

In The Garden Of Red And Blue

*The Birth Of America's Dominant
Political Parties, 1825-1860*

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“Opposition to a political candidate which is abstractly right might be politically wrong” – Senior Democratic Senator from New York.

“Where is it written in the Constitution that you may take children from their parents, and parents from their children, and compel them to fight the battles of any war in which the folly or wickedness of government may engage it?”—Massachusetts Congressman

“They are welcome, sir, to anything they can get out of my papers. They will find there, among other things, false grammar and bad spelling; but they are welcome to it all, grammar and spelling included.” – The President of the United States (responding to political opponents desire to see presidential records)

“The harmonious union anticipated is a total failure” – The Detroit Free Press

Introduction—Everything Old Is New Again

To many at the beginning of the twenty-first century, these are the worst times imaginable with individuals often feeling that political discourse is choked by partisan rancor. Usually, however, it is the “other party” to which most Republicans or Democrats direct this accusation. What’s more, there seems to be a reflexive desire to portray the present day situation as one of unprecedented partisanship. This fact compounds a widespread fear—almost an article of faith—that partisan behavior is both an evil and an unnatural phenomenon that corrupts the workings of democracy.

Although they fit perfectly with the historical notion of declension, none of the commonly held notions about partisanship are true in any absolute sense. Nor is the adversarial political discussion of the modern era any more toxic than it was, say 150 years ago. In fact, although the above comments, which smack of partisan rancor, could be perfectly appropriate for some of today’s political debates, they come not from Charles Schumer or Barney Frank or George W. Bush but Senator William Marcy and Daniel Webster and President Andrew Jackson. And the newspaper quote is not from the *Detroit Free Press* of today but from an edition printed in 1854.

This paper will examine the two-party relationship in the United States as it took shape between 1825 and 1860. This essential period in our history is one in which the new country gained its footing economically, assumed its voice globally and tore itself apart sectionally. At the conclusion of this era in 1860, America would have the two dominant parties that remain with us 145 years later. This is significant when one considers that while there were essentially two systems of two-party rivalry during the country's first 90 years, the third has lasted since before the Civil War.

This study will maintain a twenty-first century lens, looking not only at history but also employing insights from psychology, sociology, political science and other areas. Indeed, it is clear that whether examining the politics of today or the activities that occurred in centuries past, there are numerous areas of commonality, which should be evaluated from a number of perspectives. People, for example, have demonstrated a consistent desire to be free of what they see as monarchy or other similar rule. Economic, sectional, religious and other differences consistently play a big part in the way people group together and in how party organizations advance their agendas. In addition, there seems to be a basic characteristic of human nature that leads us to oppose, question or seek improvement in existing conditions. And finally, politics and political association embody an aspect of socialization—partisanship often being influenced by family, friends and other significant people in our lives.

Hopefully, the reader will come away with not just a look at what transpired more than a century and a half ago, but also knowing the relevance of these events to present day America. The overall goal is to widen the reader's understanding of the partisan spirit that aggravates some, energizes many and affects the fortunes of everybody.

A Propensity To Be Partisan

We have political partisanship in the United States not because of an illogical breakdown in the process, but because republican democracy requires that individuals and groups unite their animating causes with the interests of others. Partisanship such as the United States has come to know results not only from present day politicians but also from the hard work and public spiritedness of people like Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, Martin Van Buren, and Abraham Lincoln. Today, their names remain on street signs and public buildings while their legacies to the political arts remain largely forgotten.



Early political banner created to celebrate Jefferson's victory in 1800. With this election there was a genuine sense that at last, "the people" had triumphed.

Political parties in the United States predate the republic itself, especially when you consider the rival factions that took opposite sides of the revolutionary war conflict. Some cite the contests in seventeenth century England between Tories (the King's loyalists) and the Whigs (the "country party" opposition) as forerunners to America's two-party systems. Founding father and second U.S. President John Adams was said to observe, "In every colony,

divisions always prevailed. In New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Massachusetts and all the rest, a court and country party have always contended,” (White & Shea, 2002, p. 41).



Thomas Jefferson

Alexander Hamilton

Once British rule was removed as a force that garnered political opposition, the founders sought to build a republican form of government that would be non-partisan. In Federalist 10, James Madison (1787) said that “liberty is to faction what air is to fire,” as he prescribed and defended republican principles and the layering of local, state and Federal governments. He emphasized that “the influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular states but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other states.” Ultimately, Madison would split with fellow Federalist Papers author Alexander Hamilton as they evolved from patriotic brothers-in-arms to political rivals.

Many say the divide began in the administration of George Washington as differences between his Secretary of State (Jefferson) and Treasury Secretary (Hamilton) came to the surface. And so began the process by which we would have two parties continually contesting elections at every level: Jeffersonian Republican vs. Federalist then Democrat vs. Whig and finally Democrat vs. Republican.

Are We Born To *Party*?

Rivalries that developed between Hamilton and Jefferson and their respective supporters seemed to set the stage for a national partisan tradition. But this phenomenon—the ability to join the political pursuits of like-minded individuals or organizations—could be attributed to the freedoms we enjoy, including speech and assembly. In fact, it is difficult to envision how factions or parties would not form in a governmental system where free assembly and speech are so widely practiced and universally cherished.

Further, to achieve anything legislatively requires more than 50% of votes—something that virtually demands alliances and cooperative efforts such as the kind that develops within political parties. In the 1940s, noted political scientist E.E. Schattschneider wrote, “It should be flatly stated that the political parties created democracy and that modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of parties,” (White & Shea, 2002, p. 39).

Going back further in time, classical Chinese thinking sees virtually every element of the world aligning itself around opposed, continually interacting forces of yin and yang. And while western politics thousands of years into the future was the furthest thing from these ancients’ minds, their concept certainly seems—at least symbolically—to describe the interaction between opposing but co-dependent forces. The ancient Greeks and Romans maintained—or attempted to maintain—democracies that were free of faction, party, or political organization of any kind. Cicero in fact disliked the idea of any kind of political organization (Everitt, 2001). This fact itself may well have influenced the founders, many of whom were well versed in the writings of the Roman philosopher-statesman.

One thing that must be seen in the traditions leading to the nineteenth century however is the nurturing of factional or partisan spirit. Historian Bernard Bailyn (1967) has

pointed out that “Opposition thought, in the form it acquired at the turn of the early eighteenth century, was devoured by the colonists...From the earliest years of the century it nourished their political thought and sensibilities,” (p. 43).

Others have noted that the issue of protecting liberty while preventing the influence of political parties was a major dilemma confronting the framers of the constitution. Their system, which spread an elaborate system of government over a vast republic, was created to make parties’ existence so difficult they would eventually fade away. (Jaenicke, 1986; White & Shea, 2002). In Federalist 10, Madison foresaw that government would function despite often dysfunctional interests when he said, “The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principal task of modern legislation and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government.” While the system—without a formal place for parties—had many advantages, it was a less than effective means for translating public sentiment to government policy. So, it soon gave way to the inevitability of a partisanship. Initially, this competition was less formal and far more loosely organized than the parties we know today, designed primarily to respond to particular crises, issues or movements (Jaenicke, 1986).

Why then do political parties appear in a virtually organic fashion wherever they are not outlawed? Why was one of the first acts of formerly Communist countries in Europe that of legalizing political parties (Patterson, 2000)? On one hand, the parties seem to fill an intuitive need in human beings to both associate and align themselves with like-minded individuals. Further, the parties seem to assist the individual in processing of political information. While the Federalists thought government would intimidate the people as a “complicated science,” (Wood, 1969) parties actually help build understanding of the process.

Studies in the latter years of the twentieth century demonstrate that parties offer an important means for people to process information about issues. Those with strongest party identification are more likely to be issue-oriented voters (Gant & Luttbeg, 1987). Another study shows that rather than being fixed in childhood or “inherited” from parents, a person’s party identification takes shape and then starts to adjust beginning around the age of 25. Changes may occur depending on the dynamics of an individual’s cherished issues and the policies of a given party. (Franklin, 1984).

Martin Van Buren believed not only that parties were natural to the political process but also that they helped prevent other kinds of factions by aligning persons with geographic interests along other common beliefs. Well before he became the eighth President, Van Buren was what might be classified as the nineteenth century’s ultimate party man. He genuinely rued the diminishing party identification during the Monroe Administration and viewed Monroe’s accommodation of old enemies to be a heresy to the traditions of Jefferson. He argued that party distinctions should always be maintained saying,

The old ones are the best of which the nature of the case admits. Political combinations between the inhabitants of the different states are unavoidable and the most natural and beneficial to the country is that between the planters of the South and the plain Republicans of the North. The country has once flourished under a party thus constituted and may again, (Remini, 1951, p. 131).

Van Buren’s heritage as a New Yorker no doubt drove his thinking. As the son of a Dutch tavern keeper, he was regularly exposed to the hurly-burly of the state’s rich and factious politics. New York was built on a long history of internal conflict owing to its foundation on the conflicting cultures of the Dutch, British and other ethnic groups that were layered over religious differences. It was also divided along the socio-economic lines between the aristocratic merchants and landholders, independent freeholders and freemen and then unenfranchised mechanics and tenant farmers. Moreover, geography played a role from the

earliest with the upstate-downstate divide already evident. With such a make up, there were political parties and factions in constant conflict virtually from the colony's earliest days (Bonomi, 1971).

Van Buren certainly would have found common ground with modern researchers who have looked closely at the people, their issues and partisan alignment. And whether the argument related to the Second Bank of The United States or dealings with foreign powers, Van Buren would clearly understand political polarization as described by many recent researchers and authors. Looking at partisanship in a way similar to how economists view spending, some believe that voters rely on their party identification because they frequently lack time and energy to sift through all the complex details of a candidates stands and credentials. The party gives the voter a quick, easy solution (White & Shea, 2002). Partisanship also helps solidify opinions or simplify those to which we are opposed.

