

RS#08: The Know-Nothings

Directions: Read the following essay about the history of the Know-Nothing Party and answer the questions that follow. Use specific evidence from the text to support your answers.

Nativism refers to the belief that native-born Americans were superior to those born in other countries. This caused many immigrants to feel out of place in their new country. Several years before he became president, Abraham Lincoln wrote to his friend Joshua Speed, explaining his view of the Know-Nothing party:

“I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can any one who abhors [strongly rejects] the oppression of Negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy [corruption] appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a notion, we began by declaring ‘all men are created equal.’ We now practically read: ‘all men are created equal, *except Negroes.*’ When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read: ‘all men are created equal except Negroes, and foreigners, and Catholics.’ When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating [leaving the U.S.] to some country where they make no pretense [pretending] of loving liberty...”

In the early 1800s, as immigrants flowed into the United States in record numbers, a number of American citizens became alarmed. Waves of immigrants, who brought with them new languages, cultures, and traditions, were seen as a threat to established Americans. The Germans and Irish immigrants generated considerable opposition. Many were concerned that Irish Catholics were controlled by and took orders from the pope in Rome.



The "Know-Nothings" had their own version of the American Flag

The secretive political parties that were formed in response to this perceived threat were comprised primarily of white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant males born in the United States. These parties held anti-Catholic and anti-immigration views.

The nativists who belonged to the secret societies were determined to stop the influx of immigration and protect so-called traditional American values. Their profound hostility toward immigrant groups was displayed in 1834, when schoolchildren and nuns were run out of their school and convent near Boston by a group of anti-Catholic townspeople who burned down the buildings.

The Native American Democratic Association was organized in 1835, as a state political party, by a group of New Yorkers. Their candidates ran on a platform openly opposing Catholics and immigrants and won 40 percent of the vote in the fall elections. During the 1840s, similar groups appeared in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other cities. Eventually, opposition to Catholicism and

immigration as well as resistance to supporting and educating poor foreigners became popular themes for groups attempting to organize on a national basis.

Another fraternal group, the Order of the Star Spangled Banner, was created in New York in 1849, and similar groups formed in other U.S. cities. When questioned about their nativist beliefs, members responded that they “knew nothing,” and soon found themselves labeled the “Know Nothings.” Though secretive at first, the organization soon found public support for proposals that included strict restrictions on immigration, prohibiting foreign-born individuals from voting or holding public office, and new residency requirements for citizenship. Many Know-Nothing supporters also felt that liquor was detrimental to the immigrant population and so they sought measures to limit alcohol sales. They also supported daily Bible readings in schools and tried to ensure that only Protestants could become public school teachers.

Once public, the Know-Nothing movement grew rapidly, at its height claiming one million members. By 1852, supporters of the Know-Nothing movement had achieved significant political results with many of their candidates winning seats in local and state elections. A Know-Nothing candidate was elected the governor of Massachusetts, and all but two members of the Massachusetts state legislature were members of the party. Forty members of the New York state legislature were Know-Nothings. By 1855, Know-Nothing supporters had elected thousands of local government officials as well as eight governors. Forty-three Know-Nothing candidates were elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and there were five Know-Nothing senators.

As the support of the Know-Nothings was at its peak, however, the movement was already in decline. Despite their success in winning elective office, the Know-Nothings were largely unsuccessful in passing significant legislation. They were unable to pass bills in Congress prohibiting the admission of certain immigrants or requiring registration and literacy tests for voters in certain states.

In 1856, the Know-Nothings held their first and only national convention in Philadelphia. As the American Party, they nominated former President Millard Fillmore as their presidential candidate. Fillmore finished a distant third in the presidential election with 21 percent of the popular vote and 8 electoral votes. He lost to Republican John Fremont and the presidential winner, Democrat James Buchanan.



Adapted from:

<http://law.jrank.org/pages/8005/Know-Nothing-Party.html><http://teachingamericanhistorymd.net/000001/000000/000065/html/t65.html> and (text); [2](http://schools-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

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wikipedia.org/images/815/81506.jpg.htm (campaign banner);
<http://keywords.fordhamitac.org/wiki2/index.php?title=Image:Know-nothing-flag.jpg>, (nativist flag);
<http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/lincoln/speeches/speed.htm> (Lincoln quote)

1. What were the political views of the nativists?

2. Why did people support the Know-Nothing movement and other nativist organizations?

3. What did the popularity of the Know-Nothings and other nativist groups reveal about the bias of some American citizens towards those they considered non-American?
