

The Birth of the Republican Party

MAIN IDEA

In the mid-1850s, the issue of slavery and other factors split political parties and led to the birth of new ones.

WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The Republican and Democratic parties remain the major political forces in the United States today.

Terms & Names

- Franklin Pierce
- nativism
- Know-Nothing Party
- Free-Soil Party
- Republican Party
- Horace Greeley
- John C. Frémont
- James Buchanan

One American's Story

As editor of the *New York Tribune*, Horace Greeley always spoke his mind. A staunch abolitionist, Greeley consistently argued in his columns against popular sovereignty and in favor of forcible resistance to slave catchers.

In March 1855, after Greeley became frustrated with the Whig Party's shifting position on slavery, he issued a call to arms for "the friends of freedom" to "be girding up their loins for future contests" and join a new antislavery political party, the Republican Party.

A PERSONAL VOICE HORACE GREELEY

"[The Republicans have] the heart, the conscience and the understanding of the people with them. . . . All that is noble, all that is true, all that is pure, all that is manly, and estimable in human character, goes to swell the power of the anti-slavery party of the North. That party. . . now embraces every Northern man who does not want to see the government converted into a huge engine for the spread of slavery over the whole continent, every man . . . opposed to . . . the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska bill."

—quoted in *The Coming of the Civil War*

Greeley's appeal accurately reflected the changing national political scene. With the continuing tension over slavery, many Americans needed a national political voice. That voice was to be the Republican Party.

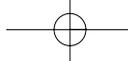


▲ Horace Greeley founded the *New York Tribune* in 1841.

New Political Parties Emerge

By the end of 1856, the nation's political landscape had shifted. The Whig Party had split over the issue of slavery, and the Democratic Party was weak. This left the new Republican Party to move within striking distance of the presidency.

SLAVERY DIVIDES WHIGS Divisions in the Whig Party widened in 1852 when General Winfield Scott became the Whig nominee for president. Scott owed his



nomination to Northern Whigs who opposed the Fugitive Slave Act and gave only lukewarm support to the Compromise of 1850. Southern Whigs, however, backed the compromise in order to appear both proslavery and pro-Union. Because of Scott's position, the Whig vote in the South fell from 50 percent in 1848, to 35 percent in 1852, handing the election to the Democratic candidate **Franklin Pierce**.

In 1854 the Kansas-Nebraska Act brought about the demise of the Whigs, who once again took opposing positions on legislation that involved the issue of slavery. Unable to agree on a national platform, the Southern faction splintered as its members looked for a proslavery, pro-Union party to join, while Whigs in the North sought a political alternative.

NATIVISM One alternative was the American Party which had its roots in a secret organization known as the Order of the Star-Spangled Banner. Members of this society believed in **nativism**, the favoring of native-born Americans over immigrants. Using secret handshakes and passwords, members were told to answer questions about their activities by saying, "I know nothing." When nativists formed the American Party in 1854, it soon became better known as the **Know-Nothing Party**.

Primarily middle-class Protestants, nativists were dismayed not only at the total number of new immigrants but also at the number of Catholics among them. To nativists, the Catholic immigrants who had flooded into the country during the 1830s and 1840s were overly influenced by the Pope and could form a conspiracy to overthrow democracy.

While the Democratic Party courted immigrant voters, nativists voted for Know-Nothing candidates. The Know-Nothing Party did surprisingly well at the polls in 1854. However, like the Whig Party, the Know-Nothings split over the issue of slavery in the territories. Southern Know-Nothings looked for another alternative to the Democrats. Meanwhile, Northern Know-Nothings began to edge toward the Republican Party. **A**

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Causes

A What impact did the slavery issue have on the Democratic and Whig parties?



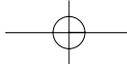
▲ The 1854 campaign banner for the Know-Nothing Party reflects its members' fear and resentment of immigrants.

