall we vote for an old bachelor, who had never the courage to take a wife? Or shall we vote for...the man who had the courage to steal his wife when she was refused to him?”¹²⁹ Ignoring how Jessie Fremont’s independence was not considered in this statement, the distinction drawn between an old bachelor and the courageous man who took physical action to get what he wanted could not be more stark. There is an implied judgment that being a bachelor was a lesser status that did not live up to the speaker’s ideal of manhood.

These are clear cases of James Buchanan’s bachelorhood being used against him in the political arena. None of these men ever said though that being a bachelor alone should disqualify Buchanan from serving as President. The bachelor status supposedly

¹²⁹ *New York Daily Tribune*, September 25, 1856.

revealed something about the character of the man, something that is seen time and time again throughout the campaign. In contrast to Fremont, Buchanan had failed to demonstrate that he was his own man, someone who would drive the nation, not be driven by others. His lack of a wife was a symptom of a larger problem: Buchanan's lack of independence and his willingness to submit to others. Fremont's supporters used his marriage to Jessie to drive the narrative that he was bold, courageous, and manly. The *New York Herald* wrote a pro-Fremont editorial that contrasted the two candidates thusly: "Through his whole life [Buchanan] has been a cold and timid man, following in the wake of other men, while Fremont has been a veritable and notable pioneer, leading the way in the path of empire, and opening up hitherto unknown regions to science and Anglo-Saxon civilization."¹³⁰ This was already an established narrative: one candidate was a follower while the other was a leader. One was a tool, a Doughface willing to submit to Southern wishes, while the other was "the Pathfinder," a man who blazed his own trail. Marital status fit into that narrative, and received significant attention during the election, but in speeches and partisan newspapers it was merely a piece of larger narratives about the candidates based around policy issues and ideals of manhood.

In contrast, Republican campaign songs frequently mentioned Buchanan's bachelorhood. Most references were only a line or two, such as "they say of true manhood, he hasn't a drop/Who has not the courage the question to pop."¹³¹ Similar to the convention speeches and newspaper editorials, these lyrics were a humorous way to connect his bachelor status to larger narratives of the campaign that were already established, that Buchanan lacked the courage necessary to meet ideals of manhood.

¹³⁰ *New York Herald*, July 12th, 1856.

¹³¹ Pierson, *Hearts*, 139.

Often bachelorhood was only brought up at the end of songs that focused on other aspects of the election. For example, one song that was mainly devoted to extolling the virtues of Fremont only references Buchanan's lack of a spouse in the final verse: "Then hurrah for Fremont, and Jessie too/And with them we'll beat the bach'lor man!/We should, we will, we can--/And with them we'll beat old Buchan!"¹³² Fremont is great enough to deserve your vote all on his own, the song argued, but with a Republican win the voter will also get Jessie too, whereas "the bach'lor man" only comes by himself. Similarly, another song saw his bachelorhood as an additional way to put down Buchanan in contrast to Fremont. After attacking Buchanan for various reasons, chief among them being the oft-repeated criticism that he was a "tool" of the plantation owners, the song ended by criticizing that Buchanan had "no dearer self/The partner of his soul/Fremont has got a "better half"/And what must be the whole!/And in the old White House shall send/Sweet music to the aisles/And like a Jessiemine will wreath/Its perch with flowering smiles."¹³³ But both of these songs treat the marital status of the two major candidates as one issue among many, and certainly not the issues that are at the top of the list of complaints.

Additionally, these songs seem to be capitalizing on pro-Jessie Fremont sentiment at least as much as negative feelings related to bachelorhood. Songs that reference that Fremont was married tend to mention Jessie by name, either directly or, as in the case of the last song, indirectly by making a play on the name of the Jessamine flower. Jessie Fremont biographers like Candice Shy Hooper have argued that Jessie was wildly popular among the Republican electorate. Hooper, reflecting on the many ways that the election of 1856 was a historic campaign, added that it was also "the first presidential

¹³² *New York Herald*, July 14th, 1856.

¹³³ *New York Herald*, July 14th, 1856.

