A.M. Brown’s Union letter book, 1864

Though it seems unimaginable today, Abraham Lincoln faced considerable challenges on his path to winning a second term in the White House. In the months preceding the 1864 election, the Union Army suffered major defeats at the Battle of the Crater and Battle of Cold Harbor, bolstering calls from the Copperhead wing of the Democratic Party for a peace settlement with the South. From within his own party, Lincoln received criticism from radical Republicans who believed he had not done enough to end slavery. Lincoln was also trying to buck the trend of single-term presidencies that had followed in the wake of Andrew Jackson. In August 1864, preparing for the possibility of defeat, Lincoln wrote a pledge, signed by the members of his cabinet, that stated, “This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to so co-operate with the President elect as to save the Union between the election and inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterwards.”

Undaunted by these odds, Lincoln’s supporters swung into action on behalf of their candidate.

The urgency of the 1864 election can be sensed from looking through the pages of a letter book from the Union Executive Committee of Allegheny County, a branch of a nationwide organization that worked to re-elect Lincoln and pro-Union legislators to Congress. Recently cataloged as part of the History Center’s National Historical Publications & Records Commission Basic Processing grant, the book belonged to A.M. Brown, a Pittsburgh lawyer who served as committee chairman. Within its pages is a circular that reveals what the organization believed was at stake in the elections to be held later that year. “Pennsylvania and the Union must be saved from the vortex into which northern traitors and copperheads (acting in concert with Southern rebels) are endeavoring to precipitate them,” the circular reads. “Abraham Lincoln and Andrew Johnson can and must be elected!”

Just like campaign strategists today, Lincoln’s supporters realized that their cause would be advanced through grassroots mobilization. Within the letter book is a circular written by Simon Cameron, formerly Lincoln’s secretary of war and governor of Pennsylvania, who was serving as chairman of the Pennsylvania Union State Central Committee. Addressing the county-level Union Executive Committee chairmen throughout the state, Cameron writes that, “instead of the campaign being conducted as others of a like character have been, by the assembling of the people in mass meetings, by the appeals of enthusiastic and eloquent orators, it must be fought hand-to-hand, by those who have charge of our organization meeting the people individually face to face, and urging on each man the performance of such loyal duty as is essential to the maintenance of the Government and the preservation of the union.”

Lincoln’s Democratic opponent that year was Major General George B. McClellan, a Pennsylvania native who had served as general-in-chief of the Union Army. Union military victories in Atlanta and the Shenandoah Valley in September seemed to bring the end of the war within sight, but Lincoln still anticipated a close race with McClellan, fearing he might lose both Pennsylvania and New York to his challenger.
Lincoln knew that winning the soldier vote would be the key to carrying the closely contested state.\(^1\) Lincoln was indeed popular among enlisted men, and the election of 1864 marked the first time that many states allowed soldiers to vote without returning to their home district. In Pennsylvania, those in military service could vote by proxy providing that their taxes had been assessed and paid within the last two years. The correspondence in the letter book reveals that Brown, in the weeks preceding the election, worked to ensure that Allegheny County soldiers had their taxes paid and ballots to record their vote. The efforts of Brown and the Union Executive Committee of Allegheny County, along with those of similar organizations throughout the state, helped Lincoln carry Pennsylvania on Election Day, on the way to a resounding defeat of McClellan.

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\(^2\) Ibid., 662.