

Early American Political Parties

Why did political parties rise and fall?

Iowa political parties, like those in other American states, respond to changes that are important to voters at the time of elections. Economic interests like taxes are always important, but sometimes moral or cultural issues like prohibition or bodily autonomy can also capture attention. The American federal system that links states to the national government also plays an important role in fostering the creation and continuation of the political party system.

Whigs and Democrats in Iowa

Before the Civil War, in Iowa's territorial and early statehood days, there were two dominant political parties: the Whigs and the Democrats. The Whigs tended to favor a more active government role in the promotion of business and economic development (building roads, promoting commerce and manufacturing, stronger currency) while Democrats favored the smallest government possible with lower taxes. However, both parties experienced internal divisions as the interests of eastern states and western states differed, and especially with growing tensions over slavery.

In 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act that allowed the settlers in western territories to decide themselves whether they would be a slave or free state. This ended the provision of the Missouri Compromise that extended the line along the Missouri-Arkansas border as the western division between slave and free territories in the West. This opened the possibility of more slave territory and was strongly opposed by many in the North of both parties. Opponents of the new law in both parties broke ranks to form first the Free-Soil Party which quickly became the Republican Party. While the Democrats continued to hold support in both North and South, the Republican Party was based almost entirely in the North, including Iowa. The Civil War cemented Iowa's loyalty to the Republican Party that continued to produce election victories at the polls until the Great Depression in the 1930s. Following World War II, Democrats began gaining strength in the cities. Today, Iowa is a two-party state and has swung both ways in recent presidential elections.

Issue-Based Party Formation

While third parties have sometimes appeared on the Iowa ballot, none has earned a significant permanent place in the political landscape. In the 1870s and 1880s, tough economic conditions for Iowa farmers led to the formation of the Populist and Greenback Parties, which encouraged the regulation of railroads, corporations and other business interests thought to be practicing unfair policies toward farmers. They also wanted more money in circulation to make borrowing and repaying interest easier. The Prohibition Party focused narrowly on efforts to eliminate the sale of alcohol, but it competed for voters with the Republicans. In 1912, supporters of Teddy Roosevelt backed him in a race against the incumbent President William Howard Taft. This split the Republican vote and allowed the Democrat Woodrow Wilson to win the White House.

In early days, candidates were nominated by political conventions. Those who had influence within the party structure played the key roles in candidate selection. In the early 1900s, Iowa amended the constitution to select candidates by direct primaries where registered voters in the party held primary elections to name the candidates. A popular candidate could gain the nomination without the support of party leaders, though this rarely happened. In 1976, the Iowa caucuses moved front and center of the national stage as the first step in the presidential nominating process. Every four years, those testing the waters for a shot at the presidency come to Iowa, providing opportunities for local voters to meet personally with top national leaders. Local politicians may step in to support one candidate or another or may keep on the sidelines so they do not offend Iowa voters or other persuasions. Regardless, national politics becomes Iowa politics every four years.

Parties are loose coalitions of citizens who rally around candidates who best promote their interests. Today, more Iowans register as "no-party" or independent than either Republican or Democrat. Among active party voters as of July 2019, registered Democrats hold a slight lead over Republicans. Republicans hold margins in the rural areas, while Democrats have urban majorities.

Supporting Questions

What economic factors impacted the rise and fall of political parties during the antebellum period?

- [“Chapter X: Parties in the United States” from Democracy in America by Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835 \(Document\)](#)
- [“The Whale that Swallowed Jonah,” 1844 \(Political Cartoon\)](#)
- [“Whig Harmony,” 1848 \(Political Cartoon\)](#)
- [Know-Nothing National Platform, July 13, 1855 \(Document\)](#)

How did the conflict over slavery influence the rise and fall of political parties during the antebellum period?

- [Grand Democratic Free Soil Banner, 1848 \(Image\)](#)
- [“Marriage of the Free Soil and Liberty Parties,” 1848 \(Political Cartoon\)](#)
- [Governor James Grimes’ Letter to the Citizens of Iowa, February 12, 1856 \(Document\)](#)
- [Grand National Union Banner, 1860 \(Image\)](#)

How did national figures shape political parties?

