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# "PURIFYING POLITICS": ILLINOIS KNOW NOTHINGS AND THE PERPLEXITIES OF THE PARANOID STYLE

IAN IVERSON

In the wake of the heated 1964 Presidential Campaign, the historian and public intellectual Richard Hofstadter reflected on a pattern in American politics that he termed the “paranoid style.” Hofstadter argued that throughout American history, various groups on the margins of the political community had made their case to the nation in “[o]verheated, oversuspicious, overaggressive, grandiose, and apocalyptic” terms and explained the nation’s problems in terms of a grand conspiracy that threatened to subvert American government and culture.<sup>1</sup> Seeing themselves as “unselfish and patriotic,” the practitioners of the paranoid style often indulged in a “feeling of righteousness” and espoused an intense “moral indignation.”<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-nineteenth century, the United States featured abundant variations on the paranoid style as outré conspiracies forced their way into mainstream thought. In the slaveholding South, the most vociferous defenders of the “peculiar institution” described an abolitionist conspiracy, a plot by Northerners and foreigners to agitate otherwise submissive enslaved people and trigger an uprising reminiscent of the Haitian Revolution. In a variation on this theme, some pro-compromise conservatives, especially in the slaveholding border states, argued that sectional extremists in both the North and the South conspired to subvert the Constitution and bring about an end to the American experiment by agitating questions over slavery.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the Northern states on the other hand, two distinct conspiracy theories gained traction as new political parties competed to fill the void left by the demise of the once powerful Whig Party. Some members of the new Republican Party became proponents of the “Slave Power Conspiracy” and argued that a small number of Southern slaveholders had subverted American liberty by taking control of the federal government and

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<sup>1</sup> RICHARD HOFSTADTER, *THE PARANOID STYLE IN AMERICAN POLITICS AND OTHER ESSAYS* 4 (1965).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> This characterization of a “Disunion” conspiracy draws heavily on the work of Elizabeth R. Varon. See ELIZABETH R. VARON, *DISUNION!: THE COMING OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR, 1789-1859*, at 9, 10 (2008).

had imposed policies on the country that benefited elite slaveholders at the expense of common whites. As an alternative, others in the new Know Nothing Party pointed to a Catholic or so-called “Papal” conspiracy. They insisted that the German and Irish Catholics who flocked to America’s shores were the agents of a plot orchestrated by the autocratic Roman Pontiff. By their account, the Pope hoped that these ignorant peasants, under the direction of crafty Jesuits and other priests, would snuff out Protestantism, republican government, and enlightened individualism in order to restore the superstitious despotism of the Dark Ages.

The ubiquity, in the 1850s, of conspiracy-thinking and of the “paranoid style” presents students of American democracy with a problem. Even as contemporary scholars firmly reject the Know Nothings’ baseless accusations of a Papal plot, historians have increasingly seen the “Slave Power” as a real force in antebellum American political life, citing ample evidence that slaveholding Democrats wielded disproportionate power in American politics.<sup>4</sup> The interplay, in Northern politics, between the Republican Party’s conspiracy rhetoric and that of the Know Nothings demands further attention from scholars. The fact that most Northern Know Nothings eventually entered the Republican Party and that nativist voters sent Abraham Lincoln to the White House raises important questions for our own moment. Can the “paranoid style” serve noble causes as well as iniquitous ones? To what extent can (and should) political coalitions welcome in those who hold views many see as reprehensible? The history of the 1850s does not offer clear answers to these dilemmas, but in examining the ideology and political trajectory of the Know Nothings in the crucial battleground state of Illinois, we learn how past national leaders molded public opinion and worked around the prejudices of the electorate to address critical issues of the day.

#### I. THE CRISIS OF 1854

In 1854, the United States faced an unprecedented crisis as the two political parties that had long dominated national affairs, the Whigs and Democrats, fractured in the face of popular outrage. Long united by their support for, or opposition to, economic measures such as a national bank, a protective tariff, and federal funding for internal improvements, the parties

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<sup>4</sup> See LEONARD L. RICHARDS, *THE SLAVE POWER: THE FREE NORTH AND SOUTHERN DOMINATION, 1780-1860* (2000); MANISHA SINHA, *THE SLAVE’S CAUSE: A HISTORY OF ABOLITION* (2016); JAMES OAKES, *THE CROOKED PATH TO ABOLITION: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE ANTISLAVERY CONSTITUTION* (2021).

now disintegrated and split into factions as the county became embroiled in a renewed struggle over the extension of slavery and the role of immigrants in American society. Both issues had produced controversy earlier in the American republic’s brief history, but their combined resurgence at this juncture posed new challenges for the nation.<sup>5</sup>

In January, Illinois Senator Stephen A. Douglas had introduced a bill to organize the new territories of Kansas and Nebraska as part of his effort to clear a Midwestern route for a transcontinental railroad. Under pressure from Southern senators in his own Democratic party, Douglas included in the bill a stipulation that the settlers of the new territories would decide for themselves whether or not to allow slavery to exist within their borders. This adoption of this principle, known contemporaneously as “popular sovereignty,” in these territories marked a repeal of the Missouri Compromise of 1820 that had prohibited slavery north of the latitude 36° 30’. The bill provoked a swift backlash throughout the free states as many Northerners denounced the measure as a cowardly surrender to Southern interests and a repudiation of a “sacred national compact.” In the final vote on the bill, Northern Whigs stood steadfastly against the proposed law while most Southern Whigs supported the measure. Among Democrats, although most Northern representatives stayed true to Douglas and voted with their Southern compatriots in favor of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a key minority in Congress defected and many more Northern Democratic party activists and voters denounced the bill as a betrayal of ordinary Northern white men.<sup>6</sup>

Simultaneously, a new political entity emerged throughout the country. Known to most as the Know Nothings, this organization had grown out of secret societies, such as the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, that had appeared throughout the Northeast in reaction to the swelling tide of

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<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of the nativist views of the Federalist Party and the Alien Act of 1798, see Roger M. Smith, *Constructing American National Identity: Strategies of the Federalists*, in DORON S. BEN-ATAR & BARBARA B. OBERG, *FEDERALISTS RECONSIDERED* 19–40 (1998). For disputes over slavery’s extension in the era of the early republic see MATTHEW MASON, *SLAVERY & POLITICS IN THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC* (2006) and JOHN CRAIG HAMMOND, *SLAVERY, FREEDOM, AND EXPANSION IN THE EARLY AMERICAN WEST* (2006).

<sup>6</sup> ROBERT W. JOHANNSEN, *THE FRONTIER, THE UNION, AND STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS* 77–102 (1989); JAMES L. HUTSON, *STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS AND THE DILEMMAS OF DEMOCRATIC EQUALITY* 100, 101 (2007). *See also*, ALICE ELIZABETH MALAVASIC, *THE F-STREET MESS: HOW SOUTHERN SENATORS REWROTE THE KANSAS-NEBRASKA ACT* (2017).

immigration to the United States. From 1845 to 1854, an unprecedented 2.9 million immigrants entered the United States. Previous waves of immigrants had consisted mostly of middle-class English-speaking Protestants who quickly assimilated into their adopted country. Many of the relatively poor Irish and German newcomers, on the other hand, spoke foreign tongues and practiced Roman Catholicism. A combination of socioeconomic tension, religious prejudice, and cultural antipathy inspired a backlash throughout the country. Committed to limiting the influx of newcomers and minimizing their political influence, the Know Nothings sought to extend the naturalization period for recent immigrants from five years to twenty-one years and bar foreign-born citizens from holding public office. Throughout the country, but especially in the North, thousands rushed to join the new organization and pledged to support its candidates in the upcoming midterm elections.<sup>7</sup>

Looking back from the twenty-first century, these two events appear unrelated and somewhat contradictory. Popular memory of the Civil War era and contemporary social movements might lead us to believe that the opponents of slavery's extension supported a universal human right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, while nativists stood opposed to the essential truth that "all men are created equal." We should not fault ourselves for recognizing the underlying antagonism between the two movements, as contemporaries also saw the two impulses as contradictory. In 1855, Abraham Lincoln, reflecting on the political turmoil that had thrown his own political identity as a Whig into question, wrote:

I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we begin by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics." When it comes to this I should prefer

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<sup>7</sup> As many as one in three Irish immigrants throughout this period spoke only Gaelic and approximately ninety percent of this generation of Irish immigrants were Roman Catholics. Although Lutherans, Moravians, and Calvinists did compose a sizable proportion of the German immigrant population, by the 1850s German Catholics outnumbered their Protestant compatriots in America. See TYLER ANBINDER, *NATIVISM & SLAVERY* 3–8 (1992).

emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, as Lincoln recognized, a key constituency within his home state of Illinois held anti-extensionist and nativist views simultaneously. Although somewhat bewildering from our perspective, these voters felt that their convictions complemented one another.

