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# Petty Passions, Nobler Actions, and Two Peculiar Institutions: Sectionalism, Partisanship, and the United States Senate, 1845-1850

Stanley G. Schwartz

Cedarville University, [sschwartz292@cedarville.edu](mailto:sschwartz292@cedarville.edu)

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# Research & Scholarship SYMPOSIUM

## **Petty Passions, Nobler Actions, and Two Peculiar Institutions: Sectionalism, Partisanship, and the United States Senate, 1845-1850**

The period from 1845-1850 was a critical moment in American history, as the question of the expansion of slavery into western territories battered the nation, turning a political system until then focused on issues of tariff and banking, to the decision of sectional and moral questions. Despite the emotion and danger of the time, the Senate, which ultimately decided the questions of slavery's expansion, brokered the Compromise of 1850, a measure that stemmed the sectionalist fervor for a time. This was achieved only through the seasoned leadership and sacrifice of uniquely great American political leaders, overcoming complications of party and section. Nevertheless, the challenges to long-term national political health remained, leading to the Compromise's undoing only four years later due to flaws evident during the period of its development and construction. The United States Senate, addressing the expansion of slavery from 1845-1850, failed to sufficiently resolve the growing moral, political, and ideological tension with the Compromise of 1850 because of the opposing sections, divided parties, separate generations, and conflicting leaders which characterized the body. This paper examines the institutional context of the Senate's actions from 1845-1850, including the political party system, growing sectionalism, and the rise of a new generation of political leaders, from the perspective of the great Senators of the period, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, and Thomas Hart Benton. Quantitative analysis of voting patterns in the Senate during the period is mixed with qualitative research for insight into the Senate's action and dynamics. Thus, a model of short-term sectionalism is arrived at illustrating why the Senate rejected some compromise plans and passed the Compromise of 1850, which was a short-term solution to the problem of slavery.