


Chapter 152 – Whigs Make Large Gains In The Off-Year Election Of 1846

	<p>Dates: August 1846 to November 1847</p>	<p>Sections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whigs Take Back The House While Democrats Hold The Senate • Important New Faces Join Congress In 1847
---	---	--

Date: August 1846 – November 1847

Whigs Take Back The House While Democrats Hold The Senate

With the war and the Wilmot controversy swirling in the background, the off-year congressional elections drag on for fifteen months, from August 1846 to November 1847. As usual, House members are chosen by popular vote of all white men (without property ownership or taxes paid as qualifiers), with Senators selected by state legislators.

The results in the House are a serious blow to Polk and the Democrats -- as the Whigs pick up 37 seats to gain narrow control over the lower chamber.

House Election Results For 1846

Parties	1844	1846	Change
Democrats	143	112	-31
Whigs	79	116	+37
Others	6	6	NC

The largest gains for the Whigs – 26 of their new 37 seats – occur in the North. Fourteen of these are in New York state alone, where the Democratic rift between Van Buren men (the “Barnburners”) and the Polk backers (“Hunkers”) hands the outcome to the Whigs.

But Democrat losses also occur across the board, suggesting unease about extending the war with Mexico beyond the borders of Texas, and about the aftermath, as it relates to national strife over the slavery issue.

Whig Gains in the House: 1846 Election

	1844	1846	Change
Northeast	19	40	+21
New York	9	23	+14
Pennsylvania	10	16	+6
New Hampshire	0	1	+1
Northwest	10	15	+5
Ohio	8	11	+3
Indiana	2	4	+2
Border	9	10	+1
Maryland	2	4	+2
Kentucky	7	6	(1)
Southeast	7	14	+7
Virginia	1	6	+5
North Carolina	3	6	+3
Georgia	3	4	+1
Southwest	1	4	+3
Florida	0	1	+1
Alabama	1	2	+1
Mississippi	0	1	+1
Total Whig Gains			+37

In the Senate, with its staggered six year terms, only one-third of the seats are in play, and all votes are cast by state legislators rather than the public.

The results here are much more comforting to Polk than those in the House – with his Democrat Party ending up with a solid 37-21 majority.

Composition Of The Senate: 1846 Election

	Democrat	Whig	Total
Free States	16	10	26
Northeast	9	9	18
Northwest*	7	1	8
Slave States	19	11	30
Border	2	6	8
Southeast	5	3	8
Southwest	12	2	14
	35	21	56

* Iowa admitted in 1846, with two vacancies filled by Democrats in 1848. Wisconsin will be admitted in 1848, restoring free/slave balance to 24/24

Date: Spring 1847

Important New Faces Join Congress In 1847



Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865)

By the time the 30th Congress convenes on December 6, 1847 for its first session, the South has assembled a roster of outspoken pro-slavery Senators who are determined to defeat the Wilmot Proviso and restore unity to the Democrat Party.

John C. Calhoun returns to the Senate after serving one year as Tyler's Secretary of State. He is joined by his fellow South Carolinian, Andrew C. Butler, another fierce States' Rights advocate.

Virginia also elects two new senators -- Robert T.M. Hunter, former Speaker of the House, and Calhoun's close friend, James Mason.

Jefferson Davis graduates from the House to the Senate in August, 1847, after his heroic duty at Buena Vista.

Three other sitting Democrat will complete the inner circle, one a Southerner and the other two, Northern men with strong pro-Southern sympathies. The Southerner is David Rice Atchison of Missouri, who is elected President Pro Temp of the Senate. The two Northerners – both future Presidential nominees – are Lewis Cass of Michigan and Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois.

As of 1847, opponents of the Southern agenda in the Senate lack enough depth and alignment to have their way.

The political turmoil impacting the House Democrats in New York state is muted in the Senate. Daniel Dickinson remains a Polk loyalist, off-setting the Van Buren "Barnburner," John Dix.

On the Whig side, Henry Clay, has left the Senate after losing to Polk in the 1844 election. The equally formidable Daniel Webster continues to serve in the chamber, but his party support has faded after he chooses to remain Secretary of State under the "turn-coat Whig," John Tyler. Two other esteemed Whigs, Senators John Bell of Tennessee and John J. Crittenden of Kentucky, are both from Slave States and uninclined toward any actions that might threaten the Union.

Still the South will need to contend with two aggressive adversaries in the Senate: the Whig, Tom Corwin of Ohio, and the Democrat-turned-Independent, John P. Hale of New Hampshire.

Hale has been a Democrat throughout his career, and supports the Polk-Dallas ticket in 1844. But he has also been a consistent critic of slavery, joining the Whig JQ Adams in the House in opposing various "Gag Rules." This leads to an attempt by his state adversary, Franklin Pierce, to oust him from the party – a move that ends with a crusade by Hale to turn New Hampshire against slavery and his first election to the Senate in 1846.

While men like Hale and Corwin and Dix will begin to push back against the strong pro-Southern forces in the Senate, they will make little progress until additional support arrives in the election of 1848.

The House of Representatives is another story. It has already passed the Wilmot Proviso and is beginning to latch on to the powerful new notion of “free soil for free men” – and is eager to fight for both.

It is also joined in 1847 by a first term congressman from Illinois, Abraham Lincoln.

Lincoln is the lone Whig in a House delegation dominated by the members of Senator Stephen Douglas’ statewide machine. He will serve a single term before returning to his Springfield law practice – and a circuitous path toward the presidency.