Antislavery Parties Form

Two forerunners of the Republican Party had emerged during the 1840s. In 1844 the tiny abolitionist Liberty Party—whose purpose was to pursue the cause of abolition by passing new laws—received only a small percentage of votes in the presidential election. Yet the Liberty Party won enough votes to throw the election to Democrat James K. Polk instead of Whig candidate Henry Clay.

In 1848 the **Free-Soil Party**, which opposed the extension of slavery into the territories, nominated former Democratic president Martin Van Buren. Although the Free-Soil Party failed to win any electoral votes in 1848, it received 10 percent of the popular vote, thus sending a clear message: even if some Northerners did not favor abolition, they definitely opposed the extension of slavery into the territories.

THE FREE-SOILERS Many Northerners were Free-Soilers without being abolitionists. A number of Northern Free-Soilers supported laws prohibiting black settlement in their communities and denying blacks the right to vote. Free-Soilers objected to slavery's impact on free white workers in the wage-based labor force, upon which the North depended. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison considered the Free-Soil Party "a sign of discontent with things political . . . reaching for something better. . . . It is a party for keeping Free Soil and not for setting men free."



Major Political Parties 1850–1860		
Party	Established	Major Platform
Free-Soil	1848	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anti extension of slavery • pro-labor
Know-Nothing	1854 (as American Party)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • anti-immigration • anti-Catholic
Whig	Organized 1834	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pro-business • divided on slavery
Republican	1854	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • opposed expansion of slavery into territories
Democratic	1840 (The Democratic-Republican party adopted “Democratic Party” as official name)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • states’ rights • limited government • divided on slavery

SKILLBUILDER Interpreting Charts
 What issue is addressed by almost all the parties shown on the chart?

Free-Soilers detected a dangerous pattern in such events as the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act and the repeal of the Missouri Compromise. They were convinced that a conspiracy existed on the part of the “diabolical slave power” to spread slavery throughout the United States. Something or someone, according to the Free-Soilers, had to prevent this spread. **B**

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Motives

B Why did most Free-Soilers object to slavery?

REPUBLICAN PARTY In February 1854, at a school house in Ripon, Wisconsin, some discontented Northern Whigs held a meeting with antislavery Democrats and Free-Soilers to form a new political party. On July 6,

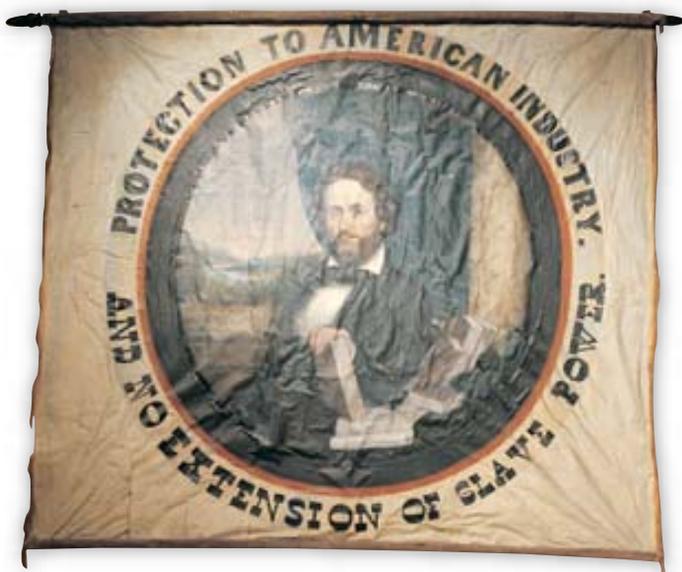
the new **Republican Party** was formally organized in Jackson, Michigan. Among its founders was **Horace Greeley**.

The Republican Party was united in opposing the Kansas-Nebraska Act and in keeping slavery out of the territories. Otherwise, it embraced a wide range of opinions. The conservative faction hoped to resurrect the Missouri Compromise. At the opposite extreme were some radical abolitionists. The Republican Party’s ability to draw support from such diverse groups provided the party with the strength to win a political tug of war with the other parties.