Polarization reflects the tendency for partisans to accept at face value arguments and evidence congruent with their interests and beliefs while critically scrutinizing arguments and evidence that threaten those interests and beliefs. Moreover, we suggest, such biased processing of information fosters harsh evaluations of individuals on the other side whose perceptions and arguments in the eyes of the opposing partisan appear biased and self-serving, (Pronin et al., 2002, p. 637).

Van Buren's contemporaries and fellow political luminaries, Andrew Jackson and Henry Clay made their political careers in the scrutiny and opposition of each other's aims. For his part, Jackson's processing was always done with the interests of *the people* in mind. The people, according to Old Hickory's definition, consisted of farmers, laborers, mechanics and others who made their living from the sweat of their brow (Remini, 1984). Clay—along with other Whigs—had personal criteria for evaluating issues of the day centering along lines of social order, respect for established national institutions, gradual progress, economic growth and protection. With these interests framing their arguments, the dominant political forces clashed continually in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

“Good Feeling” or Heresy?

Perhaps only once in the history of our republic did a party enjoy such universal control that two-party contests were virtually eliminated. This occurred during the Monroe administration in which the President ran for re-election virtually unopposed. Monroe himself worked to encourage unity too, naming one-time members of the decimated Federalist Party to key positions.

Still, ideologies and beliefs did not always coalesce during this period of unanimity. Many in the victorious party of old Thomas Jefferson believed that the political spirit of his long deceased foe, Alexander Hamilton, lived on even though the political world was unified behind the Democratic-Republicans. Even in his later years, Jefferson continued to brand the defunct federalists as “monarchists,” warning that they were hiding among Democratic-Republican ranks. He said, “Although it is not yet avowed (as that of the Monarchy, you know, never was), it exists decidedly, and is the true key to the debates in congress,” (Rutland, 1979, p. 44).

So much for the “era of good feeling.”

And then, like a vacuum waiting to be filled, partisan competition reemerged from its long dormancy as one-time comrades not only came to loggerheads over the issues of the day and found ways to join with persons in whom they found most common ground. Arguments were focused on debates of national importance relating to the role of the federal government, states rights, internal improvements and more. Wherever issues arose people found themselves of different opinions and sought to associate themselves with those of like mind.

1825-1860: 35 Years Of Alignment And Realignment

On a warm summer's day in 1854 in a Michigan town named for a late and popular Democratic President, Jackson, the party of Lincoln would form adapting a name first used by the Democrats' forerunners. They called themselves *Republicans* feeling that their ranks now came closest to embracing the principles of Thomas Jefferson. And so it was that the tussle of ever-shifting party systems would crystallize into the organizations that would continue for the rest of the century and the next as the Democratic and Republican Parties.

The presidencies of Jackson and Lincoln seem to bookend a period of time that shaped America's national identity as a youthful, robust and always growing nation and its identification as a political, brawling, two-party country. It should be noted however that Lincoln's election in 1860 finished what began with election of John Quincy Adams in 1825 after a long and controversial contest. Nominally, Adams and Andrew Jackson were both of the Jeffersonian Republican (or Democratic-Republican) Party, as were the other two contestants Henry Clay and William Crawford. Although Jackson had won a plurality of the electoral votes, his tally was short of the majority needed. And it was Clay's slight preference for Adams combined with a personal ambition that drove the powerful Kentucky congressman to engineer Adams' election in the House of Representatives—the only instance where this constitutionally prescribed remedy was employed. When Adams then named Clay to be his secretary of State uproar followed among the supporters of Jackson.

Ultimately, Martin Van Buren blamed James Monroe for the whole debacle and for destroying the old Republican Party organization by not naming a successor as his predecessors had since the time of Jefferson (Remini, 1951). In the ensuing years, partisan performance and party unity is something Van Buren would work to achieve throughout the term of John Quincy Adams at great cost to the new president.

Party Blindness And The Adams Curse

If talent, principle, and intellect were the fundamental criteria for presidential success, then John Quincy Adams may well have become the greatest leader in U.S. history.

Unfortunately, his presidency began under the cloud of the “corrupt bargain” (Rutland, 1979). And like his father, he ultimately oversaw an administration that provided a backdrop for the machinations of genuine partisans.

As Secretary of State, Adams had been largely responsible for one of the most enduring principles of American foreign policy, the Monroe Doctrine, which established America’s intent to keep the hemisphere free of colonial influence. He had been the nation’s leading diplomat, a U.S. Senator and had successfully survived the declining fortunes of America’s Federalists. And like his father, Adams had strong non-partisan sensibilities. Today, his election in 1824 stands along with that of Rutherford B. Hayes (1876) and George W. Bush (2000) among America’s most controversial contests.



John Adams



John Quincy Adams

As for the “bargain,” both Adams and Clay denied any improper dealings and indeed any understanding between them would fall within the law and be viewed by some as old-

fashioned horse trading. Yet as a result, Adams and Jackson—who had once been friends and allies—were to have nothing to do with one another after the Adams inauguration in March of 1825.

Although he had been elected as a Democratic-Republican in a virtual one-party era, Adams may well have been the first president brought down by a partisan onslaught. For the first time, a president attempted to put forth his domestic and diplomatic agendas with both houses of congress in the hands of those aligned against him (Bemis, 1956). Despite his enormous gifts, Adams had little capacity for politics or leadership in an increasingly “popular” America (Sellers, 1991). His policies were, to a fault, based on his personal beliefs, convictions and personal desire to see improvement at every level. And while he envisioned an America of “Power with Liberty” (Bemis, 1956; Sellers, 1991) and forecast that the country would have world power commensurate with its geographical size, he failed to take the peoples’ preferences to heart in any significant manner. Adams believed in a leadership purpose to government, not that it should merely carry out the will and whim of the masses. This was not a “populist” position.

In reality, the forces that worked against Adams actually gathered momentum during the Monroe administration. There had been growing dissatisfaction among many old line Jeffersonians with the Monroe Administration’s accommodating view toward Federalists, termed “fusion” by Van Buren and other detractors (Remini, 1951). Those who saw their political inclinations closely linked to instincts and inclinations of the elderly “sage of Monticello” were dissatisfied with the accommodation represented of people like Adams, Clay and others. Seeing the accommodation as something that preserved a discredited ideology while simultaneously undermining the spirit of Jefferson, Van Buren sought like-minded men. Prior to his career in the U.S. Senate, which began in 1821, he had built his

Albany Regency into one of the country's first well-organized and disciplined political operations. Specifically, his "bucktail" faction of New York Republicans had seen its successes mount with virtually every election period, culminating with the ouster and disgrace of archrival DeWitt Clinton.

On coming to Washington, Van Buren met with almost immediate success in arranging for the ouster of the House Speaker after his arrival in the Senate in 1821. He traveled about the country from New York to Georgia to Virginia in an effort to rebuild Jefferson's own party. He was a new kind of politician ready to create a new era of partisanship—an era that his opponents were oblivious to until it was too late.



Martin Van Buren in later years Long-time Van Buren Rival Thurlow Weed

Joining forces with other nineteenth century "partisan flame throwers" like Virginia's John Randolph, the Van Buren forces branded Adams with every conceivable political wrong. According to his well-organized opponents, Adams was guilty of being a Federalist, voting against the Louisiana Purchase (20 years earlier) and being too generous with the British in navigation and fishing rights negotiations. And like the charge that is affixed to long-time

office holders today, Adams was labeled a career politician having tallied over \$104,000 in his years of government service (Bemis, 1956).

The rancor over the election and its “corrupt” bargain—combined with ongoing strife within the Democratic-Republican Party—began to give shape to reliable and recognizable factions. As the 19th Congress met, Adams and Clay allies aligned as “National Republicans” while the Jackson men and former supporters of Crawford began to go by the name “Democrats.” With a thin edge in party membership compared to the Jackson men, the Adams and Clay congressional supporters nevertheless had less than majority control. By the time of the 20th Congress, they would be in the minority (Johnston, 1890).

And so it was, that our single era of one-party rule had run its course. From the point of the Adam’s administration forward, there would be two dominant political forces, continually tussling, debating and jockeying for favor among the electorate. It could be argued by the likes of Van Buren or Thomas Jefferson himself that there was never really a period of one-party rule because throughout that period the flames of rivalry hidden, but not extinguished.

The new spirit of partisanship and the nature of nationwide political movements must certainly have confounded Adams. It seems that he was determined to maintain the “era of good” feelings and to govern as a non-partisan politician. He saw not campaigning or politicking in the Jacksonian movement, but rather ingratitude, demagogy and “unnatural passions.” Because of the machinations of those working against him, Adams’ overall effectiveness as president was significantly diminished. His greatest years of public service came before his presidency as Secretary of State and after, as a Massachusetts Congressman.

The election of 1828 was a watershed. For the first time, a vast majority of states’ electors were chosen by the popular vote within each state. In 1824 and prior elections, state

legislatures were responsible for voting in the electors. With 1828, the party organization established by Van Buren was organized, mobilized and motivated behind the candidacy of Andrew Jackson. General Jackson was a relatively easy winner over Adams in both electoral and popular vote, winning all of the South and most of the new western states. And thanks to Van Buren he carried the major electoral prize of New York.

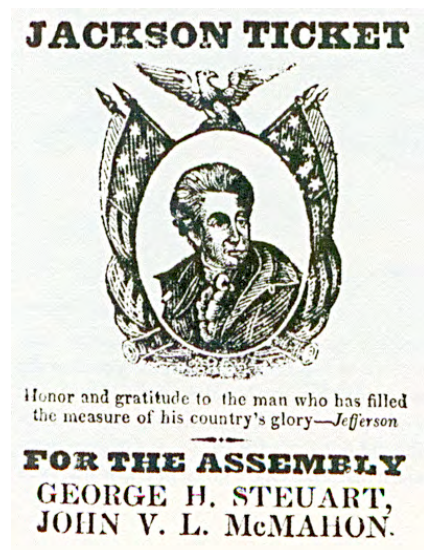
Partisan Dividing Points 1824-1829

Democratic Republicans (Jacksonians)	National Republicans* (later Whigs)
Appealed to farmers, laborers, immigrants	Friendly to business interests. Believed that Government should create a business-friendly environment.
Opposed to Bank Of The United States. Suspicious of credit, paper money.	Proponents of strong, centralized banking and monetary flexibility
Generally free traders	Protectionist in nature
Strong believer in states rights	Nationalist

*Like the Jacksonians who would become known as “Democrats”, the National Republicans also viewed themselves as descending from the Republicans of Thomas Jefferson’s era. However, their ranks harbored more former Federalists and those with Federalist sentiment.

