

From Wide Awake to Woke: Anti-Establishment Politics and the Dangers of Political Corruption¹

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Abstract

The American electorate and political climate overall are deeply fractured today. The political divisions of the present are typified by a general disgust with the political status quo and a sense of having “awoken” to the realities of political corruption. This situation parallels a similar zeitgeist which prevailed from the mid 1850s in the United States following the breakdown of the “compromise system” (rooted in the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Compromise of 1850) with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. The underlying question of slavery, many American voters seem to have decided, could not be solved within the political process. Many at first dropped out of politics-as-usual by joining newly formed political parties such as the Know Nothings and the Republicans. The Election of 1860, however, witnessed the sudden rise, from this political ennui, of the Wide Awakes, a militant group whose actions helped galvanize political disaffection into mobilization for civil war. Left unchecked, disgust with political corruption in Washington today, although underlain by the ideological divide of globalization and not slavery, could lead to a similar crisis of the union as occurred in 1860.

Keywords

Wide Awakes, Know Nothings, Missouri Compromise, Compromise of 1850, Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), Abraham Lincoln, Stephen Douglas, Bleeding Kansas, “Woke”

Introduction

In mid August, 2017, hard left and far right

agitators clashed at the so-called Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. On August 12, a neo-Nazi plowed his car into a group of demonstrators at the rally, killing thirty-two-year-old Heather Heyer and wounding more than two dozen other people. In the summers of 2018, 2019, and 2020, Antifa, a violent anarchist group, along with radicalized members of Black Lives Matter terrorized the residents of cities and towns across the United States. In Portland, Oregon, in 2019, disabled citizens and elderly passersby were beaten, violent altercations ensued with right-wing counter-demonstrators, and journalist Andy Ngo suffered brain damage after being beaten by Antifa members. Patriot Prayer groups were also subjected to violent attacks by Antifa and others on the hard left. The summer of 2020 has been one of the most violent on record, with Antifa, Black Lives Matter, and other groups orchestrating and encouraging arson, looting, rioting, murder, and other crimes in response to perceived discrepancies in police brutality against people of color, including Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and Jacob Blake. On the opposing side, rightist militias stand ready to fend off encroachments by the left-wing revolutionaries, and in Kenosha, Wisconsin, a seventeen-year-old resident of the neighboring state of Illinois allegedly shot someone in self-defense during riots in that city in August of 2020. The United States appears to be heading towards a civil war.

Those witnessing this process unfold in real time may be tempted to believe that the situation in the twenty-first century is unique. But there is historical evidence from the American past to refute the notion that what we are seeing today is *sui generis*. Almost exactly one hundred and sixty years ago, the nation was convulsed by a wave of paramilitary and political-revivalist violence which dwarfed the

¹ I thank Prof. Mark Ramseyer for his astute comments on earlier versions of this paper.

localized violence displayed by Antifa and other such groups in the present day. The main case I will consider in this paper is that of violence perpetrated by a quasi-militia group in the United States during the run-up to the 1860 presidential election.

The presidential election of 1860, the most dangerous election in American history, came during a time of wildly inflated political rhetoric—and appalling political violence. The episodes of violence surrounding the 1860 election are particularly noteworthy because youth had grown disgusted with politics in general, a sentiment shared by many older voters as well. Instructive for us today is that this overheated rhetoric and concomitant violence stemmed from a very similar widespread cynicism towards corrupt politics to the political mood prevailing in 2016 and after. The explosion of rhetorical and political violence in 1860 did not arise out of a vacuum. The price of political corruption can be far greater than a lost election or a diminished political party, a historical reality that should be applied to assessments of the political and social state of the United States in the present.

