"Know-Nothingism, Abolitionism, and Fanaticism:" An Analysis of the Collapse of the Second Party System in Maine

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“Know-Nothingsm, Abolitionism, and Fanaticism:” An Analysis
Of the Collapse of the Second Party System in Maine

An Honors Paper for the Department of History
By Justis Dixon

Bowdoin College, 2023
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Introduction

“The election is over, and the People have triumphed. Never in the history of the State has there been such a perfect tornado among political parties as we have just witnessed - the old parties are blown sky-high and are nowhere.”¹ This exuberant account of recent electoral proceedings could be found in the pages of the *Piscataquis Observer* in the aftermath of the transformational 1854 elections in Maine. For the first time in decades, the combined Democrat and Whig stranglehold on power in the state had been broken. Growing discontent with the positions of the two establishment parties on both local and national level issues led to an environment in which a third party challenger could win the governorship. That challenger, Anson Morrill, centered much of his campaign on the politically powerful concepts of temperance and nativism. Additionally, new debates over the extension of slavery began to factor prominently in campaigns for both state and federal level positions. How could outside forces have harnessed these burgeoning issues in a way that toppled the existing party infrastructure in an era of tremendous partisan polarization? What about Maine led it to experience these changes as it did? The year 1854 marked a key point in the shift away from past partisan politics, and the magnitude of the transformation would only increase in the following years.

In order to assess the significance of this change in Maine, and how that applies to broader considerations, we must first consider the background of the Second Party System. This system dominated American politics between the 1828 election of Democrat Andrew Jackson and the collapse of the Whig Party in the early 1850s. The Second Party system was one defined by strong partisanship but a tendency to avoid discussing the most pressing issues of the day, the

¹ *Piscataquis Observer* (Dover, ME), September 2, 1854.
most significant of these obviously being the presence and expansion of the slavery in the United States. Scholars have studied the effect to which public pressure over the issue of slavery helped bring about the demise of the second party system. While the extent of that pressure certainly varied between different constituencies and groups, a consensus forms among historians that opposition among the people to the expansion of slavery was instrumental in founding the Republican Party. While the Republican Party was certainly not a committed anti-slavery party until well into the Civil War, discontent about the institution of slavery and the powers it wielded undoubtedly helped create an atmosphere where this brand of political party could grow and thrive.

This project focuses on the last decade of the Second Party system in the state of Maine. From the halls of government in Augusta to the busy streets of Portland to the small towns scattered around Piscataquis County, Mainers in the 1840s and 1850s were engaging with their political system more than ever before. Both parties relied on popular support and sought to engage citizens in a variety of ways. Party conventions open to all happened frequently around the state, and many Mainers sought to make their voices heard in advocacy groups such as abolitionist societies or temperance unions. The explosion of newspapers kept citizens engaged with their political surroundings and other new technologies allowed for the unprecedented spread of information around the state and around the country.

Maine represents an ideal case study for this project on the collapse of the Second Party system. Geographic, political, and religious diversity within the state allow for the consultation of a variety of perspectives. Maine was at the forefront of many progressive policies in the mid-nineteenth century, most notably efforts to restrict the sale, purchase, or consumption of alcohol, commonly known as the temperance movement. Additionally, as Maine is situated far away
from the slaveholding south and the battlegrounds of popular sovereignty in the West, a clear distinction can be made between local issues and national issues in seeking to determine which most directly caused the collapse of the Second Party System. Finally, Maine’s practice of holding state and local elections every year allows for frequent assessments of how new and contested issues drove changing political conditions.

There are two principal explanations given by historians for the collapse of the Second Party System, with each emphasizing different issues as the catalyst for change. One prominent view is that the issue of slavery stood clearly above the rest as the principal cause of the failure of the Second Party System. In this view pressure was placed on the political system primarily by Northern antislavery activists who demanded that the issue of slavery’s expansion be brought to the forefront of American politics. However, this was something that neither major party believed was worth the risk. In his book “There is a North”: Fugitive Slaves, Political Crisis, and Cultural Transformation in the Coming of the Civil War, John L. Brooke writes that “the Whigs played a complicated game with antislavery voters” by supporting their messaging to an extent but nevertheless continuing to work with their southern colleagues on economic matters. The Whigs’ reluctance to take a strong position on key issues led to divisions within the party, which led to “the eruption of nativist organization and violence in Philadelphia, and in New York, where Whigs divided between nativism and William Seward’s emerging political antislavery.” For Brooke, it was the issue of slavery that initially drove Whig voters to consider an alternative, and their continued lack of clarity on the issue prevented new voting blocs from joining the party and led directly to the party’s ultimate downfall. Some more recent historians

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2 John L. Brooke, “There is a North”: Fugitive Slaves, Political Crisis, and Cultural Transformation in the Coming of the Civil War, Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2019, 54.
3 Brooke, “There is a North”: Fugitive Slaves, Political Crisis, and Cultural Transformation in the Coming of the Civil War, 241.
echo this viewpoint, including Stephen Maizlish, who in his book *The Triumph of Sectionalism* declares that “the slavery issue shattered the Second Party System and shaped the realignment that brought Republicans to power.”

