

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

Mid-Nineteenth Century Political Parties — United States

W. E. Binkley

Volume 34, numéro 1, 1955

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300378ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300378ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Binkley, W. E. (1955). Mid-Nineteenth Century Political Parties — United States. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 34(1), 79–87. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300378ar>

MID-NINETEENTH CENTURY POLITICAL PARTIES — UNITED STATES

W. E. BINKLEY
Ohio Northern University

PARTY REGULARITY was characteristic of the electorate of the United States in the 1840's. Probably ninety per cent of the voters then professed the Democratic or Whig political faith and the two-party system never stood higher.¹ Yet in the next decade the Whig Party completely disappeared, the Democratic Party became so demoralized that it did not elect a President in 28 years while a new major party, the Republican, sprang into sudden existence. This swift transition from stability to instability is the primary problem of this paper.

Unquestionably the political parties of the United States are loose federations of state and local parties rallied quadrennially to capture the power and prestige inherent in the presidency. Much of the campaign propaganda employed smacks of irrelevant symbolism and crude imitations of logical force. Thus Andrew Jackson became the leader around whom rallied the newly enfranchised masses largely because he had managed to slaughter a thousand British soldiers in a single day at New Orleans and so he was Democratic President for two terms. The Whigs turned the same trick in 1840 by electing General William Henry Harrison who had won the Battle of the Thames in 1813.

Before the slaveocrats had captured the Democratic Party in the 1850's and identified it with state rights it had been a nationalistic aggregation of southern yeomen and little planters, of the less prosperous pioneer grain growing farmers of the Old Northwest, German and Irish immigrants throughout the North, and the rural common folk of New England. In 1844 they elected James K. Polk, the ablest of the eight Presidents between Jackson and Lincoln, a faithful representative of the then dominant imperialist sentiment of the nation. "Manifest Destiny", coined just then, accurately epitomized Polk's paramount policy. Thus the Mexican war while not deliberately provoked, was not just an accident. Though Polk could not have known it, here would have been the appropriate place for a dance of the Macbeth witches.

Polk ordered troops to the Rio Grande and the Mexicans and American forces clashed. Three months later when President Polk asked Congress for \$2,000,000 to purchase territory from Mexico, a Pennsylvania Democratic, anti-slavery congressman, David Wilmot, moved to attach a rider to the appropriation bill providing that all territory purchased by the appropriation should be free soil. Mexican territory was already free soil but planters were poised eager to introduce their slaves as soon as Mexican territory might be acquired. Though never enacted, the Wilmot Proviso was introduced again and again, and set off the chain reaction that did not cease until slavery had perished from the soil of the United States.

¹ Carl R. Fish, *The Rise of the Common Man*, (*History of American Life*, New York, 1927), VI, 166.

The Mexican War had no sooner ended than the Whigs, never able to elect a President on issues, utilized once again a conventional strategy of the weaker major party by nominating and electing General Zachary Taylor, victor in the early battles of the Mexican War. Taylor's administration inherited the critical issues created by the war. During the prolonged debate on them the Union hung precariously in the balance. It was saved only by a balancing of sectional interests in the Compromise of 1850. The hardest bargain was driven by the slavery interests in a new Fugitive Slave Law. In the face of the rising tide of anti-slavery sentiment in the North the slavery interests forced two extreme provisions in the Act. Providing the federal commissioner who sat in judgment on a fugitive slave a fee of five dollars if he set the fugitive free and ten dollars if he returned the Negro to the claimant who might even be a pretender was indefensible. But obligating citizens of free states, even abolitionists, to respond to the summoning of a *posse comitatus* and join in pursuit of a poor fugitive whose only offense was a dash for Canada was the sheer madness of the sort provoked in those whom the gods would destroy.