Ideologically committed to maintaining a well-ordered, culturally homogenous, and “progressive” society, anti-extensionist nativists perceived aggression from Southern slaveholders and Catholic foreigners as twin threats to republican liberty. As succinctly captured by the historian Luke Ritter, “nativists saw independence, individualism, and Protestantism as historically and inseparably linked.”<sup>9</sup> Both slaveholders and Roman Catholics undermined democratic government, free labor capitalism, and public virtue by promoting autocracy, hindering education, and indulging intemperate desires. They believed that slaveholders and their foreign-born lackeys, through the corrupt organ of the Democratic Party, sought to “stop and hinder all manly and religious development and to plant the whole earth with slavery, ruin, and concubinage.” Given to apocalyptic hyperbole, anti-extensionist nativists undoubtedly engaged in the paranoid style. Indulging in, as Hofstadter put it, “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy,” the Know Nothings practiced a politics of alternative reality that continues to the present day. In their ferocious denunciations of immigrants and the Roman Catholics, the Know Nothings displayed the intolerance we associate with today’s practitioners of the paranoid style. Still, it would be a mistake to dismiss the Know Nothings as merely bigots. Throughout the North, nativist voters would eventually evolve into Lincoln supporters.<sup>10</sup>

Illinois serves as an especially insightful a case study. More than just the home of the two most notable Northern politicians of the era, Stephen A. Douglas and Lincoln, the “Prairie State” also captures the economic dynamism and demographic upheaval of this period throughout the North. Both Lincoln and Douglas abhorred nativism as rank prejudice, yet,

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<sup>8</sup> Letter from Abraham Lincoln to Joshua Speed (August 24, 1855), in 2 THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN 323 (Roy Basler ed., 1953).

<sup>9</sup> LUKE RITTER, INVENTING AMERICA’S FIRST IMMIGRATION CRISIS: POLITICAL NATIVISM IN THE ANTEBELLUM WEST 66 (2021).

<sup>10</sup> *Id.* WKLY. CAP. ENTER. (Springfield, IL), Sept. 23, 1854; HOFSTADTER, *supra* note 1, at 3, 19–23 (1965).

eventually, both men recognized that they would need to appeal to a least some nativist voters to win a majority in the state. A pivotal battleground state in national elections, Illinois in the mid-1850s sat at the heart of a region rapidly transforming from a homogenous and locally oriented frontier zone into a heterogeneous and market-oriented “heartland.” These changes proved both exhilarating and terrifying. On the one hand, most Illinoisans seemed ready to set aside the divisive economic questions of decades past to join in hands to build up their state as the core of the “Great West” with its metropolis at Chicago. By facilitating the rise of railroads and banks, the twin engines of economic development, the state’s political leaders hoped to secure prosperity for their citizens and power for themselves. Stephen A. Douglas had hoped that his bid to secure an eastern terminus for the transcontinental railroad in Illinois would invigorate his state and boost his own national reputation. But in single-mindedly pursuing this goal, Douglas overlooked how other changes occurring across the Prairie State and nation fractured the existing political order beyond repair.<sup>11</sup>

## II. POLITICAL NATIVISM AND ANTI-CATHOLICISM

The political inferno ignited by the Kansas-Nebraska Act further inflamed Illinois's cultural divisions, lately amplified by an increasingly diverse ethnic makeup. The state’s earliest settlers, “Butternut” migrants from Virginia and Kentucky, dominated Southern Illinois. These hard-scrabble frontiersmen and their dependents usually subscribed to a backwoods variant of the Calvinism their ancestors had brought with them from Ulster and Scotland. With predestination as their watchword, they perceived moral reform efforts as intrusive and misguided, an offense to God’s sovereignty. The “Yankees,” who migrated in increasing numbers from greater New England throughout the 1840s and 1850s, carried the zeal for Christian perfectionism sparked by the Second Great Awakening. Preaching a postmillennial Arminian faith that formed the foundation of Northern evangelicalism, they enthusiastically supported morally oriented social movements such as temperance, Sabbatarianism, and education reform. As in so many things, culturally blended central Illinois occupied a

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<sup>11</sup> For thoughtful analysis of the vision of Illinoisans and other inhabitants of the “Great West” in this period, see WILLIAM CRONON, *NATURE’S METROPOLIS: CHICAGO AND THE GREAT WEST* (1991); JOHN K. LAUCK, *THE LOST REGION: TOWARDS A REVIVAL OF MIDWESTERN HISTORY* (2013); KRISTIN L. HOGANSON, *THE HEARTLAND: AN AMERICAN HISTORY* (2019).

moderate position and many of its citizens supported the well-established and politically heterogeneous Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopal churches.<sup>12</sup>

Although the native-born predominated, the state also contained an increasingly influential population of immigrants and by 1850 they accounted for 13 percent of Illinois’s population. Motivated to emigrate by both economic and political factors, the state’s German-language speakers generally came from middling backgrounds and had sufficient capital to establish farms, workshops, and stores throughout the state. Although mostly Catholic or Lutheran in their faith, a small contingent of free-thinking intellectuals and professionals, exiled after the failed Revolutions of 1848, would emerge as important leaders in this divided community. Impoverished Irish Catholics, on the other hand, migrated *en masse* to work as canal diggers and settled in Chicago where they emerged as one of the Democratic Party’s most faithful constituencies.<sup>13</sup>

In the minds of many of Illinois’ native-born Protestants, the cultural, political, and economic threats posed by this influx of immigrants necessitated a decisive response. Suspicion of immigrants, especially of Roman Catholics, had a long history in Illinois. Elijah Lovejoy, an antislavery newspaper editor murdered by an anti-abolitionist mob in Alton and brother of future radical Republican Owen Lovejoy, had ranted in the 1830s against “the hordes of ignorant, uneducated, vicious foreigners” who

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<sup>12</sup> For discussions on the economic and political implications of mid-century theological debates see CHARLES SELLERS, *THE MARKET REVOLUTION: JACKSONIAN AMERICA, 1815-1846*, at 393–95 (1991); RICHARD CARWARDINE, *LINCOLN: A LIFE OF PURPOSE AND POWER* 32–44 (2006); DANIEL WALKER HOWE, *THE POLITICAL CULTURE OF AMERICAN WHIGS* 166–67 (1979); DANIEL WALKER HOWE, *WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT* 176–82 (2007). *See also*, STEPHEN L. HANSEN, *THE MAKING OF THE THIRD PARTY SYSTEM* 60–67 (1980); W.F. Short, *Early Religious Leaders and Methods in Illinois*, in *TRANSACTIONS OF THE ILLINOIS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY FOR THE YEAR 1902* 56–62 (1902); Barton E. Price, *Religion, Reform, and Patriotism in Southern Illinois: A Case Study, 1852-1900*, 107 *J. ILL. STATE HIST. SOC’Y* 175–88 (2014).