The Election of 1860 as Denouement of Compromise

In the case of the 1860 election, the season of intense political violence, which was followed by a devastating war, was in turn preceded by an increasingly wholesale rejection of the entire political arrangement. Voters had grown disillusioned with the political process in the United States and had largely lost faith in the ability of that process to bring about a resolution to the country's ills. The hinge of this broad rejection of the political process was the issue of slavery, and the failure of the federal government to effect a solution to the slavery divide. The question of slavery had long festered within the American republic, and attempts to work out compromises on the slavery question had become more urgent as the

nation expanded. The issue became hopelessly complicated by the acquisition of vast territories from the Republic of Mexico in the Mexican-American War. The Compromise of 1850, hammered out to accommodate slaveholding and Free Soil ideologies within erstwhile Mexican land, as well as in the new states of Florida and Texas (both slave, both 1845), Wisconsin (free, 1848), and California (free, 1850), was a political boondoggle unsatisfying to hardly any parties to the deal.² The strengthening of fugitive slave laws, meant to ensure the smooth operation of the compromise and thus the preservation of the ideologically divided union, only exacerbated the sense among the electorate in general of disgust with the horse-trading and deal-making in Washington.

The “drain the swamp” mood that prevailed in the 1850s was countenanced in earnest when the old-line Whig Party collapsed in the wake of the deeply unpopular Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854.³ New parties hostile to business-as-usual in Washington, such as the nativist Know Nothings and the radical-abolitionist Republicans, both formed in 1854 when the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which effectively nullified the Missouri Compromise of a generation before and reshuffled the already unsteady Compromise of 1850, went into effect.⁴ The Kansas-Nebraska Act cancelled, in the minds of many voters, any hope for a Washington-led resolution to the slavery problem. People began to tune out professional politicians, and a palpable sense of disassociation from politics in general filled the air. Supporters on both sides of the slavery issue rightly saw Kansas as a proxy battleground for the slavery question. Jayhawker abolitionists and largely Democrat-aligned slavery advocates thronged Kansas and acted out such violence over whether Kansas would enter the Union as a slave state or free—for upon this question depended whether there would be a plurality of slave or free states, which in turn would have enormous national political repercussions one way or the other—that Kansas was known as “Bleeding Kansas,”

² See, e.g., Herbert J. Doherty, Jr., “Florida and the Crisis of 1850,” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Feb., 1953), 32-47, and Robert R. Russel, “What Was the Compromise of 1850?” *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 22, no. 3 (Aug., 1956), 292-309.

³ See Roy F. Nichols, “The Kansas-Nebraska Act: A Century of Historiography,” *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 43, no. 2 (Sep., 1956), 187-212.

⁴ See, e.g., William E. Gienapp, “Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority in the North before the Civil War,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 72, no. 3 (Dec., 1985), 529-59, Michael F. Holt, “The Politics of Impatience: The Origins of Know Nothingism,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 60, no. 2 (Sep., 1973), 311. See also Charles Zimmerman, “The Origin and Rise of the Republican Party in Indiana from 1854 to 1860,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, vol. 13, no. 4 (Dec., 1917), 349-412, Bruce Levine, “Conservatism, Nativism, and Slavery: Thomas R. Whitney and the Origins of the Know-Nothing Party,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 88, no. 2 (Sep., 2001), 455-88, and Joseph Schafer, “Know-Nothingism in Wisconsin,” *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Sep., 1924), 3-21.

the site of political violence caused by the failure of the political system of the United States to address, much less resolve, political disputes of great magnitude, such as the issue of slavery and the expansion of the Republic.⁵ Much like the United States ca. 2020, the United States ca. 1854 was a fraying amalgam of distrust of Washington and disdain for the political status quo.

The election of Illinois congressman Abraham Lincoln to the White House in 1860 precipitated the final crisis of the Union and, ultimately, the Civil War. But the Civil War was preceded by bouts of localized violence, prolegomena to the pitched battles that define the war today. The 1859 raid on Harper's Ferry by John Brown (who had been a major participant in the Bleeding Kansas violence) and his followers is one such example of isolated bloodshed. But the radical abolitionist views of the Brown group do not quite stand as synecdoche for the wider political fraying of the republic, which was a function of slavery in part, to be sure, but by the mid 1850s also of a much broader distaste for politics-as-usual. This rejection of politics-as-usual, of machine politics and the network of graft that typified so much of American politics in the middle of the nineteenth century, was represented not by John Brown, a loner leading a desperate charge, but by a group of young men with a nationwide following and extensive political network calling themselves the Wide Awakes. The Wide Awakes represent very nicely the late-1850s zeitgeist of disgust with the political process outright, and also presage the "woke" mentality behind much of the political violence of the present.