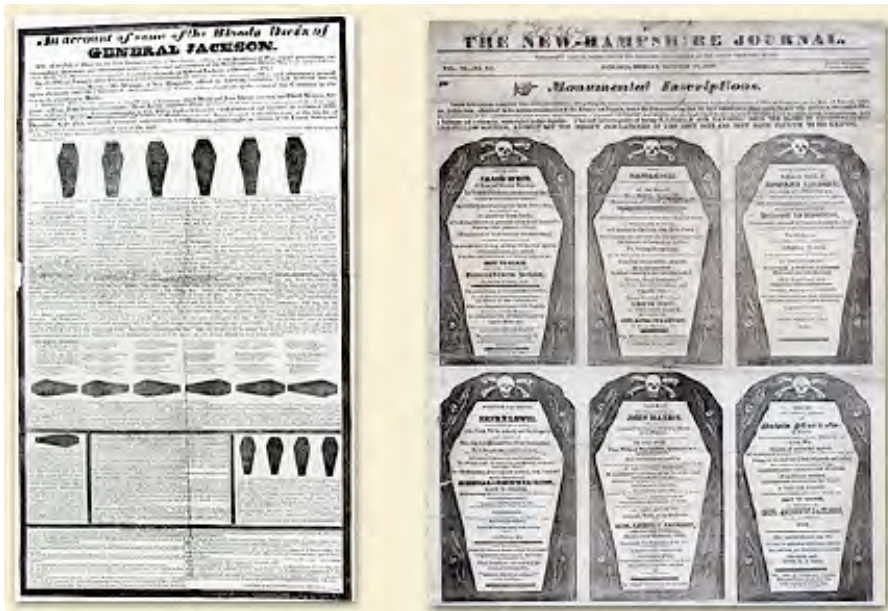
Jacksonian Democracy—“The People Shall Rule”

1828 produced a genuinely partisan election. Martin Van Buren also saw the fulfillment of his dream of a nationwide party system working in coordinated fashion toward unified goals. First under the banner of Andrew Jackson and then as the party’s standard-bearer himself, Van Buren was the driving force behind a new kind of party organization that its leaders would continually refine through the coming years. And unlike their predecessors—Jefferson, Madison and Monroe—the “Democracy” would discard any notion of partisanship as a negative force. In fact, they believed that parties helped to remedy natural flaws in the Electoral College as well as ameliorate other dangerous components of electoral politics. They also believed that partisan competition helped to counterbalance governmental power more effectively than constitutional separation of powers (Jaenicke, 1986).



Pro-Jackson political material

The alliance of Jackson and Van Buren was important. Ever astute and always striving, the Red Fox of Kinderhook had actually supported Jackson rival William Crawford in 1824. He came to understand the old war hero’s national popularity and determine ways for himself to align his own partisan ambitions to the Tennessean’s natural constituency.



Then as now, a reputation as a war hero also had political “negatives.” Anti-Jackson material relating to people executed under his command in the War of 1812.

The Democrats of the Jackson–Van Buren era also were the first to define party principles and requirements. Around 1825, Van Buren began to insist on two key conditions if a candidate were to win the support of the Albany Regency. First the candidate had to stand for both equal rights and strict constitutional construction. In this case, equal rights defined an equal ability of all working men—farmers, mechanics and laborers—to have access to the advantages of a free economic system. A second criterion for Van Buren’s support was that the candidate had to have the support of the party organization—defined initially as the party caucus and later as the nominating convention (Jaenicke, 1986).

Of course, the Democrats also performed best when they had an opponent. Adams provided a natural adversary at first, and with his defeat they turned to Adams supporters and other larger institutions such as the Second Bank of The United States, protective tariffs, the move to put government resources to work on internal improvements. The Democrats made enemies of those classes they saw as profiting from business and trade rather than the sweat of their brow. Historian Robert Remini (1951) describes the Jackson appeal saying,

The election of 1828 brought about the triumph of what is commonly referred to as Jacksonian Democracy. This phenomenon defies definition because, fundamentally, it was a faith. It glorified such words as ‘people,’ ‘their will,’ and reform,’ but had not yet given them precise meaning. Perhaps for some men, this new Democracy had no precise meaning; nevertheless, it was something which they knew existed and was important, something they could be loyal to and cherish, (p. 196).

The victory represented a political paradigm shift—removing power from what the Jacksonians saw as the moneyed interests and putting it into the hands of the common man (Meyers, 1957; White & Shea, 2002). Speaking for the “little guy” has been fundamental Democratic Party politics ever since. It was the party of Jefferson, Madison and Monroe, but with new partisan energy fueled by the likes of Van Buren.



Andrew Jackson

It should be emphasized that the Democratic party of Jackson was one that believed in constructional construction, limited government and low taxes. An “activist government” in the mind of the Jacksonians was one that put the power of government to work in the interests of business, what might be termed “corporate welfare” in the modern era. For these

reasons, they were minimalist, believing that by removing the impediments of taxes and keeping trade open, they would remove obstacles holding back the farmers and laborers they represented (Remini, 1951; Sellers, 1991).

Importantly, Jackson's political appeal eclipsed regional interests. His stand against the efforts of South Carolina and Georgia to "nullify" certain aspects of federal law seemed to foreshadow the secession crisis that would follow three decades later. His firm Unionist stand endeared him throughout the North and the South. But at the same time, Jackson also seemed to build an ever-longer roster of political enemies opposed to what was viewed as an imperial nature. For example, Jackson pushed the primacy of the executive branch by being the first president to veto bills based on his judgment of them as policy and not on constitutional grounds.

There is no question that his standing as America's first "popular" president was significantly enhanced through the efforts of Van Buren. The President returned the favor by remaining supportive and loyal to Van Buren throughout the course of his two terms. In one notable saga, Van Buren resigned his Senate seat at the behest of Jackson who appointed him Minister to Great Britain. However, opposition in the Senate led to a tie vote over his nomination with the deciding vote cast by then Vice President Calhoun *against* Van Buren. Jackson's rage at the betrayal led to Van Buren being placed on the Vice Presidential ticket in 1832.

That year was important not only in that it brought about another four years for Jackson, but also because it was the first time a party carried out an organized national convention. Delegates would meet in Baltimore for this and the next six conventions, with the states closest to the convention site sending the largest delegations (democrats2004.org,

2005). This was also the first election campaign that featured hats, signs, banners, parades, rallies and other activities instigated or encouraged by Martin Van Buren (Remini, 1951).

And under the triumphant imagery went a vast geography, in terms of land as well as in policies and ideas. The party had united the interests of northern laborers and southern slaveholders. It got new Catholic immigrants and fourth-generation Kentucky Baptists to see the world the same way politically. And the Democrats pulled the forces of western adventurers together with the needs of southern traditionalism.

The Democratic Party envisioned by Van Buren and given the popular face of Jackson had become far more than a “faction” as our nations founders may have characterized it. Instead, it became a unifying force that was rendering obsolete the kind of factionalism the constitution’s framers feared. But apart from belief in the constitution and fear of centralized authority, the notion of being a Democrat was fairly open to interpretation. One point universally embraced was the idea that the *people* had the right to rule. “Republican” spirit and populism were nurtured as never before, (Atkins, 1992).

And with the wide range of people, interests and influences came the difficult task of managing party responsiveness and preserving loyalty. With the 1830s, the political system of patronage was beginning to take full shape. Usually referred to as the spoils system, the practice of delivering government appointments to a victor’s supporters was openly practiced and unashamedly advocated by Van Buren, Jackson and others. The comment by William Marcy (made once in defense of Van Buren) that “to the victor belong the spoils” (Remini, 1951; White & Shea, 2002) revealed a common view and has been one of the most frequently quoted political aphorisms since the beginning of the republic.

Cohesion and cooperation were important to party leaders like Van Buren. It was believed that patronage fostered not only a stronger party and sense of mission but that what

was good for the Democratic Party was good for the country. Democrats felt that their opposition would always have to rely on trickery to win elections—including efforts to deadlock presidential contests to have them decided by the House Representatives, (Remini, 1984). As long as the party could keep northern anti-slavery members and southern plantation owners voting the same way, then it could focus on representing the common man.

At the time of the famous 1820 Missouri Compromise, the country was composed of free and slave states in virtually an equal measure. And the measure by which both Maine and Missouri were admitted to the union assured what its proponents envisioned as a path forward that would maintain the balance of power. But the country was continuing to evolve politically and socially. Over time, the practice was looked down even among elements in the South while northerners' anti-slavery stridency ratcheted higher.

With the slavery question touching Americans' nerves on so many levels—economic, geographic, moral and religious—it was clear that the party which best negotiated the difficulties posed by the issue would hold sway. Attempts to align northern and southern agendas may not have made Democrats pro-slavery, but they were definitely “anti anti-slavery.” There was unity between the northern “plain republicans” and southern planters – whose common interest was that they were both far away from the Federalist/Whiggish appeal to merchant and trading classes (Rutland, 1979). And they carried the day in all but two presidential elections between 1828 and 1860.

Van Buren and other northerners were able to walk the fine line by avowing both a personal opposition to slavery and a strong belief in the constitution or rule of law. Even Jackson—a southerner and slave owner—was careful in the way he addressed the question. The story of confiscated anti-slavery material in Charleston South Carolina is illustrative.