Yet conservatives who cherished the Union, Lincoln among them, accepted the Compromise of 1850, savage Fugitive Slave Law and all, as the price of national integrity. Stephen A. Douglas was but expressing a wide spread view when, upon returning home from the Senate in 1850, he declared that he never expected to make another speech on the subject of slavery.² So insistent were the proponents of the Compromise that it had at long last finally settled the slavery questions that Free Soilers contemptuously dubbed them the "Finality Men."

Of the three parties that nominated presidential candidates in 1852 only the Free Soilers denounced the Compromise of 1850. This minor party was the successor of the Liberty Party which had emerged during the severe depression of the late 1830's. The Liberty Party had found a scapegoat for the nation's economic woes in the slave holders, those improvident plungers who overmortgaged their plantations, failed and then defaulted payments. Not until slavery was extirpated could economic recovery come about. But in 1840 the Liberty Party polled only one third of one per cent of the popular vote for President. Nevertheless they hung on but were discredited in 1844 by casting enough votes in New York to throw its block of electoral votes to Polk and thereby throw the election to a slaveholder. Moreover their fundamental argument was demolished by the fact that prosperity had returned while slavery persisted and that was the end of the Liberty Party. Here, however, was one of the grandparents of the Republican party.

In August, 1848 there convened at Buffalo, in the heart of the great zone of westward New England colonization, the delegates of a new multi-interest party, the Free Soilers. These men were less exasperated with slavery than with the slavocracy which ran the national government in the interest of cotton and tobacco to the utter neglect

² James A. Woodburn, *Political Parties and Party Problems in the United States* (New York and London, 1914), 89.

of Northern interests. Small farmers, village merchants and household and mill workers made up the rank and file of the Free Soilers who cherished the equalitarian idealism of the Declaration of Independence. "Repugnance to the presence of the Negro," not to slavery, was the essence of Free Soilism.³ "Let the soil of our extensive domains," they put in their 1848 platform, "be kept free for the hardy pioneers of our own land and the oppressed and banished of other lands, seeking homes of comfort and enterprise in the New World."⁴ Their campaign slogan was "Free Soil, Free Speech, Free Labor, and Free Men." The men who shouted this in 1848 had only to add "Fremont" as they shouted it again eight years later as Republicans in the first presidential campaign of that new born party which also is indicative of the lineage of the Republican party.

A mid-century flood of immigrants, hordes of Irish potato-famine refugees among them, divided our people into classes for the first time in our history, according to the late General Francis A. Walker.⁵ Almost without exception these newly arrived Irish and Germans joined the Democratic party whose politicians led them to the polls where they helped determine the election of Polk in 1844. The Whigs, as the traditional party of the more prosperous, paid the taxes that provided the hospitals, poor houses and outdoor relief for the incoming horde of paupers whose votes kept the Whigs' political opponents securely in local, state and national offices. Quite naturally the Whigs, consisting predominately of the older American stock, in their exasperation were becoming a nativist party. These circumstances led to the emergence of a new party, the American, organized in secret lodges whose members concealed their activities with the invariable response to all questions, "I don't know", whereupon Horace Greeley denominated them the Know Nothing Party and it stuck. Since most immigrants were Catholics it was an anti-papal party. It sought to delay enfranchisement of the immigrants and disqualify naturalized citizens from office. It attracted the lower income levels, the illiterate and semi-illiterate particularly, and aroused Protestant prejudice against Catholics, leading often to mob violence. So phenomenal were the gains of the Know Nothing party in the local, state and congressional election of 1854 that its leaders were confident they would elect the President in 1856.

In 1854 Senator Stephen A. Douglas, Chairman of the Committee on Territories, was busy devising a bill to provide civil government for the virgin territory west of Missouri in order to prepare for a railroad to the Pacific. Seeking to avoid a clash over whether slavery was to be permitted in the newly organized territories of Kansas and Nebraska the bill provided that "when admitted as a state or states, the said territory, or any portion of the same shall be received into the Union with or without slavery, as their constitution may

³ Edward Channing, *History of the United States* (6 vols., New York, 1905-25), VI, 4.