<sup>13</sup> For statistics on the Midwest’s foreign-born and Catholic populations, see Ritter *supra* note 9, at 15–19. For helpful discussions of German immigrants and politics in this period see Christina Bearden-White, *Illinois Germans and the Coming of the Civil War: Reshaping Ethnic Identity*, 109 *J. ILL. STATE HIST. SOC’Y* 231–51 (2016); ALLISON CLARK EFFORD, *GERMAN IMMIGRANTS, RACE, AND CITIZENSHIP IN THE CIVIL WAR ERA* (2013); BRUCE LEVINE, *THE SPIRIT OF 1848: GERMAN IMMIGRANTS, LABOR CONFLICT, AND THE COMING OF THE CIVIL WAR* (1992). For an insightful discussion of the role of Irish immigrants in Chicago’s political culture see Patricia Kelleher, *Class and Catholic Irish Masculinity in Antebellum America: Young Men on the Make in Chicago*, 28 *J. AM. ETHNIC HIST.* 7–42 (2009).



under the guidance of the Catholic Church were “calculated, fitted, and intended to subvert our liberties.” Yet in the 1850s, as the number of foreign-born Illinoisans swelled well beyond anything Lovejoy might have predicted, the nativist imperative to check the influence of immigrants took on a new urgency.<sup>14</sup>

This impulse manifested itself in four separate arenas in Illinois in the mid-1850s. First, evangelical Protestants sought to squelch cultural aberration among immigrant groups by imposing strict Sabbath ordinances that would prohibit the feasting and drinking popular among Irish Catholics and Germans of all denominations. Closely connected to such efforts was an attempt to adopt prohibition or the “Maine Law” and ban the production and sale of intoxicating spirits. Some nativists sought to check the influence of the foreign-born at the ballot box, by imposing restrictions on naturalized citizens holding public offices and/or lengthening the waiting period for naturalization. Finally, and most obliquely, many nativists supported the establishment of public schools throughout the state, equipped with the Protestant King James Bible as a textbook, in an effort to encourage the use of the English language among Germans and check the growth of Catholic parochial schools. The rapid emergence of the American or “Know Nothing” Party served as the political engine for most of these measures.<sup>15</sup>

The introduction of the Nebraska Bill exacerbated existing tensions within Illinois's long dominant Democratic Party. Although settled largely

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<sup>14</sup> Ritter, *supra* note 9, at 37.

<sup>15</sup> Ritter, *supra* note 9, at 38–59. Prohibition measures received the title of “Maine Law” following Maine’s adoption of the measure in 1851. The passage of the law marked a major shift in the temperance movement, which had previously relied on voluntary pledges of abstinence, using tactics of “moral suasion” similar to that of abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison. For background see JACK S. BLOCKER JR., *AMERICAN TEMPERANCE MOVEMENTS: CYCLES OF REFORM* 54–60 (1989). Although native-born evangelical Protestants dominated the temperance and Sabbatarian movements, they were joined throughout the Midwest by small groups of pietistic Protestant immigrants, especially English and Welsh Methodists, Scottish and Irish Presbyterians, Scandinavian Lutherans, and members of the Dutch Reformed Church. This dynamic sometimes complicated the politics connecting nativism, moral reform, and anti-Catholicism. For a thoughtful discussion of these pietistic immigrants and their political affinities with native-born evangelicals see PAUL KLEPPNER, *THE CROSS OF CULTURE: A SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF MIDWESTERN POLITICS, 1850-1900* 84–89 (2ed., 1970). For background on the role of evangelical Protestants in Northern political life, see Daniel Walker Howe, *The Evangelical Movement and Political Culture in the North During the Second Party System*, 77 *J. AM. HIST.* 1216–39 (1991); RICHARD J. CARWARDINE, *EVANGELICALS AND POLITICS IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA* 199–218 (2ed., 1997).

by those of "Yankee" stock, Northern Illinois had remained competitive for Democratic candidates, even after defections to the Free Soil ticket in 1848. The Kansas-Nebraska Act, by opening free territory to the extension of slavery, permanently alienated many of these one-time Jacksonians from the Democracy. At the same time, Yankee Democrats had begun to join their Whig cousins in expressing nativist views and campaigning on issues such as temperance and anti-Catholicism. The dramatic success of the *Chicago Tribune* as both an antislavery and anti-Catholic organ during this period reveals the compatibility of these positions in the eyes of many readers. Such a trend appeared elsewhere in the state as anti-Nebraska Democrat George T. Brown of Alton championed temperance and Sabbatarianism before becoming a firm opponent of the Kansas-Nebraska Act. On the other hand, anti-extensionist immigrants, such as the German Democrat Gustave Koerner, found themselves, for a time, alienated from both the national Democracy and the new anti-Nebraska coalition.<sup>16</sup>

The process of realignment remained anything but straightforward. Ethnic, religious, and cultural identities operated within a complex milieu of partisan affinities and policy positions. Some anti-extensionist Whigs, such as Abraham Lincoln, felt nothing but antipathy for political nativism even as they maintained close alliances with Know Nothings. On the other hand, some champions of temperance, nativism, and free schools ultimately became loyal Douglas Democrats, such as Theodore S. Bowers of the *Mount Carmel Register*. Throughout the debates of the following years, party leaders of all stripes, as well as advocates of social reform, would try to activate these various identities to mobilize the electorate in their favor. Although the question of slavery extension would come to shape the politics more than any other issue, this was not apparent to those living through the events of 1854. No clear path forward existed amid the political tumult that defined the months after the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act as all factions sought to bolster their conservative credentials and restore a semblance of order, whether by reasserting the supremacy of the people through popular sovereignty, restoring the Missouri Compromise as a

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<sup>16</sup> Thomas M. Keefe, *Chicago's Flirtation with Political Nativism, 1854-1856*, in 82 REC. AM. CATH. HIST. SOC'Y OF PHILA. 131, 131, 32 (1971); HANSEN, *supra* note 12, at 54.

“sacred compact,” or reimposing the cultural preeminence of Protestant Anglo-Saxons.<sup>17</sup>

The last goal preceded the introduction of the Nebraska Bill. Back in November 1853, George T. Brown’s Democratic *Alton Courier* featured an editorial denouncing the indifference of German immigrants to American observance of the Sabbath. For Brown, the United States was “superior to Germany in very many respects” with the “general observance of the Sabbath as one instance of that superiority.”<sup>18</sup> A subsequent convention of Sabbatarians held across the state in White County declared that “the continued prosperity of the nation in civil and religious liberty, depends upon the recognition and sanctification of the sabbath.”<sup>19</sup> While such sentiments might appear hyperbolic for twenty-first-century Americans, for believers in

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<sup>17</sup> Historians have offered a variety of interpretations for the collapse of the Second Party System and subsequent realignment in Illinois. The traditional position places the question of slavery’s extension at the heart of the realignment. See DON E. FEHRENBACHER, *PRELUDE TO GREATNESS: LINCOLN IN THE 1850S* (Stanford University Press ed., 1st ed. 1962). The so-called “ethnocultural” and “geographical” interpretations, notably advanced by Paul Kleppner and Stephen L. Hansen, respectively, and supported to varying extents by the work of Michael F. Holt, William E. Gienapp, and Joel H. Silbey, emphasize religious, linguistic, and cultural divisions between pietists, liturgists, Yankees, immigrants, and Southerners as leading factors. See PAUL KLEPPNER, *THE THIRD ELECTORAL SYSTEM, 1853-1892: PARTIES, VOTERS, AND POLITICAL CULTURES* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press ed., 1979); HANSEN, *supra* note 12; MICHAEL F. HOLT, *THE POLITICAL CRISIS OF THE 1850S*, at 175–181 (John Wiley & Sons, Inc. ed., 1978); WILLIAM E. GIENAPP, *THE ORIGINS OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY 1852-1856* (Oxford University Press, Inc. 1987); JOEL H. SILBEY, *THE PARTISAN IMPERATIVE: THE DYNAMICS OF AMERICAN POLITICS BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR* (New York: Oxford University Press ed., 1985). Recent literature has largely returned to the traditional “fundamentalist” interpretation but acknowledges the role of ethnocultural issues and geography. See Bruce Levine, *Conservatism, Nativism, and Slavery: Thomas R. Whitney and the Origins of the Know-Nothing Party*, 88 *J. AM. HIST.* 455–588 (2001); ERIC FONER, *THE FIERY TRIAL: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND AMERICAN SLAVERY* 72, 73 (New York: W.W. Norton & Co. ed., 2010); Bruce Levine, “*The Vital Element of the Republican Party*”: *Antislavery, Nativism, and Abraham Lincoln*, 1 *J. CIVIL WAR ERA* 481–505 (2011); James L. Hutson, *The Illinois Political Realignment of 1844-1860: Revisiting the Analysis*, 1 *J. CIV. WAR ERA* 506–535 (2011); GRAHAM A. PECK, *MAKING AN ANTISLAVERY NATION: STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS AND THE NORTHERN DEMOCRATIC ORIGINS OF THE KANSAS-NEBRASKA ACT, 1849-1854*, at 97, 105–07 (University of Illinois Press ed., 2017).

