

Chapter 211 – A New Political Party Called The “Republicans” Makes Its First Appearance



Dates:
Summer 1854

Sections:

- Backlash Against The Kansas-Nebraska Bill Begins To Shake Up The Political Landscape
- Opponents Of The Slave Power Organize The Republican Party

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Backlash Against The Kansas-Nebraska Bill Begins To Shake Up The Political Landscape

The effects of Douglas’ controversial 1854 bill are felt not only in the Kansas Territory, but also at the national level – as the politicians prepare for upcoming mid-term elections, which run from August 1854 to November 1855.

The Democrats are coming off a decisive victory in 1852, picking up twenty-eight seats in the House and two in the Senate, to go with Pierce’s resounding defeat of Winfield Scott in the presidential race.

Democrat Party Gains In 1852 Elections

House	1850	1852	Change
Democrats	130	158	+32
Whigs	86	71	(15)
Free Soil	4	4	NC
Unionist	10	0	(10)
Others	3	0	(3)
Senate			
Democrats	36	38	+2
Whigs	23	22	(1)
Free Soil	3	2	(1)

This collapse for the Whigs sends its members in search of new issues that can support their political viability.

Ironically the best option comes from the Democrat, Douglas, in the form of his 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Bill.

Public antipathy toward the bill is immediate and strong across both the North and the West. First because it reneges on the 1820 Missouri Compromise and re-opens the threat of *nationalizing* slavery. Second because, like the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, it appears to be another capitulation by the Democrats to bullying demands made by the southern planter elites.

The initial political response lies in the formation of various coalitions which march behind the banner of repealing the 1854 bill.

One such coalition simply calls itself the “Opposition Party” and consists of two Whig factions. One are the anti-slavery men, ranging from moderates like Henry Seward, Edward Bates and Abraham Lincoln, to outright abolitionists such as Charles Sumner, Salmon Chase and Cassius Clay. The other are the Whig Unionists who fear that the turmoil brewing in Kansas will end in civil war. Included in this latter group are both northerners (Edward Everett, Robert Winthrop) and some southerners, notably John J. Crittenden (Kentucky), John Bell (Tennessee), and William Graham (North Carolina).

The other coalition, known as the “Anti-Nebraska Party,” will include Northern Democrats who favored the Wilmot Proviso banning the expansion of slavery and bolted to the Free Soil Party in 1848 to back Van Buren over Cass. Among this group are formidable politicians such as Gideon Welles of Connecticut and Hannibal Hamlin of Maine.

The normally astute Stephen Douglas is both surprised and alarmed by these negative reactions.

In his mind, the notion of applying the principle of popular sovereignty, rather than a fixed line, in Kansas, seems like a small concession to the South in exchange for opening the Territory and supporting his route for the transcontinental railroad through Chicago.

By the summer of 1854, however, the true cost of the bargain begins to dawn on him, and on Franklin Pierce.

For Douglas, the bill is the end of his presidential aspiration; for Pierce, it is the realization of his greatest fear, a possible North-South schism within his own party.

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Opponents Of The “Slave Power” Organize The Republican Party



Grass Roots Men With Their American Flag

Another group opposing the spread of slavery is more grass roots in character and calls itself the Republican Party.

The first officially recorded gathering here takes place in Ripon, Wisconsin, on March 30, 1854, with some 30 locals in attendance at what becomes known as The Little White Schoolhouse. The meeting is called by a lawyer, one Alvan Bovay, recently arrived in Ripon from New York City. According to tradition, the men “walked in as Whigs and Free-Soilers and left as Republicans.”

Other independent meetings follow, one in Bangor, Maine, then in Friendship, New York, and Washington, DC.

A more sizable and organized convention follows, this time in Jackson, Michigan from July 6-13, 1854.

The prime mover here is Charles V. DeLand, editor of Jackson's *American Citizen* paper, who invites all who oppose the "slave power" to attend:

In view, therefore, of the recent action of Congress upon this subject (the violation of the Missouri Compromise) and the evident designs of the slave power to attempt still further aggressions upon freedom, we invite our fellow citizens without reference to former political associations, who think that the time has arrived for a union at the North to protect liberty from being overthrown and duntrodden, to assemble in mass convention on Thursday, the 6th day of July, next, at 1 o'clock p.m. at Jackson, there to take such measures as shall be thought best to concentrate the popular sentiment of this state against the encroachment of slave power.

When some 3,000 people show up, the convention is forced outside to a 40 acre grove, where the proceedings are completed "under the oaks." The primary task lies in hammering out a tentative platform. Ten of the thirteen planks signal opposition to "the Slave Power's still further aggressions upon freedom." While not embracing abolition, the delegates are unequivocal in condemning slavery on moral grounds.

We believe that slavery is a violation of the rights of man – as a man – we vow at whatever expense...to oppose...by all means...all attempts, direct and indirect, to extend slavery in the country...or to allow new slave states into the union.

Ironically this position mirrors that taken by Thomas Jefferson in his original draft of the Land Ordinance of 1784.

After the year 1800 there shall be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude in any (future state).

Claims to giving the new party its name are widespread. Most trace the idea back to Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party which dominated the political scene during his time. But the acknowledged popularizer of the "Republican Party" moniker is Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*, and soon to be a prominent member of the movement on the national stage.

New energy is pumped into the movement some three months after the Jackson convention adjourns. Its source is a retired Whig from Illinois named Abraham Lincoln who returns to politics to protest the Kansas-Nebraska Bill.