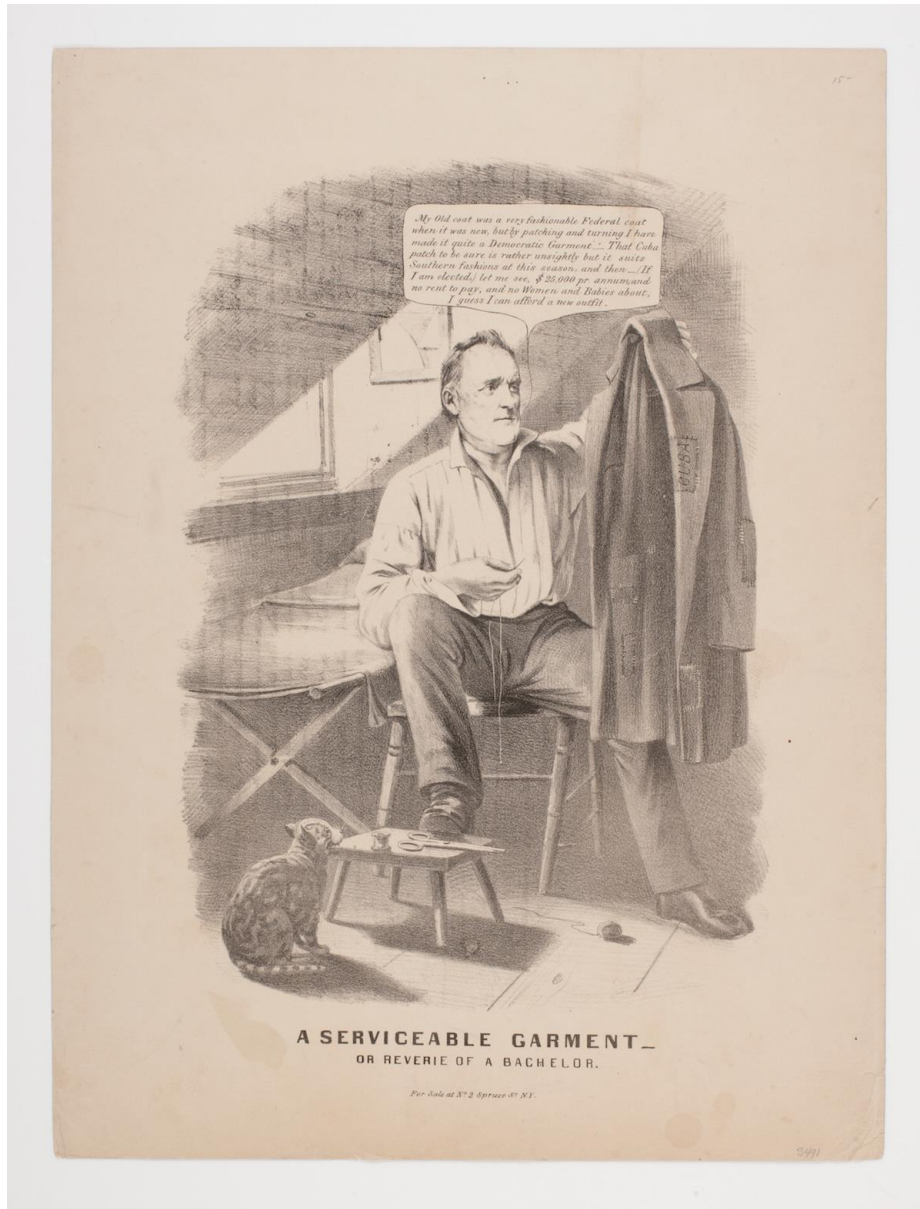
election in which a candidate's wife was prominently featured in a positive manner."¹³⁴ Banners at rallies often celebrated both "John and Jessie" and one went even further by excluding John Fremont all together: "Jessie for the White House." Hooper argued that "the nascent Republican Party seized upon Jessie's popularity and her talents to attract attention to it."¹³⁵ Certainly her inclusion in so many Republican campaign songs supports that conclusion. It is likely that some of this criticism of Buchanan's bachelorhood was simply a way for Republicans to continue keeping the politically popular Jessie Benton-Fremont in the mind of voters as much as possible. Rallies were designed to excite larger swaths of the electorate compared to the conventions, which, especially in the nineteenth century, focused more on party platforms and policy distinctions. Therefore it makes sense that the rallies gave more attention to the candidate's popular wife, and also referenced Buchanan's lack of a wife more frequently, than either party felt compelled to do at their national conventions.

Finally, there is an oft-cited political cartoon that mocked Buchanan's bachelorhood while simultaneously making the more consistent criticism that the candidate lacked manly independence and changed his policy positions whenever advantageous.¹³⁶

¹³⁴ Hooper, *Wives*, 41

¹³⁵ Hooper, *Wives*, 42.

¹³⁶ N. Currier, *A Serviceable Garment—Or Reverie of a Bachelor. United States, 1856*. Retrieved from the Library of Congress. <https://www.loc.gov/item/2003656586/>.



The image is of Buchanan sitting alone in a dark room looking sad and trying to mend an old coat above the caption "Reverie of a Bachelor", an allusion to the title of a popular non-fiction book of the same name published in 1850. All of this subtly highlighted that Buchanan lacked a wife, like Jessie Fremont perhaps, who could mend his clothing for him. The illustrator may have wanted viewers to pity Buchanan, but certainly he was not a man to admire or vote for. This cartoon is one of the most cited by