- [Federalist Paper No. 10, November 22, 1787 \(Document\)](#)
- [President George Washington’s Farewell Address, September 19, 1796 \(Document\)](#)
- [Letter from Former President Andrew Jackson to Amos Kendall, June 2, 1840 \(Document\)](#)
- [“Old Des Moines Awake!” Newspaper Article, July 23, 1840 \(Document\)](#)
- [“True Republican Ticket” Ballot, 1860 \(Document\)](#)

[*Printable Image and Document Guide](#)

Additional Resources

***Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generations* by Joseph Ellis**

This is a Pulitzer Prize-winning book written by Joseph Ellis, a professor of history at Mount Holyoke College, that explores selected interactions among individuals who profoundly influenced the early development of the United States.

“The History and Principles of the Whigs in the Territory of Iowa” from *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*

This entry in *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics* focuses on the origin of the Whig Party in the territory of Iowa. The essay highlights the history of the party and its prominent politicians in the state.

“The Know Nothings in Iowa: Opportunity and Frustration in Antebellum Politics” from *The Annals of Iowa*

This scholarly essay from *The Annals of Iowa* looks at the story of the Know-Nothing Party in Iowa, which was an outburst of nativistic sentiment that has - from time to time - punctuated American history.

“Chapter X: Parties in the United States” from *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835

STATE HISTORICAL
SOCIETY OF IOWA

TEACHING WITH PRIMARY SOURCES

“Chapter X: Parties in the United States” from *Democracy in America* by Alexis de Tocqueville, 1835

Chapter X: Parties in the United States

Chapter Summary

Great distinction to be made between parties—Parties which are to each other as rival nations—Parties properly so called—Difference between great and small parties—Epochs which produce them—Their characteristics—America has had great parties—They are extinct—Federalists—Republicans—Defeat of the Federalists—Difficulty of creating parties in the United States—What is done with this intention—Associative or democratic character to be met with in all parties—Struggle of General Jackson against the Bank.

Parties in the United States

A great distinction must be made between parties. Some countries are so large that the different populations which inhabit them have contradictory interests, although they are the subjects of the same Government, and they may thence be in a perpetual state of opposition. In this case the different factions of the people may more properly be considered as distinct nations than as mere parties; and if a civil war breaks out, the struggle is carried on by rival peoples rather than by factions in the State.

But when the citizens entertain different opinions upon subjects which affect the whole country alike, such, for instance, as the principles upon which the government is to be conducted, then distinctions arise which may correctly be styled parties. Parties are a necessary evil in free governments; but they have not at all times the same character and the same propensities.

At certain periods a nation may be oppressed by such insupportable evils as to conceive the design of effecting a total change in its political constitution; at other times the mischief lies still deeper, and the existence of society itself is endangered. Such are the times of great revolutions and of great parties. But between these epochs of misery and of confusion there are periods during which human society seems to rest, and mankind to make a pause. This pause is indeed only apparent; for time does not stop its course for nations any more than for men; they are all advancing towards a goal with which they are unacquainted, and we only imagine them to be stationary when their progress escapes our observation, as men who are going at a foot-pace seem to be standing still to those who run.

IOWA DEPARTMENT OF CULTURAL AFFAIRS • 600 E. LOCUST ST. • DES MOINES, IA 50319 • IOWACULTURE.GOV

Courtesy of Project Gutenberg, de Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America*, “Chapter X: Parties In The United States,” 1835

Description

In the early 1830s, French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville traveled through the newly-formed United States to study its fledgling democracy. The result was his book, *Democracy in America*, which focuses on his view of how the United States was developing its political institutions from an outside observer.

[Full Transcript of “Chapter X: Parties in the United States” from *Democracy in America*](#)

[Transcribed Excerpts from “Chapter X: Parties in the United States from *Democracy in America*](#)

