

# The Breakdown of the Party System

by *Steven Mintz*

As late as 1850, the two-party system seemed healthy. Democrats and Whigs drew strength in all parts of the country. Then, in the early 1850s, the two-party system began to disintegrate in response to massive foreign immigration. By 1856 the Whig party had collapsed and been replaced by a new sectional party, the Republicans.

Between 1846 and 1855, more than three million foreigners arrived in America. In cities such as Chicago, Milwaukee, New York, and St. Louis immigrants actually outnumbered native-born citizens. Opponents of immigration capitalized on working-class fear of economic competition from cheaper immigrant labor, and resentment against the growing political power of foreigners.

In 1849 a New Yorker named Charles Allen responded to this anti-Catholic hostility by forming a secret fraternal society made up of native-born Protestant working men. Allen called this secret society "The Order of the Star Spangled Banner," and it soon formed the nucleus of a new political party known as the Know-Nothing or the American party. The party received its name from the fact that when members were asked about the workings of the party, they were supposed to reply, "I know nothing."

By 1855 the Know-Nothings had captured control of the legislatures in parts of New England and were the dominant opposition party to the Democrats in New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. In the presidential election of 1856, the party supported Millard Fillmore and won more than 21 percent of the popular vote and 8 electoral votes. In Congress, the party had 5 senators and 43 representatives. Between 1853 and 1855, the Know Nothings replaced the Whigs as the nation's second largest party.

In 1855 Abraham Lincoln denounced the Know-Nothings in eloquent terms:

I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it, "all men are created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics." When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty -- to Russia, for example, where despotism can be taken pure and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.

By 1856, the Know-Nothing party was in decline. Many Know-Nothing officeholders were relatively unknown men with little political experience. In the states where they gained control, the Know Nothings proved unable to enact their legislative program, which called for:

- a 21-year residency period before immigrants could become citizens and vote;
- a limitation on political office holding to native-born Americans, and
- restrictions on liquor sales.

The Know-Nothing party was supplanted in the North by a new and explosive sectional party, the Republicans. By 1856 Northern workers felt more threatened by the Southern slave power than by the Pope and Catholic immigrants. At the same time, fewer Southerners were willing to support a party that

ignored the question of the expansion of slavery. As a result, the Know-Nothing party rapidly dissolved.

Nevertheless, the Know-Nothings left an indelible mark on American politics. The movement eroded loyalty to the national political parties, helped destroy the Whig party, and made the political system less capable of containing the divisive issue of slavery.

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