<sup>18</sup> *The Sabbath – The German – A Challenge*, *ALTON DAILY MORNING COURIER* (Ill.), Nov. 7, 1853, at 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Resolutions of the Convention*, *MOUNT CARMEL REGISTER* (Ill.), July 19, 1854, at 2.

a sovereign God, the dangers posed by violating the Fourth Commandment appeared all too apparent. Indeed, in late 1854 another Sabbatarian convention would announce that such “a fearful amount of Sabbath desecration” as occurred in their midst was “calculated to bring down the judgments of Heaven; not only upon individuals but upon the nation at large.”<sup>20</sup> By dishonoring the Sabbath with drinking, carousing, and feasting, immigrants posed an immediate threat to the United States’ covenant with Divine Providence.<sup>21</sup>

Liquor dealers facilitated these Sunday shenanigans, as well as darker scenes of perpetual drunkenness and inebriated violence that haunted the poor of all backgrounds. Reformers took aim at grog sellers using the same language of republicanism that anti-extensionists had applied to Southern slaveholders. In March 1854, the *Mount Carmel Register* attacked liquor sellers as “the aristocracy of America,” acting with impunity in their own interest against the will of the community.<sup>22</sup> By profiting off of vice and releasing intoxicated hordes, the *Chicago Tribune* denounced the “Whiskey interest” and their allies in the Democratic Party for forming an “engine to perpetuate drunkenness and crime.”<sup>23</sup> Widespread support for temperance among the “respectable” middle classes put pro-liquor Democrats on the defensive, and they did their best to separate temperance from partisanship. The pro-Nebraska *Rock Island Republican* objected “to the spasmodic efforts of defunct whiggery to galvanize itself into motion by hanging on to the tails of the temperance men.”<sup>24</sup> The *Republican* rightly feared that members of the opposition had garnered support from their stance on temperance, but liquor’s most fervent opponents did not rally under the Whig banner.<sup>25</sup>

Instead, they took up the cause of the Know Nothings, also known as the Native Americans, who emerged as a political force from the shadows of semi-secret fraternal lodges. These political nativists linked immigration, drunkenness, and sabbath breaking as part of a grand anti-republican conspiracy formulated by the Roman Catholic Church. Under the direction

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<sup>20</sup> *Sabbath Convention of South-Eastern Illinois*, MOUNT CARMEL REGISTER (Ill.), Dec. 27, 1854, at 1.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* The numbering of the Ten Commandments remains disputed among Christians. Most Protestants consider the command “Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy” as the Fourth Commandment. Roman Catholics and Lutherans consider this to be the Third Commandment.

<sup>22</sup> Editorial, MOUNT CARMEL REGISTER, Mar. 15, 1854, at 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Politics in Indiana*, CHI. DAILY TRIB., June 7, 1854, at 2.

<sup>24</sup> *The Rock Island Weekly Argus*, DAILY REPUBLICAN (Ill.), Apr. 5, 1854, at 2.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

of the Roman Pontiff, devious priests and an ignorant laity had begun to undermine both Protestantism and liberty throughout the United States. Springfield's Know Nothing organ, the *Weekly Capital Enterprise*, declared that "No American who employs an Irish servant is beyond the reach of Jesuitical spies."<sup>26</sup> Drawing on a long tradition of Anglo-American anti-Catholicism that dated back to the colonial period, the Know Nothings insisted that Catholicism encouraged idolatry, superstition, and devotion to a rigid hierarchy that would undermine rational Protestantism and Anglo-Saxon liberty. The Church's "treacherous and devilish" lackeys would stop at nothing for "the advancement of the papal power" and inevitably bring about "the downfall of the liberties of the people."<sup>27</sup> Although the Roman Catholic Church remained a prominent force of reactionary anti-republicanism in Europe, American Catholics worked hard to balance the commitments of their faith with their duties as American citizens. Absolutely no evidence existed for a coordinated plot by the Church's hierarchy.<sup>28</sup>

Beyond their religious bigotry, the new nativist party also tapped into a strain of anti-partisan partisanship that resonated with a broad swath to the electorate. The Know Nothings, by adopting the title of "American" as their formal party label had hoped to rise above the party squabbles that they believed had driven the country to the brink of disaster. Winfield Scott's effort to court Irish-American voters in the presidential election of 1852 had appalled nativist Whigs, while the waning of Jacksonian-Era economic disputes and a perception of complacency and corruption within the Democracy fueled a sense of alienation among some Northern Democrats. As the national bonds that had held Whiggery together snapped, many hoped that nativist patriotism could cleanse American republicanism of its profane heresies. Opposed to both the Southern Fire-Eaters and the immigrant profligates who stood poised to dominate the nation politically, the Know Nothings hoped to "purify the politics of country," "refine its nationality," and foster "true patriotism."<sup>29</sup> As aptly explained by one historian of

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<sup>26</sup> *The American*, WKLY. CAP. ENTER. (Springfield, Ill.), Sept. 2, 1854, at 2. For background on early American Anti-Catholicism see Ritter, *supra* note 7, at 86, 87.

<sup>27</sup> *The American*, *supra* note 26.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

<sup>29</sup> For background on anti-partisanship, see ADAM I.P. SMITH, *NO PARTY NOW: POLITICS IN THE CIVIL WAR NORTH 9–24* (New York: Oxford University Press ed., 2006). For details on the anti-partisan impulse in the Whig Party and its collapse, see Howe, *supra* note 15, at 278–80 and HOLT, *supra* note 12, at 845–50. *An American Party*, WKLY. CAP. ENTER. (Springfield, Ill.), Aug. 26, 1854; *The American*, *supra* note 26.

Northern Know Nothingism, the party "insisted that only ignorant foreigners could be duped by the outrageous promises of this cunning new breed of politician" that had emerged from the slaveholder dominated Democratic Party.<sup>30</sup>

For the most part in 1854 midterms, the incipient Know Nothings joined forces with other opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in a loose "Fusion" movement. In the one statewide contest, for State Treasurer, the Fusion ticket backed James Miller, a Know Nothing and fierce opponent of slavery. In other places throughout the state, the Know Nothings backed anti-Nebraska Whigs. For example, Lincoln managed to secure the endorsement of Benjamin S. Edwards of Springfield, Sangamon County's leading nativist, to support Richard Yates's bid for reelection to Congress.<sup>31</sup>

Throughout the state, the Fusion movement received broad support from voters but remained fractured politically. The anti-Nebraska coalition won some fifty-five percent of the vote statewide in the congressional contests, securing five of the state's nine districts, but lost the contest for State Treasurer. The nomination of Miller had alienated anti-extensionist Germans who split their tickets in order to vote against a Know Nothing. Although some ninety percent of German-Americans had voted for Democrats in 1852, they now split 70-30 for anti-Nebraskites who had no connection with nativism. But on the other hand, nativist voters had uniformly voted against pro-Nebraska Democrats. Thus, although many voices cried out against slavery extension, it appeared as if the anti-Nebraska Fusion men would be forced to choose between siding with either the politically powerful Know Nothings or the state's significant German population, which had largely opposed the Kansas-Nebraska Act.<sup>32</sup>

### III. NATIVISTS IN OFFICE

Throughout the first half of 1855, rather than compromising and coalescing, the anti-Nebraska forces further divided. The surge among political nativists and moral reformers evident in the preceding months reached a crescendo as this self-identified conservative force, having voiced

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<sup>30</sup> ANBINDER, *supra* note 7, at 125. See also, William E. Gienapp, *Nativism and the Creation of a Republican Majority in the North before the Civil War*, in 2 J. AM. HIST. 529, 530 (Oxford University Press ed., 1985).