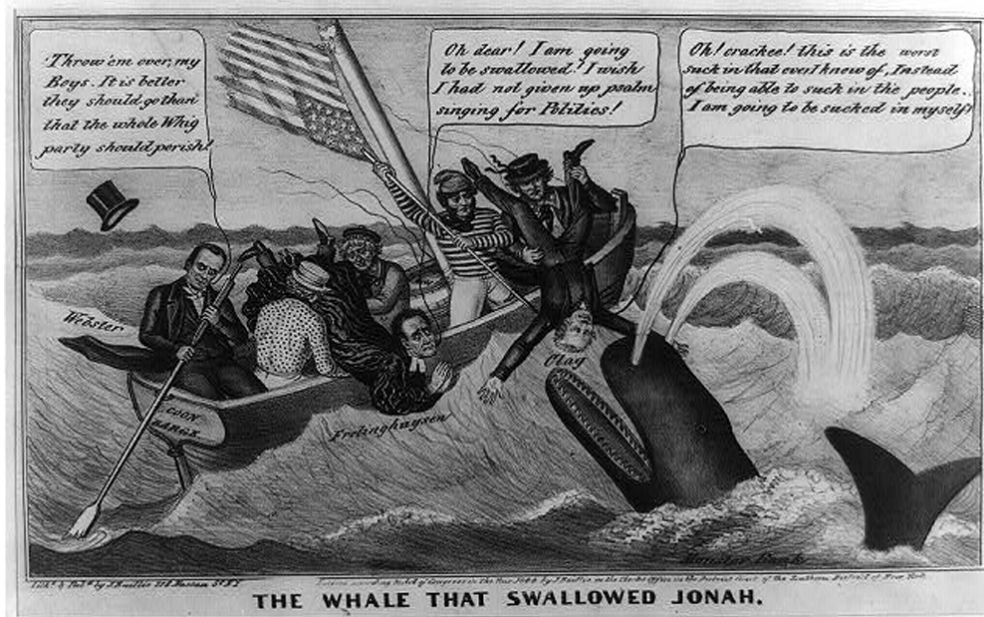
Source-Dependent Questions

- What reasons does Alexis de Tocqueville give for calling parties a “necessary evil?” Compare de Tocqueville’s opinion of parties with what [George Washington says in his farewell address](#). Whose opinion do you support? Why?
- According to de Tocqueville, what is at the root of the differences between political parties? What is remarkable to him about the development of parties in the United States compared to other parts of the world?
- Why does de Tocqueville say the Federalists were able to gain power even though they were in the minority? What factors helped Jefferson and the Democratic-Republicans gain control? How did that affect the Federalists as a party?
- Why does de Tocqueville say Americans want political parties? What makes it hard for them to develop?
- How do economic situations affect what party people support?

Citation Information

de Tocqueville, Alexis, *Democracy in America*, “Chapter X: Parties In The United States,” 1835. Courtesy of Project Gutenberg

“The Whale that Swallowed Jonah,” 1844



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Baillie, James S. and Edward Williams Clay, “The Whale that Swallowed Jonah,” 1844

Description

This political cartoon was published in 1844 and showed conflict within the Whig Party over the issue of a National Bank. Daniel Webster and friends are shown throwing the Whig presidential candidate, Henry Clay, overboard. Webster says “It is better to lose the whole party rather than keep Clay who favored a National Bank.” The whale represents the National Bank.

[Transcript of “The Whale that Swallowed Jonah” Political Cartoon](#)