The Rise of the Wide Awakes

Although almost completely forgotten today, the Wide Awakes were not so much a centrally controlled organization as a thematic uprising, almost exclusively by young men, against what many youths saw as incorrigible and systemic political corruption. Taking as their avatar one Abraham Lincoln, unlikely leader of an unlikely and upstart political party, the

Wide Awakes took politics from the ballot box to the streets, terrorizing entire cities and towns and brawling with those who dared oppose them either in word or in deed. The impromptu skirmishes and threats of even greater violence between the Wide Awakes and other youths, especially Southern sympathizers and those from Democratic strongholds, pointed to an overall, nationwide rejection of the political status quo. The Wide Awakes did not cause the Civil War, but they foreshadowed it, and especially the abandonment of politics that underlay it.

One clue to the appeal of the Wide Awakes comes, counterintuitively, from the transformation of political engagement in the United States effected by the rise of identification with political parties. As Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin write:

Virtually all historians agree that political engagement, which went well beyond voting, was both widespread and deeply felt within the electorate. Jean H. Baker observes "that nineteenth-century Americans gave closer attention to politics than is the case today, thereby guaranteeing a broader, deeper understanding of issues [...] party rallies were better attended than Sunday services or even meetings of itinerant preachers," and elections "became secular holy days." [...] "More than in any subsequent era," writes William E. Gienapp, "political life formed the very essence of the pre-Civil War generation's experience." The political party, according to Michael E. McGerr, was not merely an institution for formulating public policy and organizing election campaigns, but "a natural lens through which to view the world." "Politics seem to enter into everything," complained a nonpartisan editor during the heat of the 1860 presidential campaign.⁶

But this intense partisanship of 1860 stemmed, ironically, from the breakdown of the party system that had prevailed to that point. The compromises that had postponed near-crises in the past had been

⁵ See Sara M. Benson, "Federal Punishment and the Legal Time of Bleeding Kansas," in *The Prison of Democracy: Race, Leavenworth, and the Culture of Law* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 57-80, M.M. Quaife, "Bleeding Kansas and the Pottawatomie Murders," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 6, no. 4 (Mar., 1920), 556-560, Raymond Curtis Miller, "The Background of Populism in Kansas," *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, vol. 11, no. 4 (Mar., 1925), 469-489, and A. Theodore Brown, "Business 'Neutrality' on the Missouri-Kansas Border: Kansas City, 1854-1857," *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 29, no. 2 (May, 1963), 229-240.

effected by means of backroom deals that the idealistic youth of 1860 found intolerable. As a symbol of these “awakened” youths’ awareness of political chicanery and their desire to see to it that it ended, they adopted a pair of open eyes as their coat of arms. To show that their devotion to clean politics went beyond signs and sloganeering, however, they wore uniforms and drilled and marched in the streets. The Wide Awakes can only be described as ad hoc paramilitary units, forming ranks and provoking street battles with their rivals.

Like many others disaffected with the political status quo, the Wide Awakes were in no mood to work as patient reformers within the prevailing system. They wanted to throw the old political ways out entirely and begin their national experiment again from scratch. This would require organized violence, and the Wide Awakes seemed to intuit this. Historian Jon Grinspan captures the militancy and inflexibility of the Wide Awakes, describing them as an “army”:

Youth and militarism distinguished the Wide Awakes from the hundreds of other clubs milling around nineteenth-century American elections.⁷ The organization appealed to white men in their teens, twenties, and thirties, attracting ambitious upstarts sporting youthful goatees who were “beginning to feel their true power.” Using popular social events, an ethos of competitive fraternity, and even promotional comic books, the Wide Awakes introduced many to political participation and proclaimed themselves the newfound voice of younger voters. Though often

remembered as part of the Civil War generation stirred by the conflict, these young men became politically active a year before fighting began. The structured, militant Wide Awakes appealed to a generation profoundly shaken by the partisan instability of the 1850s and offered young northerners a much-needed political identity. They were also the first major campaign organization to adopt a military motif. Upon enlistment members became soldiers in the Wide Awake army—complete with ranks, uniforms, and duties.⁸

Grinspan notes that “the Wide Awakes did not intend to incite actual violence. They chose their symbolism to appeal to the widespread ‘militia fever’ of the era, to glorify aggressive political combat, and to signify the organizational strength and uniformity of the new Republican party.”⁹ This assertion is belied, however, by the Wide Awakes’ actions, which were remarkably consistent across the country.

For example, Col. John W. Vinson remembers the election of 1860 in this way:

Unless one has passed through the political campaigns of those years [i.e., 1858 and 1860], it is not possible to fully realize the intense excitement that then prevailed. I can only briefly allude to a few incidents of the campaign of 1860 in this State [i.e., Illinois], including the political rally I attended in Springfield, Mr. Lincoln’s home, when it was estimated that there were 75,000 or more present. [...] For that campaign,

⁶ Glenn C. Altschuler and Stuart M. Blumin, “Limits of Political Engagement in Antebellum America: A New Look at the Golden Age of Participatory Democracy,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 84, no. 3 (Dec., 1997), 855, citing Jean H. Baker, *Affairs of Party: The Political Culture of Northern Democrats in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (Ithaca: Fordham University Press, 1983), 23, 269, 271, William E. Gienapp, “Politics Seem to Enter into Everything: Political Culture in the North, 1840-1860,” in William E. Gienapp et al., eds., *Essays on American Antebellum Politics, 1840-1860* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1982), 66, and Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865-1928* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 13. See also Joel H. Sibley, *The Partisan Imperative: The Dynamics of American Politics before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), cited in Altschuler and Blumin, “Limits of Political Engagement in Antebellum America,” op. cit., 856.

⁷ Stephen Douglas had his own band of supporters, who called themselves the “Douglas Invincibles” and, as shown in the quote below, the “Douglas Guards”. Blumen and Altschuler, “Limits of Political Engagement in Antebellum America,” op. cit., 870, citing an illustration from *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, Sept. 1, 1860, 249. See more generally Daniel J. Ryan, “Clubs in Politics,” *The North American Review*, vol. 146, no. 375 (Feb., 1888), 172-77. Political paramilitary groups appear to be a function of modern politics. See, e.g., “II: The Inheritance of Lawlessness” and “III: Party and Movement,” in Chapter Eight, “Continental Imperialism: the Pan-Movements” in Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 317-348, describing the “Black Hundreds” in Russia and the rise of mob rule in the context of the Dreyfus Affair, and “I: The Masses,” in Chapter Ten, “A Classless Society,” on the Sturmabteilung (SA) in Weimar Germany and into the Third Reich, 399-427.

⁸ Jon Grinspan, “Young Men for War: The Wide Awakes and Lincoln’s 1860 Presidential Campaign,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 96, no. 2, Abraham Lincoln at 200: History and Historiography (Sep., 2009), 357-58, citing Julius G. Rathbun, “The Wide Awakes: The Great Political Organization of 1860,” *Connecticut Quarterly*, 1 (Oct., 1895), “Wide Awakes,” *Chillicothe Scioto Gazette*, Oct. 2, 1860, “Wide Awakes,” *Jackson Weekly Mississippian*, Sept. 28, 1860, Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), William E. Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party: 1852-1856* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), and Michael F. Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1978).

