When Votes Turn Violent

How a territorial decision became a violent feud

8.C.11.2.A "Explain how popular sovereignty in new territories regarding the institution of slavery led to factional feuds in "Bleeding Kansas.""

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline the rule for deciding whether to allow slavery in Kansas, circle the names of the opposing sides, and number three actions that show their dispute growing more intense.

A Vote Kansas Could Not Settle

1 In 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act. It let settlers in each new territory decide whether to allow slavery through local voting, an approach called popular sovereignty. The act also overturned an earlier limit on slavery north of a set line in the Louisiana Purchase. Suddenly, Kansas was more than a place to build farms. The outcome could change the balance between free and slave states. People who wanted slavery and people who opposed it both rushed into Kansas, determined to shape who would count as a settler.

2 In 1855, armed proslavery men crossed from Missouri into Kansas and cast illegal ballots in a territorial election. Their votes helped elect a proslavery legislature. Many free-state settlers said the election did not speak for the people living in Kansas. They organized a rival government in Topeka instead of accepting the legislature's authority. Now two groups claimed the right to make rules for the same territory. Popular sovereignty was supposed to settle the slavery question through local choice, but arguments over who could vote and whose government was lawful deepened the feud.

3 The fight moved beyond elections. In May 1856, a proslavery force attacked Lawrence, a free-state town, destroying newspaper presses and burning a hotel. Days later, the abolitionist John Brown and his followers killed five proslavery men near Pottawatomie Creek. More raids and killings followed, giving the struggle the name "Bleeding Kansas." The violence did not prove that voting was a bad idea by itself. It showed how a disputed vote on slavery, backed by rival claims to power and armed force, could turn neighbors into enemies.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did popular sovereignty draw people on both sides of slavery to Kansas?

2. How did the ballots cast by men from Missouri make the promised local choice seem unfair?

3. Why did free-state settlers form a rival government, and how did that deepen the feud?

4. How did the events at Lawrence and Pottawatomie Creek change the dispute over slavery?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine you are a Kansas newspaper editor in 1856. Write a 4- to 5-sentence editorial that traces how popular sovereignty led to a disputed election, rival governments, and violence. Include one specific event from the passage and ask readers to consider what makes a vote fair.

ANSWER KEY

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GRADE 8 · 8.C.11.2.A

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline the rule for deciding whether to allow slavery in Kansas, circle the names of the opposing sides, and number three actions that show their dispute growing more intense. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did popular sovereignty draw people on both sides of slavery to Kansas?	**Settlers would decide whether Kansas allowed slavery, so each side wanted enough supporters there to shape the outcome.**
2	How did the ballots cast by men from Missouri make the promised local choice seem unfair?	**The men crossed into Kansas and voted illegally, helping elect a proslavery legislature that many free-state settlers said did not represent Kansas residents.**
3	Why did free-state settlers form a rival government, and how did that deepen the feud?	**They rejected the authority of the legislature elected with illegal votes. The rival government meant two groups claimed the right to govern Kansas.**
4	How did the events at Lawrence and Pottawatomie Creek change the dispute over slavery?	**The opposing sides moved beyond arguments about voting to attacks and killings, turning the dispute into the violence called Bleeding Kansas.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Congress promised Kansas settlers a voice on slavery, but that promise has been twisted. Proslavery men from Missouri cast illegal ballots, helping a proslavery legislature take power. Free-state settlers rejected its authority and formed a rival government, leaving two sides claiming the right to rule. In Lawrence, a proslavery force destroyed newspaper presses and burned a hotel as the conflict turned violent. How can a vote settle a question if outsiders vote illegally and the people cannot agree on whose government is lawful?

Accept explanations that connect the local decision on slavery to competing settlers, a disputed election, rival claims to authority, and violence. Students may use either the attack on Lawrence or the killings near Pottawatomie Creek as their specific example.