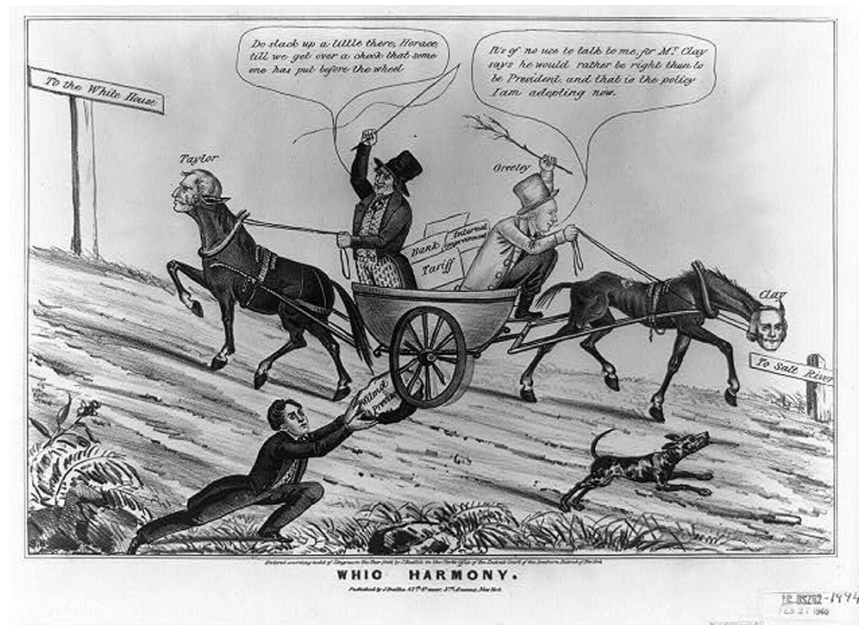
Source-Dependent Questions

- Describe this image using at least five adjectives. What do you think the artist is trying to get you to see?
- Compare this cartoon with the [“Whig Harmony” political cartoon](#). The Whig Party disintegrated by the 1850s. What common economic issues pointed out by political cartoonists helped lead to the demise of the party?
- The conflict over the National Bank was, at its heart, a fight about how to maintain a stable economy for the country. The fight wasn’t just between parties, but also within parties. What research question(s) could you use to investigate the conflict and its consequences for the Whigs?

Citation Information

Baillie, James S. and Edward Williams Clay, “The Whale that Swallowed Jonah,” 1844. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“Whig Harmony,” 1848



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Baillie, James S. and H. Bucholzer, “Whig Harmony,” 1848

Description

This political cartoon was published in 1848 and showed the deep divisions among the leaders of the Whig Party. Horace Greeley, a prominent newspaper editor and abolitionist, tries to steer the Whigs towards Salt River, or political doom. An Uncle Sam figure tries to steer the party and the hero of the Mexican War, General Zachary Taylor, toward the White House. The cart contains the most contentious economic issues that were debated during the 1840s.

[Transcript of “Whig Harmony” Political Cartoon](#)

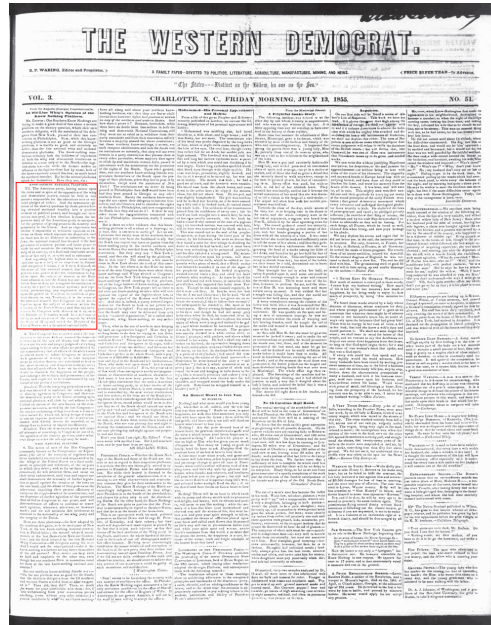
Source-Dependent Questions

- Describe this image using at least five adjectives. What do you think the artist is trying to get you to see?
- Salt River was a popular phrase in the 1840s that meant “political doom.” With that knowledge, how would you interpret the artist’s opinion of the future of the Whig Party if it follows Horace Greeley? If it follows Henry Clay?
- There are three economic issues in the Whig cart: the tariff, the Bank of the United States and internal improvements. Compare these issues with [Alexis de Tocqueville’s view](#) on early American democracy. Why might these issues still exist more than 10 years after de Tocqueville’s book was published?

Citation Information

Baillie, James S. and H. Bucholzer, “Whig Harmony,” 1848. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Know-Nothing National Platform, July 13, 1855



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "An Old-Line Whig's Opinion of the Know Nothing Platform," *The Western Democrat*, pp. 1, 13 July 1855

Description

This 1855 article is the national platform of the new Know-Nothing Party, which arose in reaction to the sectional crisis surrounding the issue of slavery. The Know-Nothings were also known as the American Party and surrounded themselves with nativist ideas. They were anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant.