⁹ Grinspan, “Young Men for War,” op. cit., 358

both the Republican and Democratic parties organized clubs or companies to form marching processions at their political rallies, during the campaign. The Republican clubs thus organized were called 'Wide-Awakes' and the Democratic clubs 'Douglas Guards' [after Sen. Stephen Douglas]. Each party had its peculiar style of uniform; that of the 'Wide-Awakes' being dark in color, and that of the 'Douglas Guards' red. Members of each were provided with swinging lamps attached to the end of a handle, to use in night parades. Horseback companies of these clubs were also formed, and they thought lightly of riding several miles to some neighboring town to participate in a parade.¹⁰

Then there is the testimonial of one Walter C. Clephane, who recalled his father Lewis Clephane's account of a run-in between some Washington, D.C. Wide Awakes and a rival organization during the 1860 presidential election.

At the time of the election of Mr. Lincoln, Lewis Clephane was president of the "Wideawakes" [sic], the Republican club of the city [of Washington, D.C.], comprising some two hundred members, who had their headquarters called the "Wigwam" [...] On the night when the returns of the election were received, after all the members of the club had left the place with the exception of some five or six, members of a small military organization known as the "National Volunteers" made an attack on the "Wigwam." [...] As the mob approached the doors were locked. These were quickly broken open by the mob, who rushed in, smashed the printing press and scattered the type in the printing office on the first floor. Meanwhile the little handful of Republicans had ascended with the slightest possible noise to the second floor, where the meeting of the organization had been held. It was not long before the mob followed them and proceeded to destroy the flags, pennants and

furniture of the club room. The third floor was the next refuge for the club members, and when the mob approached the third floor, the roof was the only place to which a further retreat could be made. This was promptly occupied. [...] Before closing the scuttle each member of the party took a loose brick from the chimney and prepared to give the invaders a warm reception should they advance beyond the third floor. They did not do this, however, but went down stairs and then some one cried: "Fire the building!" The feeling of the captives on the roof can be better imagined than described. The mob did not know they were in the building at all; nor were these gentlemen anxious to inform them to that effect; but they had no desire to remain and be roasted to death. While debating what was best to be done they were saved by the intervention of Captain Goddard and his little force of men, who scattered the rioters and released the captives.¹¹

Even members of the military viewed the Wide Awakes as harbingers of the end of the republic and of the political order inaugurated by the Founding Fathers. An anonymous diarist and witness to the 1860 election in New York City, notes that "Major Magruder of the army, a Southern man, [...] took off his hat when a procession of Wide-awakes [sic] passed his Broadway hotel last year and said, 'I salute the pall-bearers of the Constitution'; and then rather cleverly added, 'I think we ought to send some flowers over the way to the undertaker of the Union,' meaning, of course the Wide Awakes' avatar, Abraham Lincoln."¹²

Transitioning from Wide Awakism to Civil War

As Altschuler and Blumin remark, the parents of the Wide Awakes and other such political militias in the antebellum United States "rejoiced to see youthful rowdyism channeled into a military form of discipline."¹³ To be sure, however, while this aptitude of young men for rowdy behavior was a curse for

¹⁰ Col. John W. Vinson, "Personal Reminiscences of Mr. Lincoln," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Jan., 1916), 574

¹¹ Walter C. Clephane, "Lewis Clephane: A Pioneer Washington Republican," *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, Washington, D.C., vol. 21 (1918), 273. For more on the "wigwam" as the headquarters of the Wide Awakes, see William Hawley Smith, "Old-Time Campaigning and the Story of a Lincoln Campaign Song," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)*, vol. 13, no. 1 (Apr., 1920), 23-32.

¹² Anonymous, "The Diary of a Public Man. Unpublished Passages of the Secret History of the American Civil War," *The North American Review*, vol. 129, no. 273 (Aug., 1879), 140.

those who had to rear and educate them, it was a boon for military recruiters. The breakdown in democratic society led to the swelling, when war broke out, of the infantry ranks with former voters turned soldiering men. When a volunteer army was raised in Minnesota in 1861, for example, those who had belonged to the “Wide-Awakes” or the “Little Giants” (presumably a rival paramilitary organization; “the Little Giant” was a nickname for Stephen Douglas) found themselves ahead of their peers in mastery or mustering and drill.¹⁴