A pro-slavery cartoon likening the life to the slave to that of the free laborer in Britain

In the summer of 1835 the Charleston postmaster discovered a large batch of anti-slavery literature addressed to citizens throughout the area. While he was seeking instructions from Washington, an angry mob attacked and burned the post office. Jackson's position on the incident was revealing for its inconclusiveness. He decried the mob attack on the post office because of its restriction on free speech but felt that, by the same token, all the addressed recipients should be made a matter of public record (Sellers, 1991). In other words, he avoided the issue by dancing on two sides of a free speech question.

But as time evolved the question that was dividing the nation was also fracturing the party. By the time of the 1850 compromise both major parties were divided over issues relating to Texas and new territory in the southwest, fugitive slave law and the admission of

California. In fact, the compromise passed largely on the votes of northern Democrats and southern Whigs (the more conciliatory branches of their respective parties).

By aligning its fortunes solidly with the people, Jacksonians contended with other dark effects of popular sovereignty. After a considerable back-and-forth between court orders protecting Indian rights and defiance by the state of Georgia, Jackson came down firmly on the side of white Georgians who would see the Creeks and Cherokees marginalized, demoralized and ultimately removed. He mocked the Supreme Court order preventing their removal suggesting that Chief Justice John Marshall “see if he could enforce” his ruling. And he extolled the Indians to go west, assuring their safety all the while referring to himself as their “father,” (Sellers, 1991).

Democrats also found themselves sometimes in conflict with national progress. As the natural advocate planters and farmers, they hated most tariff policies because these imposed a direct economic hardship on the South and because revenues were used to further internal improvements and Henry Clay’s “American System.” Often derided as the “Englanization of America” the rapid expansion of capitalism went hand in hand with the sound, stable monetary stability provided by the second bank of the United States. Jackson however made the bank an institutional adversary, too. By extolling the virtues of hard currency and raising suspicion in moneyed interests, his rhetoric resonated with his natural constituencies. Ironically, elimination of the bank probably played a significant role in the depression that wracked the country during the administration of his successor, Van Buren.

While Jacksonian Democracy remained true to the creed of letting the popular majority have its way, it reveals to many the downside of democracy without the restraint of principles or values, (Jaenicke, 1986). One of the hallmarks of two-party performance is in the way it raises interest in issues, simplifies matters for voters, and aligns people who have

common ground—if not compatible ideas (Patterson, 2000). Between 1825 and 1840, the Democrats did this with an effectiveness that wouldn't be echoed until a century later when they united the votes of southern segregationists, northern minorities, eastern intellectuals and Midwestern laborers behind Franklin Delano Roosevelt (McCullough, 1992).

The Jacksonians were clearly more effective than any political organization to that point. In stark contrast to the administration of John Quincy Adams, they appealed directly to the immediate, individual self-interests of voters they sought to persuade. And while the appeal clearly pulled together a disparate mix, one has to wonder whether the Jacksonians deserve credit for holding the union together longer than was otherwise possible or whether they merely delayed the most incendiary issues for another generation.

How Partisanship Created The “Anti-Party” Whig Movement (And Then Destroyed It).

The years between the beginning of the Jackson ascendancy and the election of Abraham Lincoln resulted in the creation of America’s (and the world’s) two longest-lived and most successful political parties. But while debates ultimately materialized as an enduring conflict between the Democratic and Republican parties, these 35 years are in large measure the story of the American Whig Party.

This was a party, an organization and a culture that vanished with the Civil War. But it represents both the naturalness of partisanship and the urge to decry it. What’s more, the Whig party was highly successful at transforming American culture. In 2005, both major modern political parties and the wider American culture embrace elements of social and political thought that was first popularized by the Whigs.

During the 1830s and 40s, as the natural rivals to the Democrats, the Whigs became a powerful force in numerous states particularly in New England and new Western States. The Whigs won only two of seven presidential elections during their period as the “other” major party, but in many states they were dominant in legislatures and Governors’ mansions. Although the Whig Party was founded primarily by disaffected members of Jefferson’s Democratic-Republicans, it was in many respects the natural descendant of the Federalists and the progenitor to the Republicans.

There is no precise, founding moment identified for their formation, but the Whigs are universally seen as having been born out of opposition to Jackson. Membership had been drawn primarily from the group known as “National Republicans.” In the early 1830s the group began to use the name “Whigs” as a way to identify with and appropriate the spirit of England’s country Whigs. This time however, the “king” to be opposed was President

Jackson. From the beginning Jackson had been cited by his detractors as being imperial or monarchical in his willingness to defy Supreme Court rulings or his efforts to establish the primacy of the executive branch. Jackson, of course, would always maintain that his executive actions were at the behest or in the best interests of the people.

Sprung from the ideological roots of the National Republicans, Whigs saw the political world in a significantly different way than Democrats. A fundamental point of difference was viewing the United States not as primarily a confederation of separate, autonomous states but as a single nation, which would seek national progress. Whigs also believed in a more “activist” government that would foster business growth. This stood in stark contrast to the Democrats who saw its constituents as overtaxed and were likely to decry the industrializing of the country as anathema to the agrarian spirit of Jefferson.

Whigs were among the first to promote the concept of a greater good. And the Whigs helped to define and glorify our sense of ourselves as a nation of industry, commerce and human achievement. Well-known Whig, Henry Clay is known as the first to coin the term “Middle Class” as well as envision it as the strength of the country (Sellers, 1991). Whigs were proponents of Clay’s American System which not only championed nationalism but pulled the nation together through road, canal and railroad projects and improved its business climate through centralized banking, deeper rivers and improved harbors. And while Whiggery was strongest in New England and solid in the middle states, it also had strong enclaves in the South including Louisiana, home state of Zachary Taylor.

The Whigs actually had a rather illustrious roster of political notables ranging from Clay and Adams to Daniel Webster, William Henry Seward and editor, Horace Greeley. They also included future President Abraham Lincoln along with future Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens. And they maintained an ideological focus on building

America into a great nation socially and economically. Their agenda, they believed, was one that should have put them above the hurly-burly of partisan politics.



Alexander Stephens

Daniel Webster

They no doubt clung somewhat to John Quincy Adams' hopes expressed in his inauguration a decade earlier that the country had exorcised "the baneful weed of party strife" for a country that would work uniformly and harmoniously having at last (thanks to the Monroe Administration's era of good feelings) discarded every remnant of rancor against each other," (Brown, 1985). But if anything, the baneful weed was thriving and its roots were spreading. Ultimately, the Whigs would learn to compete in this political atmosphere for a time. And while their agenda was not always popular with the voters, they eventually won over the national consciousness. Historian Daniel Howe has pointed out that the Whigs' relatively short life belies their transformational success saying,

There is a special appropriateness in treating Whiggery as a culture rather than merely as a party, because the culture was more powerful than the party. Sometimes the Whigs were more successful in implementing their policies than at winning elections. When one looks at their broader social objectives (such public education or the development of didactic domestic literature), there is a striking contrast between the brief life of their party and the lasting influence of their culture. The Whigs themselves claimed to attach more

importance to their principles than to their party, since they tended to disparage political parties. While the Jacksonians won more presidential elections, the Whigs probably contributed more to shaping the new industrial society of Victorian America, (Howe, 1979, p. 3).

Today, 150 years after they crumbled as a political party, descendant sentiments of the Whig agenda can be found in platforms of both political parties. While the protectionist nature of their pro-tariff positions may have given way to a common embrace of free trade, the parties of today (albeit in varying degrees) maintain the nationalistic spirit and the belief in internal improvements. Public education is ingrained in a fabric that permanently weaves public and private interests. And the Whiggish paternalism can be witnessed in various components of both platforms ranging from the Democrats health care initiatives to the Republicans education and social security reform efforts.

Though they may have had a governing philosophy, what they lacked was political savvy. The Whigs early reluctance to behave like a party no doubt left them ill equipped to face the Van Buren machine. Prior to the point at which they official wore the Whig moniker, candidate Clay was handily defeated by Jackson, failing even in most of the states Adams carried in 1828. And Van Buren easily triumphed over William Henry Harrison and several other Whig candidates in 1836.

The 1836 election provides a good look at the Whigs' early, somewhat quixotic approach to political competition. Unlike the Democrats, they held no party nominating convention, taking pride in their decentralized organization and control (Brown, 1985). And rather than field one presidential candidate they seemed to rely on a strategy reminiscent of the Adams win in 1824—playing for a stalemate which they hoped would be decided by the house. By running Harrison in most states, Daniel Webster in Massachusetts and Tennessee Senator Hugh Lawson White in Illinois and the South, the Whigs hoped to put regional

appeal to work to their advantage (Atkins, 1992; Brown, 1985). But in the end Van Buren triumphed and the Whigs would have to wait for 1840 for another run at success.

White’s candidacy tells us something about the nature of North-South political alignment. As a southerner, White hoped to provide a more acceptable alternative to Van Buren to the pro-slavery South while Whigs in the North had the anti-slavery candidates of Webster and Harrison. White’s move again drew assertions from the Van Buren supporters that the party behind him was nothing more than reconstituted, regurgitated Federalism (Sellers, 1991, Atkins, 1992). Further, the Whigs were said to be in the pockets of business, the moneyed interests and the pro-bank people. But unlike the top-down approach employed by Federalists, the Whig’s it seems were learning to “get political.”

Partisan Dividing Points 1836-1844

Democrats	Whigs
Pro-slavery in the South. Somewhat opposed to slavery—but accommodating—in the North.	Pro-slavery in South. Stronger anti-slavery component in the North.
Friend to laborers, immigrants and farmers. Suspicious of any efforts to promote business.	Friendly to business interests
Generally free traders	Protectionist in nature
Moving to strengthen executive power	Greater belief in limited presidency and the primacy of congress
Strong believer in states rights	Nationalist

If nothing else, White’s run was enormously important in establishing the Whigs in the South where enormous turnout levels were generated (Atkins, 1992). So, the concept of two strong national parties was finally emerging. With a strong performance in states once dominated by Jackson, White also showed that the Whigs could compete with the populism of the Democrats. And for the next 20 years, the Whigs would be worthy opponents not

only at the presidential level but also in virtually every congressional or state or local competition.