[Transcript of the "Know-Nothing National Platform"](#)

[Printable Excerpt of the "Know-Nothing National Platform"](#)

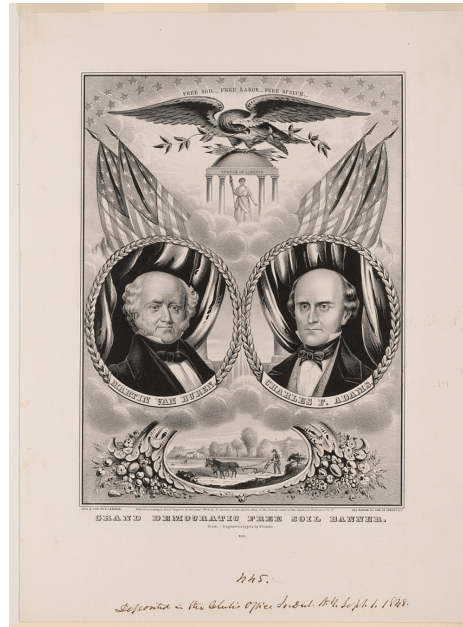
Source-Dependent Questions

- Based on this article, how do you think the established political parties reacted to the formation of the American Party, also known as the Know-Nothings? Cite evidence from the text.
- The 1850s was a turbulent time in American history with many conflicts arising around the issue of slavery. What was the Know-Nothing solution to the conflict surrounding slavery? Critique their solution using two or three sentences.
- The Know-Nothings were an anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant party. How would you reconcile those prejudices with their stance on slavery?

Citation Information

"An Old-Line Whig's Opinion of the Know Nothing Platform," *The Western Democrat*, pp. 1, 13 July 1855. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Grand Democratic Free Soil Banner, 1848



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Grand Democratic Free Soil Banner," 1848

Description

This banner promoted the Free Soil Party and its candidates in the 1848 presidential election. Martin Van Buren (left), who had previously been elected president as a Democrat in 1836, was the candidate for the Free Soil Party. The other man on the banner was Charles F. Adams, son of John Quincy Adams. The Free Soil Party received zero electoral votes in the election of 1848, which was won by Whig candidate General Zachary Taylor. The Free Soil Party made its main purpose to oppose the expansion of slavery into the western territories, arguing that free men on free soil constituted a morally and economically superior system to slavery.

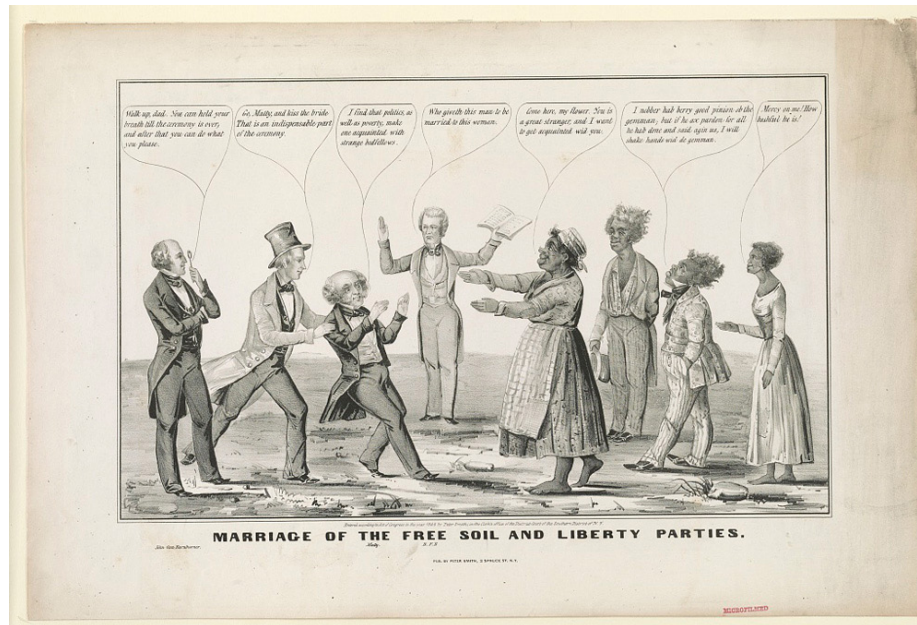
Source-Dependent Questions

- As you analyze this image, note the symbols the artist used to surround the main figures of Martin Van Buren and Charles F. Adams. In your opinion, what was the artist's purpose in using those symbols? Why would such symbolism make people want to vote for these candidates?
- The Free Soil candidates, Martin Van Buren and Charles F. Adams, were a former president and the son of a former president. What advantage would a party have by recruiting candidates with name recognition? Think about recent elections. Have modern political parties used this strategy? The Free Soil Party received zero electoral votes using candidates with familiar names. How does that compare with the modern elections you looked at?
- Based on this image, what can you infer about the Free Soil Party's stand on the issue of slavery?
- Compare this banner with the [Grand National Union Party banner](#). What similarities do you see in how each party promoted its cause(s) and its candidates? What differences?

