

AMERICAN CONSTITUTIONALISM
VOLUME II: RIGHTS AND LIBERTIES
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Supplementary Material

Chapter 5: The Jacksonian Era – Democratic Rights/Voting

Principles and Objects of the American Party (1855)¹

The Native American Party, more popularly known as the “Know Nothings,” was organized in 1845. An anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant movement, the Know Nothings drew their greatest strength from the urban areas of those northeast regions experiencing an influx of new immigrants, especially Irish Catholics. Most Irish supported the Democrats. American nativists before the early 1850s often allied with the Whigs and other reform parties. When the Whigs collapsed in 1854, the American party sought to absorb nativists from all regions of the country and emerge as the leading alternative to the Democrats. Nativists failed. The same divisions over slavery that doomed the Whigs doomed the Native American Party.

The 1856 convention of the American Party announced a “platform of principles.” Nativists advocated “the perpetuation of the Federal Union and Constitution, as the palladium of our civil and religious liberties, and the only sure bulwarks of American independence.” They demanded that “Americans must rule America,” which was understood as meaning that only native-born citizens should be selected to fill government offices. The American Party championed a ban on political office holding for any person who “recognizes any allegiance or obligation to any foreign prince, potentate or power” (i.e., the pope), statutes restricting voting to citizens, and a change in naturalization laws to require twenty-one years residence before citizenship. The party also declared “opposition to any union between Church and State; no interference with religious faith or worship, and no test oaths for office.”²

Nativist politics made strange bedfellows. Lewis C. Levin, a Nativist and temperance leader in Philadelphia, helped spark anti-Catholic riots in that city. Shortly thereafter, he became the first Jew elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. When in Congress, Levin pressed for reforms in the naturalization laws to protect “the purity of the ballot box.”³

The excerpt below is taken from the American Party’s 1855 platform and statement of principles. Compare the nativist attack on immigrants to nativist attacks on Catholics discussed in the section on religious freedom. To what extent did nativists equate aliens with Catholics? To what extent did nativists make different criticisms of Catholics and immigrants? Would their arguments have been different had the vast majority of immigrants been of different ethnicity and religion?

. . . The emigrant, ignorant of our institutions and laws, often ignorant of our language, necessarily in all cases imbued with the traditional and native sentiment which gives life and permanence to our institutions—a sentiment without which no American citizenship can be relied upon as the support of a true American policy—has been permitted, after the probation of a few years, to be brought into the circle of national fellowship, armed with all the powers for good or evil which belong to the natives of the soil. With what facility this high privilege is obtained, with what fraud its acquisition is often attended, with what incapacity and what appreciation of its purposes it is used, it is useless to recount. . . . [Emigration] has now grown into a vast and commanding power. It furnishes what may,

¹ Excerpt taken from *Principles and Objects of the American Party* (New York: American Party, 1855).

² W.S. Tisdale, ed., *The True American’s Almanac and Political Manual for 1857* (New York: De Witt & Davenport, 1857).

³ *Congressional Globe*, 29th Cong., 1st Sess. (1845), App 45. On Levin and the Know Nothings, see Michael Feldberg, *The Philadelphia Riots of 1844* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975); Ray Billington, *The Protestant Crusade, 1800–1860* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1952).

without much exaggeration of phrase, be called a distinct estate in our republic. Its ever-swelling tide is visible in every community. It is banded into combinations more or less apart from our long known and familiar masses of native citizens, by ties of foreign kindred, by unforgotten and ever-cherished nationalities, and by sympathies alien to the spirit which alone sustains our peculiar, temperate, and complicated system of freedom. Worse than this it has caught the notice and stimulated the craft of selfish political aspirants and demagogues, who have too easily found it a pliant resource for party use, and who have cajoled, flattered and seduced it into the ranks of partisan strife

Already has the country been startled by an extreme development of his influence. In violation of the spirit of our Constitution, if not of its letter,—for we cannot but suppose the literal prohibition was omitted only because the case was not deemed possible,—we find that in some of our States the alien, stranger equally to our tongues, our laws, and even our homes, has been clothed with the power of deciding, as far as his vote may decide, the election of our national representatives and of the national Executive.

Following in the train of this policy, we have seen Congress deliberately clothe the alien of the territories with the right of suffrage there, with certain anticipation that this example will be followed when the territories shall pass into the higher condition of States. In the same spirit of fatal flattery of the emigrant, Congress has proclaimed the public lands to be the heritage of the foreigner of whatever clime, and has provoked the appetite of emigration to fresh endeavors by the lure of bribes of that magnificent domain. . . .

. . . . We know that the Catholics of the United States have been brought into strong array for political action on more than one notable occasion. . . . We are not without the strongest grounds for belief that they are mainly impelled to these attempts by a desire to aggrandize their own community and give it control, as far as they are able to achieve it, in the administration of the civil affairs of the country. We perceive them to be actuated by a sentiment of hostility to the predominant Protestant spirit which our origin and laws have infused into the structure of our Government, and we cannot be use that their ultimate aim and hope is to acquire, through the influence of the foreign element in our population, a power over our institutions which shall, at least, be able to mould them into accordance with their own interests, if not wholly to subvert such as stand in the way of their designs.

The Catholic influence in the United States is the product of a recent growth, and may be measured by the progress of Catholic emigration. They have advanced side by side; and the increase of both is a striking manifestation of the establishment of a distinct and formidable foreign element which, in later years, has assumed a position of great significance in the body politic. Its organization is foreign; its agents, guides and directors, are in great part foreign; its paramount attachments are foreign; and its ambition is to effect such a change in the social constitution of the country as shall assimilate the public policy and the private habits and opinions of the nation to the teachings of a Church which is itself, as regards nine tenths of our people, essentially a foreign power. . . .

We think ourselves justified in announcing our determination to resist and counteract this influence by all lawful means within our power: and we proclaim that we should oppose with the same determination any other religious denomination we might detect in a similar endeavor to bring its members into political combination for similar ends. Our object is practically to assert and maintain in all cases, the separation between civil government and ecclesiastical authority, by whatever name or creed the latter may be known, holding the union, however slight, to be as dangerous to the one as it is corrupting to the other. . . .

. . . . We desire to see the right of suffrage consecrated in the veneration of the people as the bulwark of liberty, and protected by laws which shall for ever preserve it as the peculiar medium through which none but genuine American opinions and sympathies shall find expression in the functions of Government.