⁴ Woodburn, *Political Parties*, 84.

⁵ Francis A. Walker, "Immigration and Degradation" (*Discussions in Economics and Statistics*, New York, 1899), 426.

prescribe at the time of their admission." ⁶ Now this was territory dedicated to freedom for a generation by the Missouri Compromise of 1820 since it was north of 36 degrees and 30 minutes North Latitude fixed by that Compromise. The slavery interests might prudently have accepted the implied repeal of this Compromise but with a blind fatuity they compelled Douglas, as the price of its passage, to incorporate in the Kansas-Nebraska Bill a provision that the Missouri Compromise was repealed.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act proved to be the most explosive statute ever enacted by Congress and it will always remain a mystery why the usually astute Senator Douglas could not have foreseen the violent reaction it would provoke. For a generation hundreds of thousands of Northern men, with no special concern for slavery or the Negro, had regarded the Missouri Compromise as a sacred pledge of the security of the trans-Mississippi plains and prairies against the contamination of slavery. These sons of the Puritans had converted the curse of labor laid upon Adam into a badge of merit at the very time that slaveholders were expressing their contempt for free labor with such epithets as "hirelings" and "the very mudsills of society" as Senator James H. Hammond of South Carolina denominated the wage earners of the North in a Senate speech. ⁷ The resentment against the repeal of the Compromise was no sentimental outburst but represented instead an intensely practical matter. The prolific farmers of the North looked to the trans-Mississippi public domain to provide farms for their sons and sons-in-law and that hope was now blasted.

No sooner had the Kansas-Nebraska Bill been reported out of committee than there appeared in the newspapers the most effective piece of political propaganda in our party history. It bore the title, "Appeal of the Independent Democrats in Congress to the People of the United States" over the signatures of Senators Chase and Sumner and four anti-slavery members of the lower house. It denounced Douglas as an unscrupulous politician "willing to barter away free-state interests for the presidency." It appealed to the people "to save the West from being converted into a dreary region of despotism inhabited by masters and slaves." ⁸

The effect of the "Appeal of the Independent Democrats" was astounding. "Its inflammable sentences," wrote Beveridge, "fell like sprays of oil upon the fires which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had started in every northern community." ⁹ Spontaneously the people of the North gathered in community mass meetings, and night after night lights gleamed from country school house, village church and town hall where the Bill was berated and political action planned to meet its ominous threat. Promptly and without much reference to party affiliation candidates for Congress came forth opposed to the Kansas Nebraska Act. Scores of miscellaneous party designations were given the supporters of these candidates but the name "Fusion Tickets", given by critics of the spontaneous movement, is descriptive since they

⁶ U. S. Statutes at Large, Vol. X, 277 ff.

⁷ Congressional Globe, 35 Congress, 1st Session, 961.

⁸ H. S. Commager, *Documents of American History* (New York, 1934), I, 329.

⁹ A. J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln* (4 vols., New York, 1928), III, 186.

included northern Whigs whose party was now disintegrating, those northern Democrats who could not stomach the Act, almost all of the northern Know-Nothings, and, of course, the Free Soilers who were now right in their element. But "Fusionists" and "Anti-Nebraska Men" were not appropriate designations for a party and almost simultaneously, men and organizations throughout the North proposed the appellation, "Republican." As Allan Nevins aptly puts it, "the name was so obvious and logical, both as a counterpart of 'Democratic' and the repository of Jeffersonian associations, that it was almost inevitable; while the party really had a thousand birth-places that fateful summer, for fusionists, anti-Nebraska men and free soilers met in a thousand places."¹⁰ The late John R. Commons made vivid the political phenomenon with an apt analogy "Its members came together by a magic attraction," he observed, "as crystals appear in a chilled solution. Not one man or one set of men formed the party, though there were many claimants for first suggesting the name or calling the first meeting that used the name. The fluid solution was there and when the chill came the crystals formed."¹¹ Here was the matrix of a new major party that had never been a minor party. In the elections of the Autumn of 1854 the fusionists swept the North leaving only a few Democratic congressmen from that section, cut the total Democratic strength in the House of Representatives from 159 to 79 and elected 117 anti-Nebraskans, a majority of whom were members of councils of Know Nothing Lodges.