Citation Information

"Grand Democratic Free Soil Banner," 1848. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“Marriage of the Free Soil and Liberty Parties,” 1848



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Marriage of the Free Soil and Liberty Parties,” 1848

Description

This political cartoon shows the alliance created by the Free Soil and Liberty Parties for the election of 1848. Martin Van Buren, the champion of the Free Soil Party, is shown marrying an African-American woman. The ceremony is presided over by Benjamin Butler, an ally of Van Buren’s. Van Buren is shown being pushed toward the ceremony by Horace Greeley, an influential newspaper editor and abolitionist.

[Transcript of “Marriage of the Free Soul and Liberty Parties”](#)

Source-Dependent Questions

- What do the names of the two political parties depicted in this cartoon imply about the reasons for their formation as individual parties?
- Based on your knowledge of political parties in the United States, what issue led to the merging of these political parties?
- As you observe this cartoon, what stands out to you the most? What did the cartoonist do to lead your eye to that object?

Citation Information

“Marriage of the Free Soil and Liberty Parties,” 1848. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Governor James Grimes' Letter to the Citizens of Iowa, February 12, 1856



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Grimes, James, "To The Citizens of Iowa," *The Daily Gate City*, pp. 2, 12 February 1856

Description

Iowa Governor James Grimes wrote this brief letter to the "Citizens of Iowa" anonymously. He wrote to urge people to attend a meeting regarding the founding of the Republican Party in Iowa. At the time he wrote this, Grimes was governor and part of the Whig Party. The Whig Party was declining in popularity and power. Grimes became a leader in the Republican Party in Iowa and was elected to the United States Senate in 1859 as a member of that party.

[Transcript of Governor James Grimes' Letter to the Citizens of Iowa](#)

[Printable Excerpt of Governor James Grimes' Letter to the Citizens of Iowa](#)

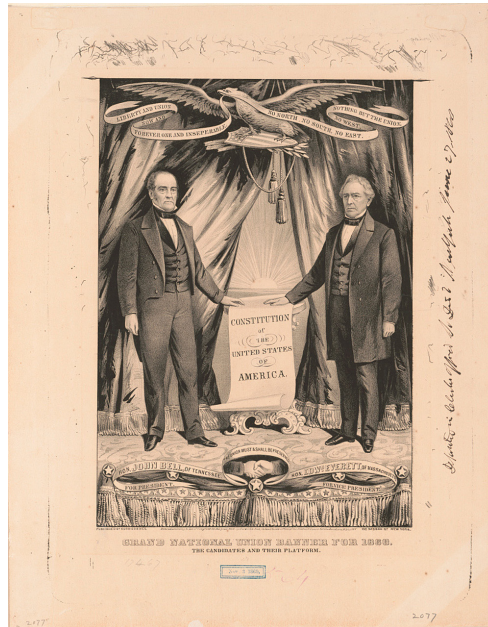
Source-Dependent Questions

- The author of this letter was the governor of Iowa and part of the Whig Party when he wrote it. What can you infer from this letter about the state of the Whig Party in Iowa?
- When this letter was written, Franklin Pierce, who was a member of the Democratic Party, was president. What do you think Grimes is implying when he says "that the party styling itself the 'Democratic Party,'" are striving to make slavery itself a great national institution?"
- In the 1850s, there were many conflicts around the country centered around the issue of slavery. Based on this letter, where do you think the Republican Party stands on the issue of slavery? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Citation Information

Grimes, James, "To The Citizens of Iowa," *The Daily Gate City*, pp. 2, 12 February 1856. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Grand National Union Banner, 1860



Courtesy of Library of Congress, "Grand national union banner for 1860. The candidates and their platform," Currier & Ives, 1860

Description

This banner was produced for the Constitutional Union Party to promote their candidates in the presidential election of 1860. The Constitutional Union Party kept the union of the states at the forefront of their party platform to the exclusion of all other issues. The Constitutional Union Party received 39 electoral votes in the election of 1860.