<sup>31</sup> HANSEN, *supra* note 12, at 49; Letter from Abraham Lincoln to Richard Yates (Aug. 18, 1854), in 2 *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* 226 (Roy Basler, ed., 1953).

<sup>32</sup> HANSEN, *supra* note 12, at 49, 50; PECK, *supra* note 17, at 131.

its support for the Missouri Compromise, sought to restore order and evangelical morality in the face of immigrant opposition. Although by no means a monolith, the pro-temperance and anti-Catholic Know Nothings proved sufficiently organized at the local and state levels to rapidly advance their legislative agenda. Chicago's "Lager Beer" Riot, the passage of a statewide public-school law, and the narrow failure of a prohibition referendum showcased further divisions within Illinois's body politic.<sup>33</sup>

The Chicago municipal elections of March 1855 offered the city's energized political nativists a chance to flex their newfound political muscle. A year earlier, they had lamented how "the Whiskey Party" aided by the "enemies of Free Schools and Political and Religious Liberty" could triumph over "Morality and Religion." Now, by electing their candidate for Mayor, Levi Boone, over the Democratic incumbent, along with a slate of other city officials on a prohibitionist and nativist platform, the Know Nothings hoped to realize their vision of a virtuous Christian society. Indeed, in his inaugural address, Boone promised to ensure that the city would "become as eminent for its moral characters as it is for the commercial facilities and material resources with which the lavish hand of a beneficent Providence has crowned it."<sup>34</sup> Explicitly excluding Catholics from his vision of the city's new birth, he denounced the Church as "a powerful politico-religious organization" devoted "to the temporal, as well as the spiritual supremacy of a foreign despot" which sought "universal dominion over this land... by coercion and at the cost of blood itself."<sup>35</sup> Boone made the reorganization of Chicago's police force a top priority putting uniformed cops on the streets for the first time as he built an army for his moral majority that could crack down on the city's immigrant-dominated saloons, beer halls, and gambling houses.<sup>36</sup>

In April, this effort to restore "law and order" led to a violent civil disturbance throughout the city. Although Boone had voiced his opposition to issuing any liquor licenses and supported the looming statewide referendum on prohibition, the city government initially pursued a policy of limiting access to alcohol by raising the cost of liquor licenses and closing by-the-drink establishments on Sundays. As Boone said in his inaugural, the city had "long been disgraced and the holy Sabbath profaned" by Sunday

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<sup>33</sup> F. I. Herriott, *Senator Stephen A. Douglas and the Germans in 1854*, in *TRANSACTIONS OF THE ILLINOIS STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY* 1912, at 142, 150–55 (Illinois State Journal Co., State Printers, 1914).

<sup>34</sup> *The Election To-Day*, CHI. DAILY TRIB., Mar. 7, 1854, at 2.

<sup>35</sup> *Inauguration of Mayor Boone*, CHI. DAILY TRIB., Mar. 14, 1855, at 1.

<sup>36</sup> *Id.*; *The Election To-Day*, *supra* note 34; Keefe, *supra* note 14, at 139–42.

liquor sales.<sup>37</sup> But the Know Nothings administration underestimated the ferocious opposition they would meet from the city’s immigrant population, particularly by the Germans, who regarded drinking beer on Sunday as a perfectly respectable activity. On April 21, an angry crowd of Germans gathered in front of the city’s Clark Street courthouse to demand the release of nineteen saloonkeepers imprisoned for either failing to pay the new fee or for continuing to serve alcohol on Sundays. In response, Mayor Boone called out the city’s new police force of 80 native-born officers to break up the crowd and deputized 150 more men to reinforce them. The clash which followed, known as the “Lager Beer Riot,” left at least one immigrant dead and dozens severely injured. The police arrested a group of 60 men, mostly working-class Germans, and Boone mustered the militia and placed the city under martial law.<sup>38</sup>

The press throughout the state reacted divisively to the violence along both cultural and partisan lines. The *Chicago Tribune* castigated the “Lager Beer swilling and Sabbath breaking Germans” and hailed the effort to enforce the law “against their low, drunkard, pauper making whiskey and beer shops.”<sup>39</sup> Downstate, George T. Brown’s *Alton Courier*, though still identifying as a Democratic paper, labeled the riot as “the fruits of the agitation which the Chicago Liquor dealers have been so industriously and unscrupulously endeavoring to raise.”<sup>40</sup> The prohibitionist and anti-Catholic *Moline Workman* also applauded the “bravery of the policemen” in the face “of a most disgraceful riot.”<sup>41</sup> The pro-Douglas *Daily Republican* of Rock Island, on the other hand, blamed “know nothing rowdies and Maine Lawites” for their “relentless war of proscription and persecution” which represented a “tide of fanaticism and treason.”<sup>42</sup> The *Republican*’s editor John B. Danforth called on the “sober, right-minded people, who love their country and the principles of their fathers” to stem the tide of dogmatic bigotry.<sup>43</sup> Less bombastically, the *Dewitt Courier* blamed the violence on

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<sup>37</sup> *Inauguration of Mayor Boone*, CHI. DAILY TRIB., Mar. 14, 1855, at 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.*; Bearden-White, *supra* note 13, at 236; SAM MITRANI, THE RISE OF THE CHICAGO POLICE DEPARTMENT: CLASS AND CONFLICT, 1850–1894, at 13–16 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press ed., 2013).

<sup>39</sup> *Who Caused the Riot!*, CHI. DAILY TRIB., Apr. 24, 1855, at 1.

<sup>40</sup> ALTON WKLY. TEL., Apr. 26, 1855, at 1.

<sup>41</sup> *The Riot in Chicago*, MOLINE WORKMAN, Apr. 25, 1855, at 2.

<sup>42</sup> *Riot in Chicago*, DAILY REPUBLICAN (Rock Island, Ill.), Apr. 23, 1855, at 2.

<sup>43</sup> *Id.*



“the over officiousness of the city officers.”<sup>44</sup> These, and many other accounts, tied the events in Chicago to recent legislation passed in Springfield which promised to implement a free school system throughout the state and enact a prohibition law, pending the result of a statewide referendum.

State support for prohibition and public schools marked a triumph for evangelicalism. By drying out the state and herding ignorant immigrant children into schools infused with a strong dose of Protestant theology, the legislators hoped to restore order to a society overtaken by idleness and debauchery. Catholic immigrants and many native-born Illinoisans with Southern backgrounds staunchly opposed both measures as a coercive overreach by Yankee idealists. A host of others, including Protestant immigrants and less pious voters born in the free states, tended to support public schools but waffled on the so-called “Maine Law.” The new Free School law required localities to provide tax support for a common school instead of allowing each county to decide the issue for itself. Since many areas of Northern Illinois already featured competition between locally established public schools and Catholic parochial schools, Southern Illinois voiced the strongest opposition to the measure. Yet, given that similar legislation had easily passed throughout the other free states, the measure provoked little controversy relative to the prohibition measure. The June referendum on that issue galvanized many voters, including the Democrats who had sat out the previous fall’s congressional elections out of frustration with the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Although support for liquor consumption, per se, remained rare, opposition to prohibition’s enforcement, or as the *Cairo City Times* put it, to the creation of a “tyrannical, dangerous, or cruel police authority” whose excesses might match “the decrees of Robespierre and his associates of France,” appealed to those skeptical of replacing a familiar problem with an unknown evil.<sup>45</sup> In the end, a coalition of Southern and Illinois born voters united with nearly all eligible Irish and German immigrants to decisively defeat the measure with fifty-four percent of voters opposing a dry Illinois.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Another Mob in Chicago*, DEWITT COURIER (Clinton, Ill.), Apr. 27, 1855, at 2.

<sup>45</sup> *The Liquor Law*, CAIRO CITY TIMES, Apr. 18, 1855.