For the campaign of 1856 the Democrats nominated James Buchanan and among other platform planks endorsed the Kansas-Nebraska Act not excepting its outrageously unfair administration under President Pierce. For the first time the American or Know-Nothing Party presented a presidential candidate in Ex-President Fillmore, a "Cotton", that is a pro-slavery northern Whig. Since the Republican party had swallowed up the northern Know-Nothings practically *in toto* the Know-Nothings contributed almost no votes to Fillmore except those of the Southern Wing. The remnants of the disappearing Whig party simply endorsed Fillmore, that is the nominee of the Know Nothings. Professor Arthur C. Cole diagnosed the fundamental defect of the Whigs when he observed: "No new reform ever emanated from the party to save it from withering decay under its proud record for aristocratic conservatism".¹²

In contrast with the Whigs the Republican party of the 1850's was decidedly a reform, even a crusading party, and the epithet "Red" was even hurled at it then. In their first national convention they nominated John C. Fremont who was more of a symbol than a statesman. As the "Pathfinder of the Rockies" he had fired the imagination of youth. The Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce who knew Fremont personally once declared that he "possessed all the

¹⁰ Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union* (2 vols., New York, 1947), II, 322, 323.

¹¹ John R. Commons, "Horace Greeley and Working Class Origins of the Republican Party" (*Political Science Quarterly*, XXIV), 469.

¹² Arthur C. Cole, *Era of the Civil War* (Springfield, Ill., 1919), 111.

qualities of genius except ability".¹³ No matter how tarnished his reputation may have become by later disclosures there still remained in the first decade of the present century hundreds of thousands of ageing men who cherished the treasured memory of their earliest political enthusiasm and were wont to say with sparkling eye and tremulous voice, "I cast my first vote for Fremont."

The 1856 Republican platform condemned not so much slavery as the slavocracy, the deadly enemy of the little enterpriser whether farmer, worker or merchant. It asserted Congress's sovereign power over territories of the United States, favored a Pacific railroad and river and harbour improvements which Democratic presidential vetoes had prevented. That it was, as Cole observes, "a party intended in many ways to be a labor party"¹⁴ was indicated in the campaign slogan "Roast Beef and two dollars a day." Despite all the Republican enthusiasm, exceeding even that of the hilarious campaign of 1840, Buchanan was elected along with a Democratic Congress.

Although the Republican party had polled forty-two per cent of the major party popular vote when the aggregation was scarcely two years old, its defeat was followed by deep despair. In fact it was saved only by a series of strokes of fortune. Hard upon Buchanan's inauguration came the Dred Scott decision which, by deciding that Congress had no power to regulate slavery in the territories, roused the fighting wrath of a party whose very *raison d'être* was to keep slavery out of the territories. Second was the publication of Hinton Rowan Helper's *Present Crisis in the South* which provided the Republicans with campaign ammunition — southern testimony as to the plight of the poor white victimized by the institution of slavery. Third was the depression of the late 1850's and never before had there been such pressure on the Government to do something about it. Republican luck was climaxed by the savage feud that broke out between Senator Douglas and President Buchanan. When a territorial convention at Lecompton prepared a constitution for Kansas but refused to permit the people to vote on it, Douglas denounced such a travesty on popular sovereignty. Buchanan made support of the Lecompton Constitution a test of party loyalty and removed from appointive office every Douglas man.