Following the 1836 election, the nation's economy fell into prolonged economic hardship and this bad news for Van Buren ultimately improved the electoral fortunes of the Whigs. In the 1838 elections, Whigs won congress for the first time naming a Virginian as their speaker. Strength in the all-important Old Dominion was seen nearly as vital to the Democrats as holding New York. The fact that the Whigs were considering a Virginian, John Tyler as their 1840 vice presidential candidate spelled further trouble for Van Buren. And the success of people like White in Tennessee during 1836 had the effect of beginning to position their opposition in a negative light for upcoming elections. The Whigs also staged their first National nominating convention in 1839. They were, it seems, beginning to borrow liberally from the Democrats' political playbook. So, they too were becoming a party of the people. And it was attracting voters to their ranks.

Throughout the period of the Jacksonians and their successors, partisan politics was continually redefining itself and creating legacies for future generations. While we got conventions and party signage in 1832, the 1840 campaign would see the introduction of a newer method that would be employed by almost every party in every subsequent election: demagoguery. The Whigs seeking to batter Van Buren portrayed their nominee (Virginia-born Ohioan, William Henry Harrison) as a man of the people, complete with the common, earthy touch. Being a war hero in previous years also helped the aging general to avoid serious interaction with the issues. The Whigs not only assumed a new populism, they painted their adversary as patrician, removed from the concerns of the common man. This naturally led to numerous attempts at political humor and ridicule, demonstrated by this popular folk rhyme, perhaps a forerunner of the negative campaign broadcast commercial:

Let Van from his coolers of silver drink wine
And lounge on his cushioned settee.
Our man on his buckeye bench can recline,
Content with hard cider is he!, (Rutland, 1979, p.74.).

Whigs seemed not to be appealing directly to the concerns and interests of voters but to nature of the voter. Rather than concentrate on their belief in internal improvements or a stronger monetary and banking system, they made the campaign one of bonfires, campaign parades, campaign symbols (the log cabin) and a slogan still—almost magically remembered by a wide cross section of adults even 165 years after the fact: *Tipppecanoe and Tyler, Too*. The rustic imagery was misleading at best, however. Harrison had been born in comfortable surroundings of a well-to-do family.

In addition to being the first presidential candidate to have a “manufactured image” at work from him, Harrison also benefited from a new backlash against the strength of the Democrats that was manifesting itself with language associating to Jackson and Van Buren as new kinds of Monarchs. All of which was ironic, given the longstanding efforts of the Jeffersonians to brand the federalists as monarchists (Remini, 1951, Sellers 1991).

And Harrison’s triumph over incumbent Van Buren meant that the party begun by Jefferson would not hold the White House for the first time in 40 years. And that broken winning streak has never been replicated since. Whig celebration, however, would be short-lived. Harrison’s long inaugural address in the Washington cold of March of 1841 was followed by illness and his death just a little more than a month into his presidency. John Tyler of Virginia thus became the first Vice President to succeed to the Presidency on the death of his predecessor. Tyler, who became known and ridiculed by both major parties as “his accident” governed in a way that often brought consternation from his own fellow

Whigs. His nearly four years as the nation's chief executive provided a colossus of partisan maneuvers and missteps.

By adapting campaign techniques employed by the Democrats, adding a few of their own and conforming their national vision to local constituencies, the Whigs were deploying partisan techniques in a way thereto never seen. Depending on the region or specific locale, they tailored their appeal to meet the need, just as the Democrats had. It seems that the notion that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" was pervasive throughout the land during the era. This illustrates the way the parties appealed to and were adopted by various ethnic groups and cultures. In the North, the Whigs stood as a protestant-based party aligned against the Irish and other Catholic groups. And because of Irish animosity toward them, free blacks in the North voted Whig. Tables were turned a bit in states such as Louisiana. There, with their Catholicism well established, the well to do planters voted Whig while the small protestant farmers who resented their wealth sided with Democrats (Howe, 1979).

As a southerner in a party that was attracting more and more abolitionists or voters who were at least moderately anti-slavery, John Tyler immediately drew suspicion. He also served at a time when the country's dramatic expansion was bringing important issues to a head in relations with England, Mexico and other countries while at the same time fraying the nerves of those who were on opposite sides of the Texas issue. The lone star republic had numerous advocates for statehood and the South was ready to embrace it. The North however could see only the specter of another slave state and persistently stated their opposition to Texas entering the union.

Tyler's pro-Texas stance put him at odds with most of his own party including Henry Clay, Daniel Webster (once his Secretary of State), John Quincy Adams and others. His support of another U.S. bank cost him and Whig party significantly as they were

trounced in the 1842 midterms. And Tyler's his pro-slavery stance cost him any chance for the 1844 Whig nomination. Interestingly, it is said that he hoped to use patronage to secure the Democratic nomination, but Calhoun and Van Buren were well ahead of him. So, the Jeffersonian-turned-Whig was now without any real party support.

Machinations over Texas were complicated by the 1844 presidential ambitions of Clay on the Whig side and Van Buren and Calhoun for the Democrats. In the end, however, neither the Whig incumbent nor the Democratic front-runner, Van Buren, would secure the nominations of their parties. Ironically, a provision of the Democratic nominating process once championed by Van Buren ultimately cost him the nomination. Unable to secure two-thirds of the vote (something which was designed to assure national party unity) the Democrats turned to James K. Polk, making him the first "dark horse" candidate. This should have been the right time for master politician and great compromiser Henry Clay to crown his luminous political career with the presidency. However, the Whigs ran poorly in a number of southern states and had to split the anti-slavery vote with third parties. The race picked up with the demagoguery and scurrilous rhetoric of 1840, with the Whigs labeling Polk a coward and the Democrats accusing Clay of being a drunk.

Clay was one of a number of leading Whig luminaries to covet the presidency. His achievements included serving as speaker of the house (longer than anyone in the nineteenth century) and leading the senate in what was widely recognized as the body's golden era (Howe, 1979). But missteps including accepting the secretary of state post under Adams and helping to block Van Buren's confirmation as Minister to Great Britain probably cost him enough political capital to blow at least one presidential bid, especially when you consider that the election of 1844 was dead even in terms of popular vote.



James K. Polk



Henry Clay

Another noted nineteenth century American luminary to carry the Whig banner was Massachusetts' Daniel Webster. As a long-time Federalist hold-out, Webster's decision to transfer Federalist support to John Quincy Adams in 1824 was essential not only to Adams success that year, but to the emergence of the second party system. Still, Webster's greatest feats were not in elective or appointed office but as an orator.

With the Whigs' prominence being both very short and remarkably consequential, you can see its principle actors on the political stage for a period of time that covers 60 or 70 years of the nineteenth century. Adams, Clay and Webster's public service made them contemporaries with many Americans of enduring fame (like Lincoln) as well as some with shorter albeit notable political careers. One of these was General Zachary Taylor. Like Dwight Eisenhower a century later—Taylor was one of those military heroes who seemed to be above party politics. His slaveholder status undoubtedly helped him in the South while his heritage as a strong pro-union and nationalist kept the Whig faithful on his side in the North. Compounding the problem of his Democratic opponent, Lewis Cass, was the fact that he lost a number of anti-slavery Democrats in his natural northern constituency thanks

to Martin Van Buren who was running on the ticket of upstart anti-slavery “Free Soil” party (Rutland, 1979).

Though a southerner, Taylor took a strong pro-union position and was uncompromising in his resistance to southern plans to expand slavery. He further warned southern leaders that he would lead union troops if necessary and hang any southern secessionists with less feeling than he’d hung deserters in his Mexican war campaigns (whitehouse.gov, 2005). Taylor’s untimely death following a Fourth of July celebration in 1850 no doubt prevented civil war, short term, as the forces of compromise soon prevailed. Taylor was succeeded by Millard Fillmore who would be the last Whig to serve as president.

Franklin Pierce and the Democrats who managed their North-South differences more effectively overwhelmed the candidacy of General Winfield Scott in 1852. And in 1856, the Whigs fielded their last candidate nationally in former President Millard Fillmore who garnered only 23% of the vote and won only Maryland. Interestingly, the party that had once enjoyed tremendous strength in the North garnered its strongest support in the South where it was the choice of those with pro-union sentiment. Fillmore faced not only Democrat James Buchanan but also John C. Fremont from a new third party. This group, the Republicans, quickly came to eclipse not only the Whigs but also other parties including the Free Soilers, and Know Nothings. The Republicans’ status as a third-party would be short.

Building third parties around issues that divide the populace

Electoral college maps in the United States appear to be a bit like fingerprints. No two have ever been exactly alike, from 1792 to 2004. Political fortunes rise and fall based on how voters feel about issues and the way parties adapt to those feelings. The period between 1825 to 1860—like the modern era—was one in which hundreds of political issues were buffeted about in both lofty political rhetoric and day-to-day American life. That era had its perennial hot topics as well—banking and currency, tariffs and taxes, expansion and management of questions concerning Native Americans. But slavery trumped every issue.

Since the time of the Missouri Compromise in 1820, the electorate and the politicians who served them kept an eye on the precarious balance established by the compromise. But alas, westward expansion, southern paranoia and increased antipathy toward slavery conspired to upend the compromise. The ability to straddle the issue had been, in some measure, skillfully employed by both the Whigs and the Democrats. Now, it could be argued that both parties had become vulnerable.

Making headway on local issues while casting aspersions on the other party's ambitions toward the issue of slavery was essential to both the local and national strength of the two major parties. In the Whigs' case, the ultimate difficulty in maintaining an appeal that could "play" locally while delivering nationally is what ultimately undid the party and helped unmake the bonds holding together North and South (Holt, 1973).