<sup>46</sup> For an overview of the 1855 Free School Law see Paul E. Belting, *The Development of the Free Public High School in Illinois to 1860*, 11 J. ILL. STATE HIST. SOC'Y 467, 500–12 (1919). For Protestant establishment within public

Though the defeat of prohibition owed as much to a lack of enthusiasm among some of the native-born as to the machinations of either immigrants or alcohol dealers, the *Moline Workman* bemoaned that Illinois was “no longer the land of milk and honey—but of whiskey outrage and murder” as a “great ocean of rum” had overwhelmed the state.<sup>47</sup> Deeply frustrated by the result of the vote, temperance advocates would abandon prohibition efforts for the foreseeable future. The nativist coalition that had rallied in support of the measure also began to fracture. But their brief moment in the sun had immeasurably complicated the task of building a permanent coalition in opposition to slavery’s extension. As political factions split, re-aligned and split again, adversaries, became allies, became adversaries again. Each party and sub-party hoped to preserve its own vision of American liberty in the face of a radicalized opposition, but in mid-1855 few could point out which radicals posed the greatest threat.<sup>48</sup>

#### IV. THE POSSIBILITY OF POLITICAL FUSION

By early 1856, many of the Illinois Whigs who had joined Know Nothing lodges wondered whether they could maintain their opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act and still succeed on the state and national levels as an independent nativist party. In 1855, the state Know Nothing Party had called for a restoration of the Missouri Compromise, but in February 1856, the Know Nothing national convention had bypassed the slavery question and nominated former President Millard Fillmore, a champion of the Compromise of 1850 and the last Whig to hold the nation’s highest office. Fillmore himself had a lukewarm commitment to nativism and this ambivalence, combined with his failure to call for a repeal of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, led some Northern Know Nothings to reject his candidacy. Still, for those intensely concerned with the Disunion conspiracy, like the Know Nothings of central Illinois, Fillmore’s candidacy proved quite appealing.<sup>49</sup>

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education see STEVEN K. GREEN, *THE SECOND DISESTABLISHMENT: CHURCH AND STATE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA* 251–53 (New York: Oxford University Press ed., 2010). For sectarian antagonism in the Chicago public schools see JAMES W. SANDERS, *THE EDUCATION OF AN URBAN MINORITY: CATHOLICS IN CHICAGO, 1833-1965*, at 20–24 (New York: Oxford University Press ed., 1977). For details on voters in the 1855 prohibition referendum see GIENAPP, *supra* note 17, at 520; HANSEN, *supra* note 12, at 62–66.

<sup>47</sup> *The Result*, MOLINE WORKMAN (Ill.), June 13, 1855, at 2.

<sup>48</sup> *Id.*

<sup>49</sup> ANBINDER, *supra* note 7, at 209, 210.

Meanwhile, even after a year of continuous agitation against the extension of slavery, Illinois's anti-extension forces remained factious and divided along old partisan and sociocultural lines. Recognizing that competing tickets would result in disaster in statewide contests, a group of self-identified conservative leaders began to lead a movement to unite on their mutual antipathy towards slavery's expansion into Kansas. Culminating at the Bloomington Convention of May 1856, the newly minted Illinois Republicans took a defensive posture against Southern aggression. Bolstered by the recent attacks on Lawrence, Kansas and Senator Charles Sumner by proslavery extremists, the Republicans attracted those Know Nothings who distrusted Fillmore. Douglas and his Democratic supporters, for their part, rejected the Republicans as incendiaries willing to risk disunion for free soil and maintained that popular sovereignty provided a reasonable antislavery solution. Exposed to both arguments, undecided voters in Illinois, wavering Democrats, Know Nothings, and ex-Whigs alike, balanced their genuine dislike of slavery with suspicion of abolitionist agitation and fear of disunion.

Unfortunately for the Illinois Republicans, suspicion surrounded the party's presidential nominee, former army explorer John C. Frémont. Although both American-born Protestants, John Frémont and his wife Jessie had eloped in 1841 with the help of a Roman Catholic priest, a fact that—along with John Frémont's French-Canadian heritage—rang alarm bells in the ears of anti-Catholic nativists. The Democrats took advantage of Frémont's relative obscurity to tar him with a variety of blatantly false and contradictory charges. Recognizing the tenuous and sometimes conflicting elements of the Republican coalition, they hoped to alienate at least one of the party's key constituencies through this campaign of misinformation.<sup>50</sup> Thus, Democrats accused the Republicans of a plot “to degrade the alien-born white man”<sup>51</sup> and also lambasted them for “laying drunk in beer saloons...to fool the ignorant laboring Dutchman.”<sup>52</sup> As a result, Republican organs found themselves in the strange position of simultaneously denying Frémont's status as “a Know Nothing or Catholic, an Abolitionist or a slaveholder.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> ERIC FONER, *FREE SOIL, FREE LABOR, FREE MEN*, 248–50 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1995); GIENAPP, *supra* note 17, at 316–29; HOLT, *supra* note 17, at 175–81.

<sup>51</sup> *The Germans on Thursday*, ILL. STATE REG., Sept. 20, 1856 at 1.

<sup>52</sup> *Produce Your Evidence*, ROCK ISLAND ARGUS (Ill.), Aug. 1, 1856, at 2.

<sup>53</sup> THE MOLINE WORKMAN (Ill.), Aug. 20, 1856 at 2.

While the Republicans largely succeeded in swinging the Know Nothings of northern Illinois into the Republican column, local leaders recognized that central Illinois would determine the election’s outcome and worked tirelessly to co-opt conservative ex-Whigs inclined towards Fillmore. In Greene County, William Herndon—Lincoln’s law partner—and ex-Congressman Richard Yates negotiated a truce with Know Nothing activist Jim Matheny so that both factions would advocate for anti-extension policies. Lincoln himself wrote to many leading Fillmore supporters urging them to throw their support behind Frémont. Presenting a pragmatic plan for limited cooperation, Lincoln explained that by supporting the Republicans and depriving James Buchanan of Illinois, the Know Nothings could potentially send the election to the House of Representatives—where Fillmore might emerge triumphant as a compromise candidate.<sup>54</sup>

In a case that highlighted a generational divide among former Whigs, Republican William H. Bailhache of the *Illinois State Journal* sought to convince his father, John Bailhache, the former editor of the *Alton Telegraph* to shift his support from Fillmore to Frémont. The younger Bailhache acknowledged that he too “would have preferred Fillmore as a candidate” as would have “a large number of the delegates” to Philadelphia, but he insisted that Frémont’s “record is a good one” and hoped that the young hero might take on a role like Zachary Taylor, the last Whig to win the White House.<sup>55</sup> Yet while the elder Bailhache would write to his fellow Old Line Whigs denouncing defections to Buchanan and backed Bissell for Governor, he remained in Fillmore’s camp. In an effort to cultivate goodwill, William Henry Bailhache even assisted in the establishment of a pro-Fillmore newspaper in Springfield. He apparently believed that the Fillmore campaign would do more harm to Buchanan than Frémont and, as evidenced in late October letters with his father, hoped that the Fillmore men would switch candidates at the last moment. Despite these efforts, ex-Know Nothing William B. Archer recognized that “the friends of Fillmore [would] not come

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<sup>54</sup> Letter from William H. Herndon to Lyman Trumbull (July 12, 1856), in *THE PAPERS OF LYMAN TRUMBULL, 1843-1894* (Library of Congress, box 5 reel 2); Form Letter to Fillmore Men (September 8, 1856), in *2 THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN*, 374 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953). See also, FONER, *supra* note 17, at 81, 82.