Source-Dependent Questions

- As you analyze this image, note the symbols the artist used to surround the main figures of John Bell and Edward Everett. In your opinion, what was the artist's purpose in using those symbols? Why would such symbolism make people want to vote for these candidates?
- The Constitutional Unionist Party did not take a stand on the issue of slavery. How does this image support or contradict that stance?
- Based on this image and your knowledge of politics, make a prediction about the success of the Constitutional Union Party in two or three sentences. Use your textbook or a reliable Internet source and research the party. How accurate was your prediction?
- Compare this banner to [Grand Democratic Free Soil Banner](#). What's similar and what's different? Why would some of the same the symbolism be used for different political parties?

Citation Information

"Grand national union banner for 1860. The candidates and their platform," Currier & Ives, 1860. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Federalist Paper No. 10, November 22, 1787



Courtesy of National Archives, Madison, James, Federalist No. 10: "The Same Subject Continued: The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection," *New York Daily Advertiser*, 22 November 1787

Description

James Madison, along with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton, anonymously wrote a series of essays in New York to convince that state to ratify the federal U.S. Constitution written in Philadelphia in 1787. In Federalist Paper No. 10, Madison writes about how the proposed constitution will help deflect the negative effects of parties.

[Transcript of Federalist Paper No. 10](#)

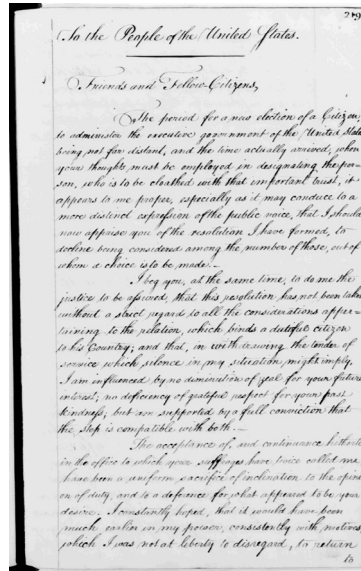
Source-Dependent Questions

- James Madison wrote this essay to convince the people of New York to ratify the proposed federal U.S. Constitution. According to him, why do factions, or parties, form? Do you agree?
- In his [farewell address](#), George Washington warned Americans against forming parties. In what ways does Washington agree or disagree with Madison in his farewell address? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.
- How will the proposed constitution mitigate or lessen the negative effects of factions, according to Madison?

Citation Information

Madison, James, Federalist No. 10: "The Same Subject Continued: The Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection," *New York Daily Advertiser*, 22 November 1787. Courtesy of National Archives

President George Washington's Farewell Address, September 19, 1796



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Washington, George, "George Washington Papers, Series 2, Letterbooks 1754-1799: Letterbook 24, April 3, 1793 - March 3, 1797," 19 September 1796

Description

When he decided not to run for a third term as president, George Washington wrote a farewell to the nation. In his "Farewell Address," Washington offered his advice to the citizens of the United States. His key points were to warn Americans against the danger of political parties, to remain neutral in foreign conflicts and to celebrate their achievements.

[Full Transcript of President George Washington's Farewell Address](#)

[Transcribed Excerpts of President George Washington's Farewell Address](#)

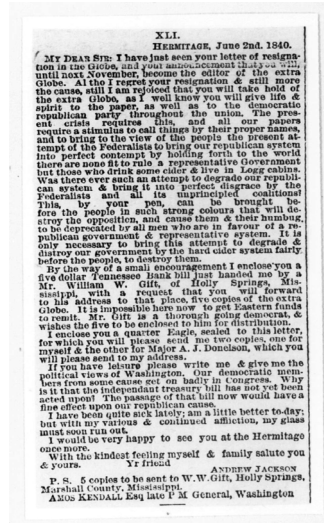
Source-Dependent Questions

- What is George Washington's opinion of political parties? Give two to three examples of what Washington thinks will happen if Americans participate in political parties.
- What does Washington think should draw Americans together?
- Think about politics today as you consider Washington's advice about political parties. Do you agree or disagree with his predictions?

Citation Information

Washington, George, "George Washington Papers, Series 2, Letterbooks 1754-1799: Letterbook 24, April 3, 1793 - March 3, 1797," 19 September 1796. Courtesy of Library of Congress

Letter from Former President Andrew Jackson to Amos Kendall, June 2, 1840



Courtesy of Library of Congress, Jackson, Andrew, "Andrew Jackson to Amos Kendall," 2 June 1840

Description

Andrew Jackson wrote this letter to Amos Kendall, journalist, politician and lawyer, during the contentious presidential election year of 1840. From his home in Tennessee, the former president continued to direct the path of the new Democratic party.