Contrary to tradition Lincoln was no founder of the Republican Party. When that Party was two years old he still considered himself a Whig — an anti-Nebraska Whig. When that measure became an issue he came out of four years of retirement from politics. Twenty-four hours after Douglas had given his defence of his Kansas-Nebraska Act in the capitol at Springfield, Lincoln rose in the same place "for a three hour argument of masterly vigor, breadth, and philosophic outlook."¹⁵ He was back in politics. Two years later came his golden opportunity to demonstrate his political maturity before the Illinois state convention of anti-Nebraska men. Facing delegates representing an incongruous aggregation of groups — the raw material of a possible party — this artist in group diplomacy performed a near miracle in

¹³ Josiah Royce, "Fremont" (*Atlantic Monthly*, XLVI, 1890), 548.

¹⁴ Arthur C. Cole, "If Lincoln Were Living Today" (*Cleveland Plaindealer*, February 13, 1938).

¹⁵ Allan Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union*, II, 339.

his famous "Lost Speech". Compelled to stir their passions, he yet held them within bounds. Doubting Whig conservatives had to be satisfied without alienating neurotic abolitionist radicals. Germans must be won over but fanatical Know-Nothings not meanwhile alienated. Not a single group could be spared. Bygones and grievances simply had to be forgotten by everybody. J. G. Randell puts it perfectly: "With the politician's eye for vote getting and uniting incongruous elements of his party, he avoided the language of the anti-slavery crusade and narrowed the issue to the clear-cut doctrine of freedom in the territories."¹⁶ As the inspired orator, speaking extemporaneously, warmed to his theme and purpose, veteran reporters, among them John L. Scripps, editor of the *Chicago Press*, fell under the spell and forgot their notes, with the consequence that the world will never know just what Lincoln said in this "Lost Speech". "Never," wrote Scripps, "was an audience more completely electrified by human eloquence . . . It fused the mass of hitherto incongruous elements into perfect homogeneity."¹⁷ Influential men who heard the speech instantly concluded that Lincoln was a presidential possibility and as he left the hall that day someone told him so. He said nothing; but from that hour it is suspected he cherished the great ambition.

At any rate in 1860 the Republican Convention at Chicago nominated Lincoln on a platform that repudiated the principles of the Dred Scott decision, demanded the admission of Kansas as a free state, pledged the Party not to interfere with slavery in the states, insisted that the territories be kept free, and called for a protective tariff, a railroad to the Pacific and a homestead law. Two things had given Lincoln a broader reputation than in 1856: the notable series of debates with Senator Douglas in 1858 and his Cooper Union speech in New York City early in 1860.

When the Democratic Convention of 1860 met at Charleston, South Carolina, Douglas was the logical candidate of the Democratic party. Here however he was confronted with a fanatical group of pro-slavery extremists among them the so-called "fire-eaters". The strength of the "fire-eaters" was due to their ability to exploit the economic distress of the little planter intensified by the current depression and the fact that the price of slaves in the late 50's had risen out of all proportion to the profit from cotton and tobacco planting.¹⁸ The "fire-eaters" were holding out the promise to restore the African slave trade and flood the South with cheap slaves within the reach of the poor planter so that every southerner, rich or poor, might own a slave. The big planters could afford to raise their own human stock and they knew moreover that reopening the African slave trade would turn the North into an abolitionist madhouse.

The extremists at the Charleston Convention were obdurate in demanding a plank declaring that neither Congress nor state legislature

¹⁶ J. G. Randall, "Abraham Lincoln" (*Dictionary of American Biography*, XI, 248).

¹⁷ Quoted by H. C. Whitney, *Life of Lincoln* (New York, 1908), 77.

¹⁸ See chart in U. B. Phillips, *Life and Labor in the Old South* (Boston, 1929), 177.

could exclude slavery or impair the right to slaves in the territories. If the Douglas men had yielded on the dogma of popular sovereignty in the territories it would have turned over the whole Northwest to the Republicans. When the Douglas forces stood their ground the extremists took a walk and the Charleston Convention adjourned without nominating a candidate to reconvene later at Baltimore where Douglas was nominated on a platform representing his views.