In the event, the Wide Awakes proved the instability of partisanship and the preference that the young felt for maneuvers over mere canvassing by frequently refusing to disband even after Lincoln had won the election of 1860. Historian Jon Grinspan writes:

While some companies disbanded after the election, hundreds of others continued to meet and offered to escort Lincoln down to Washington for his inauguration. They were politely refused, but the mere suggestion stoked southern fears. South Carolina fire-eaters began to organize “Minute Men” militias, not out of empty paranoia, but “as an offset to the Wide Awakes of the North.” The creation of the Minute Men is often mentioned as a major stepping-stone on the road to disunion, but few historians note that they were a direct response to the Wide Awakes. The link between secession and the movement is even stronger than previously realized. As South Carolina’s leaders debated secession late on the evening of December 20, one speaker referenced the movement. [...] The first Americans to secede did so with the Wide Awake movement on their minds, an emblem of the flawed Union they were fleeing. [...] Fear of the Wide Awakes [...] was a major factor in many

southerners’ calculus of disunion.¹⁵

The Wide Awakes, and the political disaffection that drove them to militancy, thus played a big part in bringing about the collapse of the federal system and the downfall of the union.

Conclusion

The parallels with the American present virtually draw themselves. The 2016 election, while certainly not as momentous as the election of 1860, brought into office a candidate who vowed to dismantle the entire Washington arrangement—to “drain the swamp” by breaking up the monopoly of elites over government and the emoluments flowing from being ensconced in power in the nation’s capital. The ideological line is no longer slavery, but globalization, which has fundamentally riven the American electorate into two halves arguably as passionately opposed to one another as were the pro-slavery and Free Soil supporters in the 1850s and 1860. These issues, slavery and globalization, are very different, of course, but the effect upon American politics is remarkably similar, and has led today, as some sixteen decades ago, to a widespread disaffection with, and even disgust for, the political status quo.

This is not to say that it is inevitable that a Know Nothing-type movement supported by much of the electorate today will devolve into Wide Awake-ism tomorrow, and then civil war the day after that. But there are already troubling signs that we are moving in that direction. Consider, for example, that the young people today who congratulate themselves for having seen through a system and society they consider rigged and fundamentally unfair refer to themselves as “woke,” or, as the young people of 1860 might have put it, “wide awake”.

¹³ Altschuler and Blumin, “Limits of Political Engagement in Antebellum America,” op. cit., 873

¹⁴ John D. Hicks, “The Organization of the Volunteer Army in 1861 with Special Reference to Minnesota,” *Minnesota History Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 5 (Feb., 1918), 353. The article that mentions this fact was written in 1918, when the United States had just entered World War I. The author duly writes in the opening paragraph: “Now that the war [i.e., the Great War] is at last a reality, we all feel justified in for once indulging our primal instincts and focusing our attention upon military events. [...] In a day when our government is bending every effort towards the raising of a mighty army, nothing could be more appropriate than the refreshing of our memories as to the methods used in assembling another army in 1861.” John D. Hicks, “The Organization of the Volunteer Army in 1861,” op. cit., 324.

¹⁵ Jon Grinspan, “Young Men for War,” op. cit., 377-78, citing George P. Bissell to Abraham Lincoln, Dec. 30, 1860, Lincoln Papers, available online at American Memory, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/amhome.html>, “Political Intelligence,” *New York Herald*, Oct. 20, 1860, “State Convention,” *Charleston Courier*, Dec. 22, 1860, “By the Telegraph,” *Jackson Weekly Mississippian*, Jan. 9, 1861, and “George Sanders on the Sequences of Southern Secession,” *Tri-Weekly Charleston Courier*, Nov. 8, 1860. On the collapse of the republic in general, see Michael E. Woods, “What Twenty-First-Century Historians Have Said about the Causes of Disunion: A Civil War Sesquicentennial Review of the Recent Literature,” *The Journal of American History*, vol. 99, no. 2 (Sep., 2012), 415-39.

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