Slavery and other national questions were spawning new parties, too. In the North, the Free Soilers were formed to promote not only an anti slavery agenda but to specifically press the idea that new territory in the United States should without question be "free soil." The party known both by a more official and patriotic name—the American Party—but informally as the "Know Nothings" developed to appeal to the sentiments of the protestant

culture that was feeling under siege by increasing numbers of foreigners coming to the shores in general and the growing American presence and prominence of the Catholic Church, (Holt, 1973).



Cartoon ridiculing the Van Buren and the Free Soil and Liberty Parties

These were preceded by other third parties, which became forces to reckon with at least on a local or regional level. This included the Anti-Mason Party, which was inspired by the murder of a Batavia, New York man who had threatened to expose the sacred and secret rituals of the exclusive society (Remini, 1951; Rutland, 1979). Resentments, such as those directed against the Free Masons, were often the driving force in the formation of third parties.

Throughout the nineteenth century new parties seemed to emerge whenever a large portion of the populace felt its needs were not met by the major parties (Morse, 1892). The question of whether a new party succeeds or not is indeed relative. Certainly, electoral success is an absolute measure of success. Another measure of third party success is the

elevation of a primary cause to national attention. Third parties that are most successful are the ones that see their issues absorbed by the major parties. And successful third parties are usually a major catalyst in any kind of realignment that draws large numbers out of another party (Bartley, 1975).

For their part, the Know-Nothings made a good showing in 1856, with Millard Fillmore carrying their banner (Fillmore was also the Whig Candidate in some states). He garnered nearly 22 percent of the vote capturing the sentiment of those who—depending where they lived abhorred Catholics, disdained slavery or couldn't stand the thought of the Union breaking up. Sometimes though, the moderate success achieved by third parties in changing the political dialog ultimately results in their downfall as their philosophies get appropriated by larger parties. By the 1860 election, many who had been Know Nothings in 1856 moved over to the Republican Party in the North. Their efforts at arousing anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic feeling also benefited the Republicans by attracting large numbers of middle- and working-class voters and removing the grip that the Democrats had once held on them.

The Republicans: Their Time, Their Place, Their Issue

It is common to discuss single-issue parties and failure in the same breath. Like the Whigs, the Republicans began as much as a “movement” as an organized political party. But, improving on the Whigs model, they were fast to organize and pool the resources of their various state organizations. Even more astonishing than the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860—when he was only on the ticket in the North—is the fact that John C. Fremont nearly pulled it off in 1856.

The party went immediately from third-party to major-party status in the North, as a result of the “anti-Nebraska” fervor that had washed over the North completely and compellingly by 1854. It is a remarkable political lesson when one observes that the one person most responsible for getting the Republican party going was actually Democrat, Stephen A. Douglas. Democrat Stephen A. Douglas, seeking to shore up support in the South, proposed what was a seemingly “democratic” solution to the question of slavery in the new territories. But by letting the popular sovereignty within territories settle the slavery question, Douglas opened a Pandora’s box that could never be closed again. The measure meant that the “peculiar institution” could advance not only west, but also north. Douglas was said to observe that with the passage of the legislation, he could have well traveled from Boston to Chicago by the light of his “own burning effigies,” (Moos, 1956). At the time, it was conceivable to many in the northern population that Minnesota or the Dakotas might be admitted as slave states. As remote as the possibility might have been in actuality, voters throughout the North were outraged.

There was shock that long trusted barriers to slavery’s expansion could be summarily tumbled. Outrage was extended not only to the south but also to those interests in the North, which had either failed to prevent the Kansas-Nebraska or failed to see it coming. A

common notion was evolving that the country needed a party that was willing to oppose slavery in every state in which it operated. This of course could never be said of the Whigs.

Along with the first meeting of the party in Jackson, Michigan, similar Republican organizations were springing up throughout the North in states like Wisconsin and Illinois. Indiana, Ohio and Vermont held rousing Republican conventions one week after the Jackson event. One state where the Republican movement was thwarted initially was New York, where the Whig machine of Thurlow Weed pushing the Whig Candidacy of William Henry Seward (Moos, 1951). New York editor Horace Greeley however was a leading voice behind the movement, which would eventually absorb most of the energy from the Free Soil and Know Nothing movements in his state and soon draw Whigs as well.

The Republicans did not just want to negate slavery, they were animated by the cause of free labor. It was fundamental to their concept of progress that free labor would both fuel capitalist industry and encourage new capitalists from within the laboring ranks. The cause of free labor also further positioned northern sentiment against the South (Foner, 1970).

Free labor proponents saw the direct conflict between a region that expounds the virtues of industry and human initiative and one that lives off of the unpaid labor of others. And while the fatally wounded Whigs had a strong anti-slavery component and ideological underpinnings that were strongly compatible with the concept of free soil, it was also a party that had a strong southern and pro-slavery wing. Further, the strength of Whigs during the 1830s and 40s came from the fact that they were the party of compromise. By the mid-1850s, however, the North was feeling betrayed by compromise.

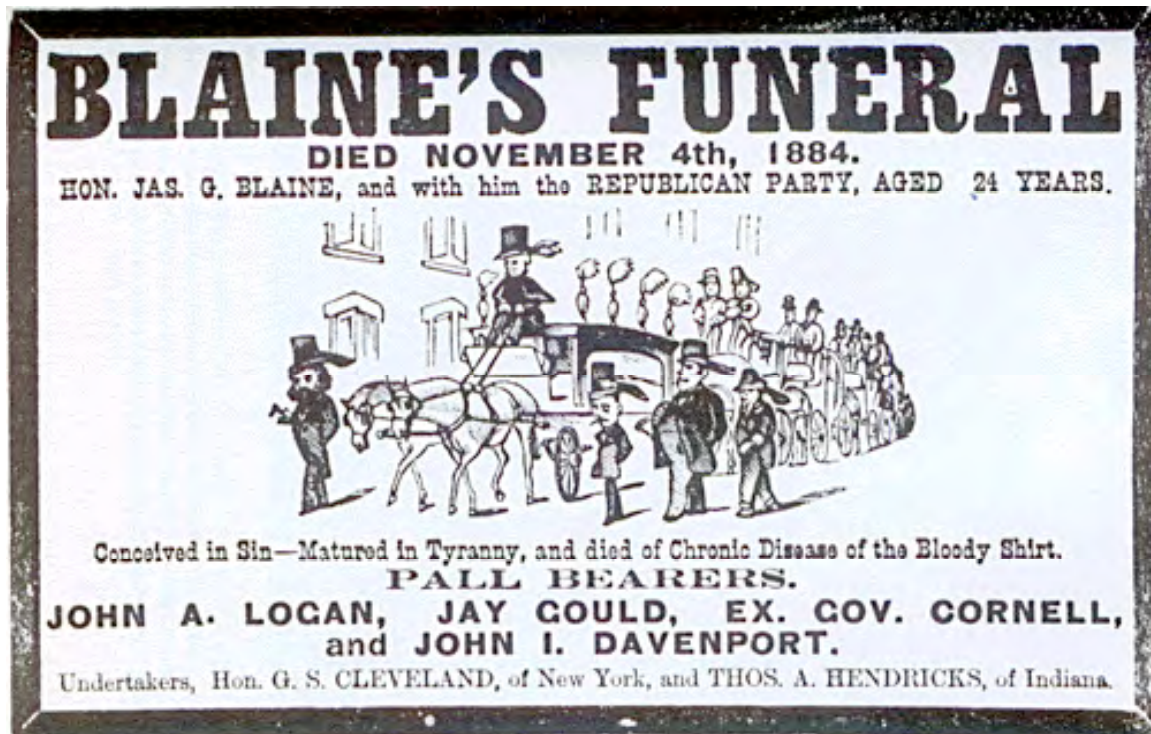
Increasingly, the North had also developed a sense of superiority, moral and otherwise. The Republicans reflected this attitude and helped to encourage it. State-by-state comparisons between North and South were used to show that select northern states bested

comparably sized southern states in terms of virtually all things valued by the society of the time. The devastation of farming land by the lazy methods of the slaveholding planters was cited as another sign of southern inferiority (Foner, 1970).

As always, the labor argument was prominent. But it should be noted that free labor did not necessarily mean pro-slave. A *New York Tribune* article from the era said in part: “There are Republicans who are Abolitionists; there are others who anxiously desire and labor for the good of the slave; but there are many whose main impulse is a desire to secure the new Territories for Free White Labor, with little or no regard for the interests of Negroes, free or slave,” (Foner, 1970, p. 61).

Despite its fast success at gaining national recognition, the party was slow to win converts in some areas. Abraham Lincoln—one of the most ambitious politicians in Illinois—straddled the fence between his Whig beliefs and the understanding that slavery was on its last legs as an institution. He was defeated as a Whig Candidate for senator by an opponent who essentially melded together the interests of anti-Nebraska Democrats and Whigs along with that of the upstart Republican Party. By most accounts, Lincoln’s conversion to Republicanism took place a year or so later when he fused his Whigs with the new party supported the 1856 presidential candidacy of Fremont (Luthin, 1944).

Eventually, New York’s Seward would also call himself a Republican along with his political confidant, Weed. In New York as in other eastern states, the party seemed to gain the energy generated by the Know Nothings’ short-lived strength and the implosion of Whigs (Holt, 1973). While anti-Nebraska sentiment was not the only thing on people’s minds, it was certainly glue that held together the disparate interests of erstwhile Whigs, anti-slavery Democrats, Know Nothings and Free Soilers.



Democrats remained angry over the “bloody shirt” many years after the Civil War as indicated by this poster celebrating Democrat Cleveland’s victory over Blaine in 1884

By 1856, the Republicans were winning big in many northern state elections including governorships and legislatures. The presidential candidacy of Fremont (yet another war hero) was energized by a caldron of sectional strife that began with the bloody attacks taking place on Kansas Free Soilers by pro-slavery settlers and insurgents. Massachusetts Senator Charles Sumner’s brutal Senate floor beating by a southern Congressman created further fodder for the northern press. During this period, the editorial product of Republican or Whig leaning papers typically blended a combination of anti-slavery invective with attacks on the southern way of life and the tragedy in Kansas. Waving “the bloody shirt” was a tactic that was both legendary and infamous (depending on your party). Northern Democrats came to resent the way rhetoric was used to tarnish the image not only of the South but also of their party (Moos, 1951; Foner, 1970).