A Convention of the anti-Douglas Democrats nominated for President John C. Breckenridge on a platform the most significant plank of which declared "That it is the duty of the Federal Government, in all its departments to protect when necessary, the rights of persons and property in the Territories" which is to say that there was no power on earth with authority to exclude slavery from the territories. It can be said that Breckenridge was nominated for little other purpose than to ruin Douglas who had the temerity at long last to break the generation-long hegemony of the slaveocracy over the Northwest. It should be remembered that President Buchanan was a "dough face", that is a northern man with southern principles, and in his vindictive drive to punish Douglas threw the patronage, prestige and power of the presidency behind the candidacy of Breckenridge.

The remnant of the Whigs, under the name of the Constitutional Union Party, nominated John Bell of Tennessee and appealed to the voters with the slogan, "The Constitution of the Union of the States and the Enforcement of the Laws". When it became evident that Douglas had no chance of victory that indomitable leader directed his campaign to the preservation of the Union. This exponent of the Unionist sentiment of the upper Mississippi Valley, invading even the South, asked an audience, "Do you think a citizen of Illinois will ever consent to pay duties at a custom house when he ships his corn down the Mississippi to supply the people there? Never on earth." Three years later boys of the upper Mississippi Valley in uniforms of blue literally fulfilled Douglas' prophecy by investing Vicksburg until it fell and permitted the Mississippi once more to flow "unvexed to the sea" to use Lincoln's inimitable phrase.

If anyone still entertains the theory that the secession that grew out of the campaign of 1860 represented the consummation of a grand conspiracy, Ollinger Crenshaw's searching study should disillusion him.¹⁹ The South bungled from beginning to end. The fifteen southern states had one hundred and twenty electoral votes and the capture of the 32 more required to elect a President did not seem impossible. But factional bickering frustrated every effort at unity. Fusion of the Douglas, Breckenridge and Bell electoral votes were arranged in key northern states too late to defeat Lincoln. His election was a foregone conclusion throughout the South early in the campaign and plans for secession were consequently well matured by election day. A possible fusion of border-state Constitutional Unionists with the Republicans intensified the hysteria of the extremists of the Deep South. Another factor was the well-nigh universal southern Lincoln-

¹⁹ Ollinger Crenshaw, *The Slave States in the Election of 1860* (John Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science Series, LXII, No. 3, 1945).

phobia, despite his essential moderation, his detestation of abolitionists and his sympathetic understanding of Southerners and their problems.

The Republicans, on the contrary, managed their campaign with consummate skill. The appeal of the homestead plank was epitomized in the slogan, "Vote yourself a farm." This was neither the first nor last revolution to be effected by the promise of a new distribution of land tenure. Stump orators drove hard at the competition of slave labour with the question, "How can the free laboring man ever get two dollars a day when a black slave costs his master ten cents a day?"²⁰ Capital contributed little or nothing to Lincoln's election. The great merchants of the North were in a panic over the possibility that Lincoln's election would provoke secession which threatened the loss of the lucrative Southern trade and of \$200,000,000 due from southern customers. Native northern labour proved to be the decisive force in Lincoln's election. Southern sneers at northern "hirelings" and "mudsills of society" had something to do with it.²¹

One can only speculate as to what might have happened in a straightout two-party battle between Lincoln and Douglas. This much is indisputable, that Lincoln, in carrying the free states, had won a decisive victory in the electoral college, a result that would not have been changed if the popular votes for his three competitors had gone to a single candidate which, in effect, they did through the anti-Lincoln fusion tickets in every Northern state where there seemed to be a reasonable chance.²² Manoeuvring of the field to throw the election into the House of Representatives had been defeated by a clear-cut, perfectly constitutional victory for Lincoln. *

²⁰ Morison and Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic* (2 vols., New York, 1937), I, 533.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 533.

²² A. N. Holcombe, *The Political Parties of Today* (New York, 1927), 176.

* A brief report of the discussion which followed the reading of this paper and those which are immediately before and after this, is found on page 95.—*Editor*.