

Chapter 186 - The Democrats Suffer Major Losses In The 1854 Mid-Term Elections

Time: Fall of 1854

The Democrats Face Mounting Public Anger

The mid-term election of 1854-55 signals the end of the Whigs, the growing threat facing the Democrats, and the first glimpse of a third-party coalition capable of competing successfully on a national scale.

After Winfield Scott's lopsided loss to Pierce in the 1852 race, the old Whig party disbands, with its adherents scrambling to find a new home. Meanwhile the Democrats are left riding high, picking up thirty-two House seats that year, in addition to controlling the Senate and the White House.

Only the political calculus then comes unhinged, especially across the North, where growing public conviction is that the Democrats have forged two alarming alliances in order to stay in power.

The first is with the "Slave Power" in the South, the final straw being Douglas's May 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Bill reneging on the "sacred" Missouri Compromise.

The second is with the Roman Catholic immigrants, especially the Irish, who are successfully courted by the Democrats as the "party of the common man."

Those most troubled by these outcomes regard them as betrayals of basic American values going back to the founding fathers. In passing the Nebraska Bill, the Democrats prioritized the will of the Southern slave owners over the majority wishes of those in the North. In embracing the Catholic immigrants, it diminished the standing of the "true Americans" (i.e. Anglo-Saxon Protestants) and opened citizenship up to foreigners whose allegiance lies with the Roman Pope.

Retribution against these perceived betrayals rains down on the Democrats in the mid-term election.

Time: 1854-1855

The Know-Nothing Party Records its Greatest Victories



Voting for the 34th Congress drags on from August 1854 all the way through November 1855, with a mind-boggling array of new party options appearing on the ballot, state by state. The contest comes down to traditional Democrats pitted against three main opponents -- the ex-Whig based “Opposition Party,” the “Anti-Nebraska Party” and the recently arriving anti-immigrant “Know Nothings.”

When the votes are all in, the first signs of a roller-coaster political realignment are evident.

Henry Wilson (1812-1875)

For Franklin Pierce, the results realize his worst fears about a schism within his own party -- as the Democrats surrender seventy-five seats in the U.S. House. Their losses occur across the North, with the main defections coming from voters who opposed the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Bill and believe the party has been co-opted by the “Slave Power.”

The biggest surprise in the results goes to the 51 seats taken by the Know-Nothings, signaling that many Americans are as opposed to the presence of Catholic immigrants as they are to the Africans.

Voting Trends For The US House

House	1848	1850	1852	1854
Democrats	113	130	158	83
Whigs	108	86	71	---
“Opposition Party	---	---	---	54
American/Know Nothing	1	0	0	51
Free Soil/Anti-Nebraska	9	4	4	37
Constitutional Union		10		
Other		3		9
Total		233	233	234

A careful state-level analysis is required to untangle the shifts occurring in the returns.

The vast majority of the Democrats losses occur in eight Northern states, which exhibit direct voter migration to the “Opposition Party,” consisting mainly of anti-slavery Whigs.

Democratic House Losses To The “Opposition Party” (1854)

States	Democrats Lose	“Opposition” Gains
New York	16	13
Ohio	12	12
Pennsylvania	9	8
Indiana	8	8
New Jersey	3	3
Michigan	3	2
Maine	2	2
Wisconsin	2	2
	55	50

Other more modest defections are evident in four other states, this time from Democrats to the Know-Nothings.

Democratic House Losses To The “Know Nothings” (1854)

States	Democrats Lose	Know Nothings Gain
Connecticut	4	4
New Hampshire	3	3
Rhode Island	2	2
Pennsylvania	1	1
	7	7

Support for the Know Nothings also appears in other geographical pockets, apparently sourced from Whig fall-outs more upset by immigration than slavery.

Whig Losses To The “Know Nothings” (1854)

States	Whigs Lose	Know Nothing Gain
Massachusetts	12	12
Kentucky	5	6
Tennessee	5	5
North Carolina	3	3
Delaware	1	1
	26	27

The most startling and abrupt Know-Nothing victory occurs in Massachusetts, where all twelve House seats go to the Nativists, along with the governorship, won for the first of three times by the ex-Whig, Henry Gardner. Conjecture has it that the anti-immigrant backlash in the state traces to its deeply Protestant Puritan roots and fear that the Irish will undercut laborers currently employed in factory jobs.

Several Slave states, most notably Kentucky and Tennessee, also swing into the Know Nothing column in the House, and other local races exhibit their sudden rise.

Robert Conrad’s success in Philadelphia is matched by mayoral wins by Know Nothing candidates John Towers in Washington, DC, Levi Boone in Chicago and Stephen Webb in San Francisco. California elects J. Neeley Johnson as its Governor, and two soon-to-be powerful Republicans enter the 34th Congress wrapped cynically under the Nativist banner. One is the strident abolitionist, Henry Wilson, who wins a Senate seat in Massachusetts as a Know Nothing; the other, Schuyler Colfax, also anti-slavery, who enters the House.

In the end, the Know Nothing Party phenomenon will burn brightly in 1854 and then, much like the Anti-Masonic Party of 1828, be overtaken by the nation’s more urgent sectional conflict over slavery.

Time: August 1854 To November 1855

The Outlines Of The Republican Party Coalition Are Evident In The 1854 Results

While Republicans per se do not run in the 1854 mid-terms, the outcome provides an early glimpse of the awkward triparty coalition that will make them a contending force by 1856.

First in the mix are those politicians who genuinely oppose slavery on moral grounds. These are mostly Northern remnants of the Whig Party, joined of course by the small band of outright Abolitionists.

Second are the Know-Nothings, seeking to protect “true native-born Americans” from the perceived threats of the Roman Catholic immigrants and the Pope in Rome.

Finally, and somewhat later, come the revived Free Soilers, renegade Northern Democrats, intent on preserving the new west for free white men and protecting the “dignity” of free white labor.

In the 1854 election, it is mainly the anti-slavery and anti-immigrant elements that steal House seats from the Democrats – with the majority of the winners combining anti-slavery and anti-immigrant (nativist) sentiments.

Positions Favored By House Winners In 1854

Regarded As:	# Members
Anti-slavery + nativist	92
Anti-slavery, but not nativist	23
Nativist, but not anti-slavery	29
All others	7
	151

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Despite the various shadings between the Anti-Slavery, Know-Nothing and Free Soil supporters, most share a common conviction – the notion that the land to the west should be cleansed of

foreign elements (e.g. Africans and Catholics) for the good of the nation, and for their own self-interests.

Over the next six years, this political coalition will expand and harden -- as the Democratic Party progressively appears to be caving into outsider demands, especially those of the Southern "Slave Power."