Fremont's candidacy, though marked by the issues which would explode four years later, actually had some aspects that would be familiar to a twenty-first century election observer. His credentials as a war hero were stridently attacked or mocked by the opposition. And his alleged Catholicism was a continual subject for ridicule among Democrats looking for hypocrisy (Moos, 1951). Newspapers of the time dropped innuendo about Fremont and the presence of incense in this religious worship. In the end, the southern sweep mustered by the Democrats was added to northern states like New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Indiana and Illinois to give James Buchanan more than enough in terms of popular and electoral vote. But for an upstart party, the 1856 results had to be somewhat gratifying. Fremont completely swept the New England states and won New York even though the Republicans were late to organize there. In addition, he carried Iowa, Wisconsin and Michigan (historycentral.com, 2005). Fremont also won Ohio, a state that more than any other would serve as a bellwether for Republican success nationally. Ohio's importance to the GOP was characterized by the fact that it claimed native-state status (or at least a share) of seven Republican nominees all of whom were successful at least once. They carried the state in every election from 1856 to 1912. And no Republican has ever won the presidency without winning the Buckeye State. As predicted throughout the 2004 electoral cycle, Ohio would again be pivotal. If approximately 75,000 voters had switched from George W. Bush to John F. Kerry, the Massachusetts Senator would have won the presidency.

As 1857 got underway, Buchanan was president, but the debate continued to intensify. The Fugitive Slave Law and Kansas-Nebraska Act stirred tremendous animosity throughout the free states during the 1850s. So when the Supreme Court added to the injury with the Dred Scott decision, it had become clear that nothing short of electoral revolution could exorcise the demons the North saw in slavery. The decision said that, despite changing

attitudes toward those of African descent, Scott had no legal standing to bring the suit and that a black man had “no rights which the white man was bound to respect,” (Scott v. Sandford, 1856).



James Buchanan

The high court’s decision was met with umbrage in the Republican press and at party conventions, which affirmed the right of “free Negro citizenship.” In addition, Republican-controlled legislatures in Vermont, New York, New Hampshire and Ohio stated in resolutions that race did not disqualify individuals of color from voting and the Maine Supreme Court affirmed the right of free blacks to vote.

In Rochester, New York, William Henry Seward (1858) made one of the most famous speeches of the era which seemed to up the rhetoric ante of Lincoln’s famous “House Divided” speech earlier in the year. Seward said in part:

Hitherto, the two systems have existed in different States, but side by side within the American Union. This has happened because the Union is a confederation of States. But in another aspect the United States constitute only one nation. Increase of population, which is filling the States out to their very borders, together with a new and extended network of railroads and other avenues, and an internal commerce which daily becomes more intimate, is rapidly bringing the States into a higher and more perfect social unity or consolidation. Thus, these antagonistic systems are continually coming into closer contact, and collision results.

Shall I tell you what this collision means? They who think that it is accidental, unnecessary, the work of interested or fanatical agitators, and therefore ephemeral,

mistake the case altogether. It is an irrepressible conflict between opposing and enduring forces, and it means that the United States must and will, sooner or later, become either entirely a slaveholding nation, or entirely a free-labor nation. Either the cotton and rice fields of South Carolina and the sugar plantations of Louisiana will ultimately be tilled by free labor, and Charleston and New Orleans become marts of legitimate merchandise alone, or else the rye-fields and wheat-fields of Massachusetts and New York must again be surrendered by their farmers to slave culture and to the production of slaves, and Boston and New York becomes once more markets for trade in the bodies and souls of men. It is the failure to apprehend this great truth that induces so many unsuccessful attempts at final compromises between the slave and free States, and it is the existence of this great fact that renders all such pretended compromises, when made, vain and ephemeral.

Clearly, Seward bemoaned the compromises, which left the North, and the Republicans feeling betrayed, but he also used language far more ominous than Lincoln. And when John Brown raided Harper's Ferry, he brought the power-keg of animosity nearly to its trigger point. The uprising, for which Brown was ultimately captured and hanged, was problematic to the Republicans because while it was an assault on slavery it ran counter to their notions of law and order.

In keeping with the spirit of its partisan leanings, the Democratic *Cincinnati Enquirer* linked the raid to noted Republican politicians Salmon P. Chase and William Henry Seward.

BROWN and his followers are but the advance column of the partisan disciples of SEWARD and CHASE, who are burning to make a practical application of the "irrepressible con-flict doctrine. They stand ready to deluge the land in blood to carry out their fanatical views; and the momentous question is, do the majority of the people of the free states sympathize with them? (The Cloud, 1859)

Of course, this was a notion roundly rejected by the Republicans. Lincoln, who would face off against Seward at the May 1860 convention in Chicago, dismissed any association between Brown and his co-conspirators and the Republican Party. By that time, the Illinois conservative had advanced politically from a defeated Senate candidate to a national figure. Yet he still firmly believed that the nation could be saved without a bloody conflict.

Though not nearly as well known as Seward, particularly among the eastern and New England forces, Lincoln still had many advantages. For one, his reputation as a “conservative” and as a Whig was essential to pulling in the remaining northern Whig holdouts as well as mustering stronger support from erstwhile Know Nothings. These forces moved to the Republican Party pulling the ideological center further to the right of radical’s like New York’s Seward or Ohio’s Chase. What’s more, Seward also fell victim to anti-Catholic sentiment due to his long support of public funds to New York State’s parochial schools and his easy relationship with immigrant and predominantly Catholic groups (Moos, 1951; Foner, 1970; Howe, 1979).

The fact that the convention was held in Chicago worked to Lincoln’s advantage as well. And his third ballot nomination did not come about without good old-fashioned political shenanigans. Some of the methods used to the Springfield resident’s advantage including swelling the crowd by issuing free rail tickets to pro-Lincoln forces.

While Lincoln and Seward both received loud applause, the native son’s were said to be far more prolonged and thunderous. There was sloganeering too, as Lincoln was heralded first as the “rail splitter who would maul Democrats” and then as one who would do it “with two hands,” (Moos, 1951).

And while they may have benefited greatly from the influx of northern Whigs, Know Nothings and other conservative voters, Republicans at that convention were helped significantly by the factious, three-month, two-city Democratic convention. Presumptive nominee, Stephen A. Douglas had numerous strikes against him in 1860. For one, he had made a mortal enemy of president Buchanan. In fact, it has been said that Buchanan, who presided over the decline of his party, and a country in recession and on the verge of war had no successes as president save for the denial of the office to Douglas (Rutland, 1979).

Add Douglas's refusal to endorse a pro-slavery plank at a convention in the heart of the South and it was clear that his candidacy would be star crossed.

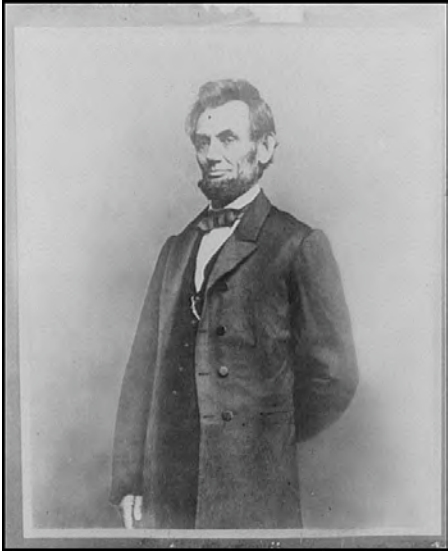


Cartoon depicting the ludicrous possibilities with the 1860 election

The Charleston convention ended in disarray. An effort to regroup in Baltimore six weeks later produced a similar result but this time two candidates emerged. The regular party affirmed the Douglas candidacy while the disaffected southern delegation met separately and nominated Vice President Breckenridge.

Lincoln, Douglas and Breckenridge do not complete the slate for 1860 however. In all the upheaval of the preceding 10-12 years, there were still partisan/sectional factions without a political home. These included the southern Whigs who had been completely abandoned by their northern brethren who had overwhelmingly joined the Republican ranks and the remaining Know Nothings in the North who had not yet found their ideological home with the slavery-focused Republicans, (Holt 1973; Howe, 1979; course-notes.org,

2005). Their choice, John Bell of the Constitutional Union Party, actually won three states and generated significant support in all but a few northern and southern states, (HistoryCentral.com, 2005).



Abraham Lincoln

And so it is that election of 1860 became unique in American history. It is the only election in which the party system seemed to suffer a complete and total breakdown (Patterson, 2000) and the only one in which four separate presidential candidates won more than one state. From the beginning, it was clear to the Democrats that Lincoln's strength in the North and far West would most likely win him at least a popular plurality. As the Whigs had in 1836, the Democratic strategy was to play for an Electoral College spoil, which would mean the election would have to be determined by the House. So real was the possibility of a complete deadlock in the body (where each state represented one vote) that it appeared the Senate's vice presidential choice may be elevated to the presidency. Here, Breckenridge's running mate Joseph Lane was thought to have the edge prompting Republican activists to warn "it's Lincoln or it's Lane" in mobilizing its voters.

With the united anti-slavery sentiment of the North firmly behind them, the Republicans advanced a campaign that focused on the old Whig standbys of tariffs and internal improvements. They were for harbor improvements, coast-to-coast rail transport and other measures, which would boost the fortunes of business, and free working men. Their victory in the North was decisive. And while he won only a popular plurality nationwide, Lincoln's Electoral College triumph was unquestionable as he took 180 out of 303 electoral votes (HistoryCentral.com, 2005).