<sup>55</sup> Letter from William H. Bailhache to John Bailhache (June 21, 1856), in *BAILHACHE-BRAYMAN FAMILY PAPERS, 1796-1922* (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum).

over” to the Republicans thanks to Frémont’s association with Catholicism and the increasing number of German-born Republicans.<sup>56</sup>

Fillmore supporters sought to step into the breach by making the case that their candidate offered the only hope for national reconciliation and revival. The Fillmore campaign paper William H. Bailhache had assisted, the *Conservative*, largely targeted the Democrats, denouncing “the present imbecile administration” for its “repeal of the Missouri Compromise” and “reopening the slavery agitation which had been closed by the Compromises of 1820 and 1850.”<sup>57</sup> Yet, it also lambasted “Republican madness and folly” alongside “Locofoco corruption” and attempted to sow doubt into the minds of Old Line Whigs leaning towards the Republicans by suggesting that the conservative favorite Supreme Court Justice John McLean favored Fillmore over Frémont.<sup>58</sup> With the statewide Know Nothing Party in disarray, and resolved, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, to support Bissell in the gubernatorial contest, the Fillmorites claimed the mantle of disinterested patriots who stood apart from party. Drawing on a tendency among Whigs identified by Daniel Walker Howe “to think of themselves as nonpartisan defenders of reason against the passions of the crowd”<sup>59</sup> the pro-Fillmore forces to position their candidate as arrayed against “sectional parties” who represented “the wildest and most dangerous passions.”<sup>60</sup> In the campaign’s final days, the *Conservative* appealed to the “many good and true men, whose every impulse is patriotic” who planned to vote for Frémont to reject the

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<sup>56</sup> Letter from William H. Bailhache to John Bailhache (August 1, 1856), in BAILHACHE-BRAYMAN FAMILY PAPERS, 1796-1922 (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum); Letter from William H. Bailhache to John Bailhache (August 2, 1856), in BAILHACHE-BRAYMAN FAMILY PAPERS, 1796-1922 (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum); Letter from William H. Bailhache to John Bailhache (October 30, 1856), in BAILHACHE-BRAYMAN FAMILY PAPERS, 1796-1922 (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum); Letter from John Bailhache to William H. Bailhache (November 3, 1856), in BAILHACHE-BRAYMAN FAMILY PAPERS, 1796-1922 (Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library & Museum); Letter from William B. Archer to Lyman Trumbull (August 11, 1856), in THE PAPERS OF LYMAN TRUMBULL, 1843-1894 (Library of Congress, reel 2).

<sup>57</sup> *Prospects of The Conservative*, CONSERVATIVE, (Springfield, Ill.), Aug. 14, 1856.

<sup>58</sup> *The People vs. The Political Hucksters*, CONSERVATIVE, (Springfield, Ill.), Aug. 14, 1856; *Republicanism Uneasy About Judge McLean*, CONSERVATIVE, (Springfield, Ill.), Aug. 28, 1856.

<sup>59</sup> HOWE, *supra* note 12, at 52, 53.

<sup>60</sup> *The Duty of Patriots*, CONSERVATIVE, (Springfield, IL.), Sep. 4, 1856; CONSERVATIVE (Springfield, IL.), Oct. 30, 1856.

“designing demagogues” and “abolitionists” who led the Republicans at the national level in favor of “Fillmore and the Constitution.”<sup>61</sup>

In the end, while Democrat James Buchanan secured only 44.1 percent of the vote, the opposition split between Frémont, with 40.2 percent, and Fillmore, with 15.7 percent.<sup>62</sup>

Lincoln recognized that for the Republicans to win Illinois in a Presidential race, they would need to secure this cohort of Fillmore voters. The party had already managed to draw most of these voters to their cause in the state and local races, as the Republicans elected their nominee for governor, William Bissell, and ex-Know Nothing James Miller, for State Treasurer, by comfortable margins. In the coming two election cycles, Lincoln employed his considerable power of persuasion to convince Know Nothing voters that the Republicans best reflected their worldview without personally engaging in nativist harangues.

#### V. KNOW NOTHINGS AND THE SLAVE POWER CONSPIRACY

In the months following the election of 1856, two critical developments increased the credibility of the “Slave Power Conspiracy” and Lincoln used these events to reframe his message in terms reminiscent of the paranoid style. In early 1857, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* outraged those who had worked to restore the Missouri Compromise. Enslaved by an army surgeon named John Emerson, Dred Scott had followed Emerson to his posts in the free state of Illinois and in the free territory of what would become Minnesota. Bringing suit against Emerson’s widow in 1846, Scott argued that his residence on free soil had, in fact, freed him and his family. Gradually working its way through the court system in the succeeding decade, Dred Scott’s case had placed profound questions of Black rights and the constitutionality of slavery in the territories before the Supreme Court. In an infamous majority opinion issued just two days after Buchanan’s ascension to the presidency, Chief Justice Roger B. Taney not only denied that Scott had a right to sue in Federal court on the basis of his race but claimed that any congressional restriction of slavery in the territories violated the rights to property enjoyed by all U.S. citizens under the Bill of Rights. Ignoring decades of precedent and brazenly dismissing public opinion, Taney retroactively nullified the Missouri

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<sup>61</sup> *Id.*

<sup>62</sup> WALTER DEAN BURNHAM, *PRESIDENTIAL BALLOTS, 1836-1892*, at 368–91 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1955).

Compromise of 1820 and declared the Republican Party's chief plank unconstitutional. Taney added that territorial legislatures, as the creations of Congress, could not act against slavery either. Only when a territory drafted its state constitution and applied for admission to the Union could it choose to restrict, limit, or prohibit slavery. Overtly partisan and sectional, the decision cut down the positions of both the Republicans and most Northern Democrats in one fell swoop.<sup>63</sup> Amid a rumor that President-elect James Buchanan had pressured the justices to rule broadly against Scott (a speculation subsequently confirmed by historians), the Republicans denounced both Buchanan and Chief Justice Roger B. Taney.

The Illinois Republican press, shocked by Taney's audacity and appalled by the decision's implications, interpreted the Dred Scott decision as an overt attempt by slaveholders and their Northern lackeys to establish slavery throughout the West. The *Belvidere Standard* argued that by extending the reach of slavery, Taney had reversed "the policy of the brave and liberty-loving spirits who founded this Republic."<sup>64</sup> Convinced that Buchanan, who had alluded to the decision in his inaugural address, had influenced the decision, the *Chicago Tribune* railed that "by this conspiracy...the leaders of the sham Democratic party" had despoiled the Constitution and left "its very life-blood sucked out of it."<sup>65</sup> Reflecting its Jacksonian heritage, "Long" John Wentworth's *Chicago Democrat* saw the decision as a dangerous step towards centralization, an "encroachment upon State rights and State sovereignty" animated by "the spirit of federalism."<sup>66</sup> Some former Whig papers also understood the decision as a threat to Northern state sovereignty, darkly forecasting that a future decision of the

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<sup>63</sup> For discussion of Dred Scott see DON E. FEHRENBACHER, *THE DRED SCOTT CASE: ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN AMERICAN LAW AND POLITICS* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); PAUL FINKELMAN, *AN IMPERFECT UNION: SLAVERY, FEDERALISM, AND COMITY* 274–84 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); PAUL FINKELMAN, *SUPREME INJUSTICE: SLAVERY IN THE NATION'S HIGHEST COURT* 204–17 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). Most scholars agree that Taney sought to establish the legitimacy an extreme Southern interpretation of the Constitution's protections for slavery in his ruling in the Dred Scott decision. Mark A. Graber has offered a notable dissent from this view, arguing that Taney's ruling actually reflected a bisectional consensus. MARK A. GRABER, *DRED SCOTT AND THE PROBLEM OF CONSTITUTIONAL EVIL* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> *No Freedom Outside of the Free States – Slavery National*, *BELVIDERE STANDARD* (Belvidere, Ill.), Mar. 24, 1857.

<sup>65</sup> "Sebastopol is Taken.", *CHI. DAILY TRIB.*, March 19, 1857, at 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Judge Taney's Opinion*, *CHI. WKLY DEMOCRAT*, March 21, 1857.

court might extend slavery into all states. As the *Pantagraph* of Bloomington explained, “one little step only remains; to decide all *State* prohibitions of slavery to be void” thus completing the “enslavement” of the free white North to the Slave Power.<sup>67</sup>

Although no evidence existed to support the Republican claim that the South hoped to extend slavery into the free states, their fear appears more rational when placed into a broader context. Even as they took up elements of the so-called “paranoid style,” indicting their opponents as conspirators set on undermining the Constitution and American liberty, in their own minds, Illinois Republicans had good reason to fear the encroachment of slavery. In a few short years, the repeal of the Missouri Compromise, the disintegration of the Second Party System, and the violence of “Bleeding Kansas” had overturned decades of sectional accommodation. As territory reserved for freedom became a domain for slavery and as slaveholders asserted their “rights” by shedding the blood of white Northerners on the plains of Kansas and in the halls of Congress, Republicans felt increasingly under siege.