historians when discussing the election of 1856 or just Buchanan in general, especially when claiming his known gay identity.¹³⁷ The focus is almost always solely on the jabs taken at Buchanan's single status. Writers like Loewen argue that Buchanan sewing, a gendered action associated with femininity, was evidence that people during his time knew that he was involved in a homosexual relationship. Once a person understands the political issues of the period however, a closer look at the cartoon reveals that while it did indeed poke fun at Buchanan's bachelorhood the main attack of the cartoon was about his flip-flopping on slavery's expansion. In the cartoon, while working alone in the dark room Buchanan mutters to himself, "My old coat was a very fashionable Federal coat when it was new, but by patching and turning I have made it quite a Democratic garment." To the politically aware in 1856, or those who studied the political history of the 1850s, this would be an obvious jab at Buchanan's shifting party allegiances, a clever way of referencing that this Democrat used to be a part of the Federalist Party. The cartoon version of Buchanan goes on to remark, "That Cuba patch to be sure is rather unsightly but it suits Southern fashions at this season." The coat does indeed have a newly (and somewhat clumsily) sewn on patch that says "CUBA" in large letters. This references Buchanan's expansionist desire to annex Cuba as a territory of the United States, a desire shared by most southern Democrats and loathed by Republicans because both believed that Cuba's climate and geography would likely lead to the expansion of slavery.¹³⁸ The critique here is again twofold. Buchanan the bachelor cannot sew well, but the cartoon more seriously criticized him for taking policy positions based on the "fashions of the season" and supporting what he knew to be "unsightly" in order to win

¹³⁷ Klein, *Buchanan*, 45. Pierson, *Hearts*, 140.

¹³⁸ Baker, *Buchanan*, 10.

Southern favor. Finally, Buchanan's speech bubble ends by mentioning his bachelorhood explicitly. Cartoon Buchanan says, "If I am elected, let me see, \$25,000 per annum, and no rent to pay, and no women and babies about, I guess I can afford a new outfit." The sad old lonely man in the image, whom the illustrator wanted the audience to understand had no spouse or children that he cared for like Fremont, could very well get a new coat if he was elected to the White House. The jab at the bachelorhood, the personal attack, is undeniable, but it is not about homosexuality. Like all good political cartoons there is a more complex statement beneath the jab though. The political argument was about his lack of adhesion to principle, that just as he once transformed his Federalist coat into a Democratic one, no one can be sure what kind of coat, or what policy positions, Buchanan would actually stick to if he was elected President of the United States. As has been seen, this argument was made against Buchanan everywhere during the campaign of 1856: not just in this political cartoon, but in the partisan press, in campaign songs at rallies, and even at the conventions that failed to make an issue of his bachelorhood.

Conclusion

Buchanan's bachelorhood was repeatedly commented upon during the American presidential campaign of 1856, but the election results prove that it was a status that voters were willing to look past. While campaign songs and political cartoons mocked Buchanan for not having a spouse, being unmarried was not discussed as disqualifying in and of itself, even by Buchanan's political opponents. To them, his bachelorhood was rather a symptom of Buchanan's larger defects as a leader. To Southerners Buchanan was not enough of a fighter; to many Northerners he lacked manly independence. Both groups

preferred other men as leaders, men who more closely performed their ideal of “martial manhood.” Once Buchanan became the nominee and promised to uphold the Democratic Party’s platform, Southerners backed him with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The Southern states alone would not have won him the election however. Buchanan’s electoral victory depended on support from Northern Democrats. For those voters, Buchanan’s “restrained manhood” was appealing since these moderate voters hoped for a man who could keep the peace. In 1856 a martial type of manhood was defeated at the polls and a restrained type of manhood was elevated to the White House.

However, while restrained manhood triumphed politically in 1856, calls for a more “martial manhood” at the Republican National Convention illuminate the existence of an appreciation of that ideal in the North as well as the South. And in the next election, the election of 1860, the country chose Abraham Lincoln, a man the Republican Party portrayed as a rough frontiersman just as they had with Fremont only four years earlier. Once Johnson finished Lincoln’s term there were seven men who served as president before Theodore Roosevelt assumed the office. Six of those seven had fought in the Civil War. It appears a restrained type of manhood fell out of favor even before the rise of Roosevelt and the simultaneous construction of the homosexual identity. Was this perhaps due to feelings caused by the failures of the Buchanan administration? Or the expansion of the commander-in-chief aspect of the presidency under Lincoln? More broadly, are there patterns to when America has sought a restrained man in the White House versus someone who appears more combative? What can these patterns tell us about a given time’s process of creating manhood? Further study is needed.

It is possible that no amount of further study will ever tell us whether James Buchanan and William King had a sexual relationship. Even if that could be proved it

would still be inaccurate to call James Buchanan our first “gay” president, since that category of identity did not exist during his lifetime. James Buchanan was still a unique figure in American history however, and not just for being the only lifelong bachelor to be elected president. He was also a man who was elected President of the United States due in part to the fact that his personality was determined to be more feminine in nature than his opponent’s. He was elected because of, and not despite, these perceptions. Many who like to speculate that Buchanan was “gay” are interested in him because they are seeking leaders from the past who challenged dominant gender ideals. While Buchanan’s feminine masculinity was actually idealized by many in 1856, a Progressive Era man deemed to be feminine could find his political career in ruins, as detailed in Murphy’s study. It is often erroneously assumed however that that is the way that it always was. Therefore, those wishing to challenge historical assumptions regarding gender ideals can still use the example of Buchanan: his election in 1856 is evidence that the interplay between gender ideals and presidential politics has been more complex and varied than is often understood.

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