[Transcript of Former President Andrew Jackson's Letter to Amos Kendall](#)

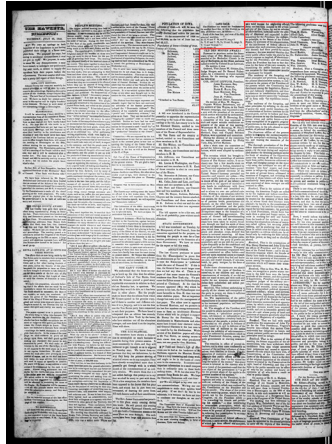
Source-Dependent Questions

- Several sources say that the Federalist Party no longer existed by 1840. If that is so, why does Andrew Jackson refer to "Federalists" in this letter? Does he mean the Federalist Party or something else?
- Why do you think Jackson names neither the candidate nor the candidate's party?
- Citing evidence from the text, how does Jackson compare the Democratic Party with the opposing party?
- In the presidential campaign of 1840, the Whig candidate for president used a log cabin and cider as his symbols of his campaign. Use a reliable source to discover more about the Whig candidate as well as the use and meaning of the symbols.

Citation Information

Jackson, Andrew, "Andrew Jackson to Amos Kendall," 2 June 1840. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“Old Des Moines Awake!” Newspaper Article, July 23, 1840



Courtesy of Library of Congress, “Old Des Moines Awake!” *The Hawk-Eye and Iowa Patriot*, pp. 2, 23 July 1840

Description

This newspaper article is the written record of a meeting of the Whig Party in Des Moines County in the Iowa Territory in 1840. The minutes of the meeting address the dissatisfaction with the Democratic administration. Iowa was not yet a state. This article gives a glimpse into the development of political parties as Iowans looked toward statehood.

[Transcript of “Old Des Moines Awake!” Newspaper Article](#)

[Printable Excerpt of “Old Des Moines Awake!” Newspaper Article](#)

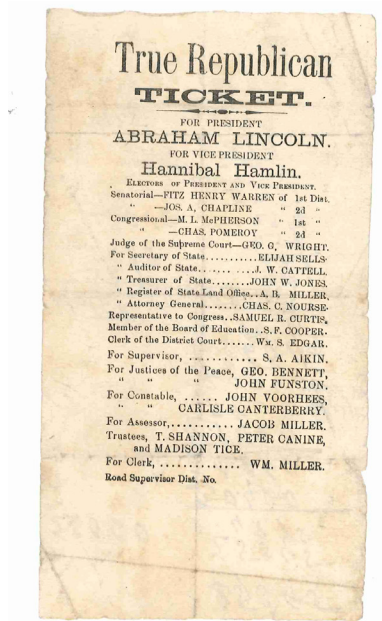
Source-Dependent Questions

- According to the Whigs, what led to the formation of parties in Iowa?
- Based on the text, how do the Whigs feel parties will affect Iowa. How do you know?
- How do the Whigs describe the “party in power,” i.e. the Democrats led by President Martin Van Buren?
- What do the Whigs predict will happen if William Henry Harrison wins the presidency?
- One of the speakers at this 1840 meeting was James Grimes, who, in 1856, wrote a [letter to Iowans](#) inviting them to start the Republican Party. What factors do you think would influence someone to change their loyalty from one political party to another?

Citation Information

“Old Des Moines Awake!” *The Hawk-Eye and Iowa Patriot*, pp. 2, 23 July 1840. Courtesy of Library of Congress

“True Republican Ticket” Ballot, 1860



Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, 1860

Description

Before the secret ballot was adopted, voting was done publicly. Political parties actually gave ballots like this one to members. When it was time for someone to cast their vote, they took the straight ticket ballot and put it in the voting box.

[Transcript of “True Republican Ticket” Ballot](#)

Source-Dependent Questions

- In the election of 1860, ballots like this were created and given out by political parties. Voters would place the entire ticket in the ballot box. Today, voters have the option to vote for each office individually. Which method do you think is the most fair? Why?
- The title of this ticket is “The True Republican Ticket.” What does that name imply?
- How might local events have an affect on national races given the straight ticket voting process?