Still overwhelmingly committed to preserving the constitutional status quo and co-equal status of the three branches of government some Republicans dismissed Taney’s ruling on slavery in the territories as *obiter dictum*, and thus did not directly assault the authority of the Supreme Court. Yet, most Illinois Republicans also recognized that to regain control of the court and reverse the decision they would need to enlarge their coalition and win victories at the ballot box. Without a change on the high bench, George T. Brown of the *Alton Courier* predicted that the Supreme Court would continue to advance the “grand conspiracy against freedom” and “in any future controversy before their tribunal” would “carry the doctrine of the supremacy of slavery much further.”<sup>68</sup> In Springfield, the editors of the *Illinois State Journal* hoped that this Democratic overreach might draw Fillmore voters into the Republican fold, gleefully noting “a revolution among the American Party papers” in the East as previously mild opponents of the Kansas-Nebraska Act now firmly committed themselves to preventing

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<sup>67</sup> *The Dred Scott Case*, WKLY PANTAGRAPH (Bloomington, Ill.), Mar. 11, 1857, at 2. For a discussion of the Republican Party’s use of states’ rights rhetoric see Michael E. Woods, “Tell Us Something about State Rights”: Northern Republicans, States’ Rights, and the Coming of the Civil War, 7 J. CIVIL WAR ERA, June 2017, at 242, 242–68.

<sup>68</sup> *Dred Scott*, ALTON COURIER (Ill.), Mar. 26, 1857, at 1.



slavery's extension.<sup>69</sup> The *Waukegan Gazette* noted that with slavery effectively nationalized by the Supreme Court, "nothing but public sentiment now hinders the slaveholder from going into any of the territories or States of this Union, and holding his slaves there."<sup>70</sup> The state's Republicans could only hope that public outrage would continue to run hot and "melt the mass of the people into one great irresistible party of freedom."<sup>71</sup>

Several months later, Buchanan pressured Democratic majorities in Congress to admit Kansas into the Union as a slave state, despite massive electoral irregularities and overwhelming evidence that the majority of actual settlers favored a free-soil policy. Although this measure proved too far for Douglas, ever the champion of popular sovereignty, Lincoln used these developments to frame Douglas and his Democratic allies as either co-conspirators or dupes in a grand plot to undermine freedom and install slavery nationally. In his famous debates against Douglas during the 1858 Illinois Senate race, Lincoln outlined the issue through the metaphor of building a house:

We cannot absolutely *know* that all these exact adaptations are the result of preconcert. But when we see a lot of framed timbers, different portions of which we know have been gotten out at different times and places and by different workmen—Stephen, Franklin, Roger, and James, for instance—and when we see these timbers joined together, and see they exactly make the frame of a house or a mill, all the tenons and mortices exactly fitting, and all the lengths and proportions of the different pieces exactly adapted to their respective places...we feel it impossible not to *believe* that Stephen and Franklin and Roger and James all understood one another from the beginning, and all worked upon a common *plan* or *draft* drawn up before the first lick was struck.<sup>72</sup>

Intimating a conspiracy between Douglas, former President Franklin Pierce, Chief Justice Taney, and President Buchanan, Lincoln hoped to convince the public that the Slave Power and its agents bore responsibility for dividing the nation. This argument countered the claim advanced by Douglas, that

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<sup>69</sup> ILL. STATE J., Apr. 8, 1857.

<sup>70</sup> *The Dred Scott Case*. WAUKEGAN GAZETTE, Mar. 28, 1857, at 2.

<sup>71</sup> CHI. WKLY DEMOCRAT, *supra* note 66.

<sup>72</sup> Robert W. Johannsen, *First Joint Debate, Ottawa, August 21, 1858*, in THE LINCOLN-DOUGLAS DEBATES 56, 57 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965).

Lincoln was an abolitionist fellow traveler and would assist Southern radicals in tearing the Union apart. Although neither case had much merit on a factual basis, by appealing to the Slave Power and Disunion conspiracies, both Lincoln and Douglas appealed to the worldview of Know Nothings who, left without an independent party after 1856, represented the key swing vote.<sup>73</sup>

Although Lincoln never publicly tied the Slave Power conspiracy to Catholicism, this did not prevent his allies from doing so. In Springfield, Lincoln’s political organ, the *Illinois State Journal*, claimed in the 1858 campaign that “Popery and Slavery have been the hard masters of the American people” and that this insidious force would “proscribe and beat down Americans because they were born on American soil, and because they would not yield allegiance to those of Rome.”<sup>74</sup> This anti-Catholic baiting continued after the election, as the widely read *Chicago Tribune* added a measure of anti-Semitism to the mix by condemning the “Catholicised Slaveocratic party” that led “the Hebrew Democrat” to be “ruled at the ballot box by the Pope’s minions.”<sup>75</sup> Although this vitriol likely offended some Republican voters, it appealed to many more who saw the Democratic Party as a corrupt organization headed by slaveholders and intent on perpetuating its own power through fraudulent immigrant votes. Indeed, even Lincoln had noted his fear that “Celtic gentlemen, with black carpet-sacks in their hands” might appear throughout swing districts to steal the election.<sup>76</sup>

This corruption angle became a principal plank in the Republican Platform in 1860, as Lincoln ran for President on a platform committed to limiting the power of the Slave Power and “arrest[ing] the systematic plunder of the public treasury by favored partisans.”<sup>77</sup> The moniker of “Honest Abe” appealed to those frustrated by startling revelations of corruption within the Buchanan administration. Although Douglas also positioned himself as an outsider, emphasizing his break with Buchanan, he remained a Democrat married to a Roman Catholic and a champion of immigrant voters. Douglas did his best to position himself as a defender of Union and order against

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<sup>73</sup> DAVID ZAREFSKY, *LINCOLN, DOUGLAS, AND SLAVERY: IN THE CRUCIBLE OF PUBLIC DEBATE* 68–110 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

<sup>74</sup> *The Two Despotisms—Catholicism and Slavery—Their Union and Identity*, ILL. STATE JOURNAL, Aug. 30, 1858, at 2.

<sup>75</sup> *The Jews and the Democracy*, CHI. TRIB., Dec. 6, 1858, at 2.

<sup>76</sup> Letter from Abraham Lincoln to Norman B. Judd (Oct. 20, 1858), in 3 *THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN, 1809-1865*, at 329, 330 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953).

<sup>77</sup> *The Platform Adopted!*, CHI. TRIB., May 18, 1860, at 4.

sectional extremism, but in Illinois, as in the other key border North states of Indiana and Pennsylvania, a majority of the Know Nothing swing voters found Lincoln more convincing. According to the analysis of historian William E. Gienapp, Lincoln won the support of 74 percent of the state's former Fillmore voters in 1860. Carefully walking the line between two antagonistic constituencies, Lincoln also managed to win over Protestant immigrants, including a key cohort of Illinois's German-born population.<sup>78</sup>

In the months that followed, as Southern states seceded and inaugurated a civil war by bombarding Fort Sumter, both constituencies would rally behind Lincoln to defend the Union and prevent the Slave Power from destroying the world's "last best hope." Contrary to what we might otherwise like to believe in the twenty-first century, the Republican victory in 1860 and the subsequent Union victory in the Civil War, depended on the support of one-time Know Nothings.

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<sup>78</sup> ADAM, I.P. SMITH, *THE STORMY PRESENT: CONSERVATISM AND THE PROBLEM OF SLAVERY IN NORTHERN POLITICS* 157, 158 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). For details on Douglas's marriage to Adele Cutts and the couple's religious life see ROBERT W. JOHANNSEN, STEVEN A. DOUGLAS 541, 542 (New York: Oxford Press, 1973); GIENAPP, *supra* note 17, at 555; Alison Clark Effort, *Abraham Lincoln, German-Born Republicans, and American Citizenship*, 93 *MARQ. L. REV.*, 1375–82 (2010).