The main competition for the Republican Party was the Know-Nothing Party. Both parties targeted the same groups of voters. By 1855 the Republicans had set up party organizations in about half of the Northern states, but they lacked a national organization. Then, in quick succession, came the fraudulent territorial election in Kansas in March 1855, and the sack of Lawrence, the Pottawatomie massacre, and the caning of Sumner in 1856. Between “Bleeding Kansas” and “Bleeding Sumner,” the Republicans had the issues they needed in order to challenge the Democrats for the presidency in 1856.

THE 1856 ELECTION The Republicans chose **John C. Frémont**, the famed “Pathfinder” who had mapped the Oregon Trail and led U.S. troops into California during the war with Mexico, as their candidate in 1856. The Know-Nothings split their allegiance, with Northerners endorsing Frémont and Southerners selecting former U.S. president Millard Fillmore. Although Fillmore had once been a Whig, for all practical purposes, the Whigs had now dissolved.

The Free-Soilers’ banner features John C. Frémont and calls for an end to the spread of “slave power” in the nation.





The Democrats nominated **James Buchanan** of Pennsylvania. Although he was a Northerner, most of his Washington friends were Southerners. Furthermore, as minister to Great Britain he had been out of the country during the disputes over the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. Thus, he had antagonized neither the North nor the South. Buchanan was the only truly national candidate. To balance support between the North and the South, the Democrats chose John C. Breckinridge of Kentucky as Buchanan’s running mate.

If Frémont had won, the South might well have seceded then and there. Judge P. J. Scruggs of Mississippi put it bluntly.

A PERSONAL VOICE P. J. SCRUGGS

“The election of Frémont would present, at once, to the people of the South, the question whether they would tamely crouch at the feet of their despoilers, or . . . openly defy their enemies, and assert their independence. In my judgment, anything short of immediate, prompt, and unhesitating secession, would be an act of servility that would seal our doom for all time to come.”

—quoted in *The Coming of the Civil War*

Buchanan, however, carried the day. Although he received only 45 percent of the popular vote, he won the entire South except for Maryland. Frémont, who carried 11 of the 16 free states, came in a strong second with 33 percent, while Fillmore brought up the rear with 22 percent.

The meaning was clear. First, the Democrats could win the presidency with a national candidate who could compete in the North without alienating Southerners. Second, the Know-Nothings were in decline. Third, the Republicans were a political force in the North.

The 1856 presidential campaign had been hard-fought. However, the dissension that characterized party politics in the mid-1850s was only a pale preview of the turmoil that would divide the nation before the end of the decade.

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Effects

C Why was the election of 1856 so important to the growth of the Republican Party?



ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Franklin Pierce
- nativism

- Know-Nothing Party
- Free-Soil Party

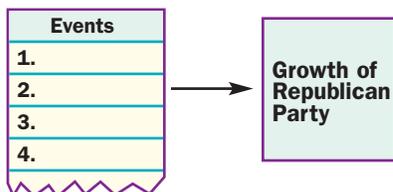
- Republican Party
- Horace Greeley

- John C. Frémont
- James Buchanan

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES

Show how various events led to the growth of the Republican Party in the 1850s. Use a chart similar to the one below.



Which event was most important in the rise of the Republican Party?

CRITICAL THINKING

3. CONTRASTING

How did the attitudes toward slavery held by abolitionists, Free-Soilers, and Know-Nothings differ? Explain your answer. **Think About:**

- the ultimate goal of abolitionists
- the reason Free-Soilers objected to slavery
- what caused the split in the Know-Nothing Party

4. SYNTHESIZING

How did the way in which the Republican Party was formed indicate that the party stood a good chance at success?

5. ANALYZING ISSUES

Why might the newly formed Republican Party have chosen John C. Frémont as their first presidential candidate in 1856?