And so it was that Abraham Lincoln became the first of 18 Republicans to serve as president between 1861 and 2005. His election had the effect that was feared by unionists and cheered by "fire-eating secessionists." Despite this, there were somewhat optimistic assessments by some southern papers that the Lincoln election would not mean the end of the union. Warning against secession, the *Staunton Spectator* (Virginia) editorialized against secession, counseling that Virginia had interests separate and apart from the cotton states. Although, its anti-Lincoln rhetoric was stinging, faith in the other branches of government was strong. In its November 13, 1861 issue, the small town paper said:

The success of the Republicans in the Presidential election is but a barren victory, and its fruits, like the apples of the Dead Sea, will turn to ashes upon their lips. They will have the Executive, but no other branch of the Government, and will, consequently, be impotent for mischief--they will not have the power to do any harm, however much disposed they may be to do so. We have the Senate, the House of Representatives and the Supreme Court in our favor, either one of which would of itself be a sufficient protection to our rights (Though Lincoln, 1860).

And so the confederation of individual autonomous states and a weak, limited federal government first envisioned by Thomas Jefferson was in jeopardy. His Democratic Party was also in shambles and would win the White House only four times between 1860 and 1932. Ironically, during the period between his election and his inauguration Lincoln paid tribute to a planned celebration of Thomas Jefferson's birthday in Boston. And though

Lincoln tied his party's ancestry to that of the long-forgotten Federalist foes of the third president he found it curious that "those supposed to descend politically from the party opposed to Jefferson should now be celebrating his birthday...while those claiming political descent from him have ceased to breathe his name everywhere," (Rutland, 1979, p. 107). The newly triumphant party may be celebrating Jefferson as they certainly appropriated the Jeffersonian party's old name. But they had brought to a head the question of whether this was a single nation or confederation of independent states. The decision would come not from the election process however, but through the blood 600,000 men in the ensuing four years.

Historical Lessons And Modern Reality

Looking at the historical period when our two parties emerged and taking stock of modern political theater presents a number of common characteristics. Further examining partisanship from perspectives provided by sociology and political science helps round out the picture that reveals several motivating and sustaining forces behind our two-party political system.

1. The desire of people to be free of what they see as monarchical (or dictatorial) forces or behavior.
2. A more primal kind of strife generated by economic, sectional, religious and other differences.
3. The fundamental human nature to oppose, question or seek improvement in existing conditions.
4. The natural socializing aspects, which interlinks party identification with tradition, relationships with family and community.

The anti-monarchical momentum could be seen in everything from the Jeffersonians calling themselves Republicans (to contrast themselves with the Federalists who they derisively called “monarchists”) to the Whigs emergence in opposition to “reign” of Andrew Jackson. More recently, this was expressed in the presidential term limit amendment after Franklin D. Roosevelt won election to 16 years as chief executive or the recent discussions for term limits in congress. Some observers—like Alexis de Tocqueville (1945)—saw the natural partisan split as being between a party of the people and the party (Jeffersonian Republicans) that seeks to limit the power of the people (the Federalists). The Frenchman called these differences “two opinions which are as old as the world,” (p. 183).

Those instances of strife between groups generating political parties can be traced as far back as the Roman patrician and plebeian factions or even further back to loosely organized groups or movements within Greek democracy (Stockton, 1990). In the United States, instances of difference have revolved around literally thousands of issues, subcultures and movements ranging from paper versus hard money in the 1830s to immigration and free trade in the 1990s. With these, parties function more as coalitions, pulling groups together around common characteristics while working to accommodate differences in other areas. But writing in a time when the Federalists had been vanquished and the Whigs yet to rise, Tocqueville rued the seeming absence of parties saying, “In the absence of great parties the United States swarms with lesser controversies and public opinion is divided into a thousand minute shades of difference upon questions of detail,” (Tocqueville, 1945, p. 185). Certainly, the ability to frame issues and focus the attention of constituencies is an essential aspect of party performance and something on which Martin Van Buren and many a modern political figure would agree.

Another motivator to partisanship is human nature itself. People of our era and the last several centuries seem born to question. Whether this extends from the period of enlightenment or from something more basic in human nature is a subject worthy of far deeper discussion. But it has certainly been an animating force in American politics from the beginning. Martin Van Buren had said on the triumph of one of his measures that he would have been perfectly willing to win taking the opposite side of the argument if necessary (Remini, 1951). Historian Bernard Bailyn (1967) traces the instinct toward opposition even further back. Speaking of eighteenth-century Americans he says:

Everywhere in America the tradition that had originated in seventeenth-century radicalism and that had been passed on, with elaborations and applications, by early eighteenth-century English opposition publicists and politicians brought forth congenial responses and provided grounds for opposition politics. But it did more. It

also provided a harmonizing force for the other discordant elements in the political and social thought of the revolutionary generation, (pp. 53-54).

There are also strong social forces that underlie partisan performance both on an individual and group level. The fact advanced by historians that Jacksonian era men tended to vote the same way as their fathers (Sellers, 1991) is echoed in more recent studies from the 1960s to the present day. These indicate that children often form their first partisan identities based on their parents' affiliations and this is even more likely in strongly political families (Wallace, 1963; Beck & Jennings, 1991). Family and social tradition can be seen broadly reflected in the consistent voting history of certain states. Kansas for example has voted Republican in 28 out of 35 presidential elections since it joined the union (and every election since it voted against native son Alf Landon in 1936). And although Georgia began to support Republicans for president with Barry Goldwater in 1964, the state has long had a reputation as a reliable Democratic state. The Governor's office had been held by a Democrat between the time of reconstruction and 2002.

Partisan behavior also draws upon the "joiner" character of America, along with its speech and assembly traditions. Marvin Meyers (1957) says, "The leading virtue of political democracy in America turns out to be the capacity to penetrate the citizen's isolation, join his self-interest to a wider group, and educate him in the wonder-working skills of organization," (p.41).

The degree to which partisan behavior affects actual voting performance is also a continuing topic of study. A typical view is that the strongest partisan identifiers are most likely to be predictable in their voting patterns (Wallace, 1963; Gant & Luttbeg, 1987). The rub for party organizations is that today's voters (*party in electorate*) are less likely to identify specifically as Democrat or Republican. This parallels growing importance of the *party in*

organization the national, state and local party organizations (Patterson, 2000; White & Shea, 2002). As partisan identification dwindles, the party organizations focus their attention on that valuable middle ground. One ironic aspect of our two-party system is that it makes non-partisans more valuable come election time. That's because it tends to create and preserve an undecided, mainstream group that is essential to victory. This almost always assures moderation and consistency yet the ability for the nation to move whenever more partisan notions become mainstream. For instance, the anti-slavery objectives of the Free Soil Party may have seemed extreme in 1848 when the spirit of the Missouri Compromise still held the nation together. But by the late 1850s they had become mainstream—with the Republicans using the issue and mixing in Whig pro-business conservatism for good measure.

Consistency and stability from region to region and even generation to generation are virtually assured by a political system that offers a further check to a constitutionally divided government. And because the parties help to frame issues, promote positions and enliven debate, they play a vital role in keeping important topics alive and in the public eye.

Conclusion

Two days before the 2004 election, National Public Radio Broadcast an interview with the University of Pennsylvania's Professor Richard Beeman who contrasted the omnipresent partisan speech of today with the more "vituperative" debate of 1800. Beeman also discussed that election in terms, which cast it as the beginning of political partisanship adding that the "founding fathers actually abhorred partisanship," (Beeman, 2004). His point is one that is made continually in college courses and in the news media. It has become an article of faith. Typically, Madison and his admonitions in the Federalist papers are cited as justification to what might be described to the popular aversion to partisanship.

One has to wonder though about this so-called abhorrence. For one, they acknowledge the basic human nature of factions. As Madison said in Federalist 10 (1787), "the latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man." What's more, Madison himself, was at work with Jefferson on partisan organization just a few short years after the Federalist papers were written. Later opinions by both Jefferson and Madison also had a "we-knew-all-along quality" to them. Writing during a period when James Monroe was stridently pursuing non-partisanship, Madison said, "No free Country has ever been without parties, which are a natural offspring of freedom. An obvious and permanent division of every people is into the owners of the Soil, and the other inhabitants." These words gained the complete endorsement of a financially distraught Jefferson. During his discontented later years, Jefferson counseled friends, "In every political society parties are unavoidable," (Rutland, 1979, p.48).



James Madison

More than 30 years had passed between the time Madison worked with future rival Hamilton (and John Hay) to craft the Federalist papers and the time when he spoke about partisanship as the “natural offspring of freedom.” And it is conceivable or likely that his new views were moderated by time, personal challenges and public experience. No, the republic did not unfold in quite the way the founders hoped. They may certainly have had a genuine interest in maintaining a political society that controlled the negative aspects of faction or party. But it is important to remember that they were blazing new political trails. While they seemed to borrow liberally from preceding democracies, we also have to remember that nothing like this—a republic, extended over such a vast geography—had ever been tried before. The situation, the constitution and the government that evolved were genuine firsts.

So we have to look at our two-party system as both a cultural inheritance and a fundamental part of our republican democracy. The organizational and disciplining aspects of party introduced by Van Buren and Jackson helped to make the American system practical. Without it, the democracy envisioned by our founders would have deteriorated long ago into a condition where “self interested individuals would quickly degenerate into a Hobbesian state of war,” (Jaenicke, 1986, p.105). The tempering effect of two-party

competition effectively puts the mainstream of the electorate in control by forcing each major party organization away from their ideological extremities and to the middle. In a country of thousands of interests and issues, the political parties are as essential as governmental checks and balances in assuring moderate and measured progress.

Today, the founders' anti-party sentiments are frequently cited almost to the point of reverence. But partisanship soon became as essential to the growth of our democracy as the constitution itself because of its ability to coalesce individuals and groups and focus attention on fundamental issues. This is a nation founded on both democratic principles in terms of participation and access and republican principles in terms of organization and practice. And while the American political landscape has continued to be a curious churning of ideologies, economic, sectional and other differences, one thing has remained consistent from the times of Andrew Jackson and Abraham Lincoln and the founding fathers before them. We have remained essentially a nation of republicans and democrats both in terms of government and party identification. The national dialog derives its strength from the energy of political competition.

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