On the national level, anti-slavery movements gained significant popular support during the 1840s and 1850s, which helped break apart the existing party system and replace it with one more rooted in national issues. In “The People’s Revolution of 1856: Antislavery Populism, National Politics, and the Emergence of the Republican Party,” Matthew Karp characterizes the Republican Party of 1856 as a “populist” movement. For Karp, this populism is inherently anti-slavery, with Republicans “emphatic about the need for fierce popular resistance to the slaveholders’ regime.” Karp also documents the idea that Republicans campaigned directly against the ‘Slave Power’ conspiracy as a way to draw support from northerners skeptical of southern planters and their influence on national politics. Karp adds that while “Republicans flirted with revolutionary populism, in 1856 both Democrats and the nativist American Party stressed the virtue of established institutions, the certainty of legal precedent, and the wisdom of veteran political leadership.” Douglas R. Egerton adds to this understanding of the overall political scene in 1856 in his article “The Slaves’ Election: Fremont, Freedom, and the Slave Conspiracies of 1856,” where he concurs with Karp about the significance of anti-slavery as a leading motive in the formation of the Republican Party. The article argues that Democrats, especially in border states such as Maryland, used fear as a tactic by messaging that free and enslaved African Americans could rise up and kill whites at any moment. Joshua Lynn, author of

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Preserving the White Man’s Republic: Jacksonian Democracy, Race, and the Transformation of American Conservatism, provides more evidence for this assertion. Lynn argues that across the country, “Democrats turned to the politics of slavery, race, and sexuality in the realignment elections of 1854 and 1855 to argue that only their party would preserve the purity of the white man’s republic.” It is likely that these arguments resonated more with Democratic-leaning voters in areas with higher African American populations, both free and enslaved, though it would be interesting to further examine the prevalence and success of similar tactics potentially used in places like rural, northern states such as Maine.

Another theory explaining the dissolution of the Second Party System places more emphasis on issues such as nativism and temperance. This view originated with a group called the ‘new political historians,’ who sought to replace a singular focus on slavery with “ethnocultural conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, or between pietistic and ritualistic religious groups, as the major determinants of voting behavior.” In speaking of this group in his article “The Causes of the American Civil War: Recent Interpretations and New Directions,” Eric Foner characterizes their view as highlighting that “a split existed between northern political elites and the mass of voters,” and claiming that voters “were ‘basically unmoved’ by the issues of slavery and sectional conflict and were more concerned with so-called ‘cultural’ questions like immigration and temperance.” Michael F. Holt describes the ‘new political historians’ as those “who focused on the identity, values, and behavior of voters rather than on political elites.”

This change motivated them to focus less on seminal issues like the existence or expansion of

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10 Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 291.
slavery and more on ethnic and religious tensions between different voting blocs in the American political environment.

In considering the decline of the Whig Party through this lens, Holt argues in his book *Political Parties and American Political Development: from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln* that the Whig Party lost support because it failed to take clear positions on these issues important to the American people. Holt turns to a quote offered by a newspaper editor in 1870, who wrote that “the Whig party died of too much respectability and not enough people.”¹¹ Holt provides as evidence the reality that nineteenth century political parties “were not primarily legislative or parliamentary organizations. Rather, they were mass parties whose continued existence was determined by the allegiance of voters to them.”¹² In Holt’s analysis, the collapse of the Whig party was preceded by the mass exodus of voters from the party due to their often unclear and unpopular political stances. In addition, potential new voters who began to grow disillusioned with the Democratic party over issues like the Kansas-Nebraska Act, nativism, or temperance, chose not to join the existing Whig party but rather the “populistic new parties, the Republicans and the Know Nothings, through which they could punish the Democrats and the despised political hacks who commanded both parties.”¹³ In the end, the Whigs’ attempt to be a big-tent party ended up driving everyone away.

While debates over the extension of slavery certainly dominated national headlines, on the local level it was ethnocultural issues that most often sorted voters into political camps. Historian William Gienapp makes this case book *The Origins of the Republican Party*, which emphasizes the role of factionalism within the major parties as reasons for their weakening

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¹¹ Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 239.
¹² Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 240.
¹³ Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 247.
influence and solidarity. Much of this came about in response to prominent political issues of the time, especially temperance and immigration. Supporters of laws to prohibit the production and consumption of alcohol could be found in both major parties. This therefore made it difficult for party leaders to make firm stances on these issues, with Gienapp noting that “in deciding whether to endorse prohibition, Whig politicians had to weigh losses from their ranks against potential gains from the Democrats.”

Gienapp cites as evidence the case of the Maine Law, a temperance measure passed in the state in 1851. The votes of both Democrats and Whigs were divided on the bill’s passage, and Gienapp claims that this event “began a reorientation in Maine politics” in which existing party alliances began to dissolve and new coalitions formed. In Connecticut, many disillusioned Whigs, upset about their state party’s adoption of temperance and other issues, decided against going to the polls. Whigs around the country were consistently shown up by third parties, such as the Free Soilers, who “hoping to broaden their base of support and weaken the Whigs, emphasized the issue of temperance over slavery.”

Gienapp also notes that conflicts over immigration and nativism similarly weakened the dominant parties of the Second Party System. While the Whigs were typically seen as the nativist, anti-Catholic party, some thought they did not go far enough, with “zealots who desired a stridently anti-Catholic ticket…disgusted with the Whigs’ half-hearted response” to the Catholic threat in Cincinnati, Ohio. These factions then ran their own candidates in local elections, which upset the existing balance of power between the parties.

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In my study, I seek to blend these two ideas into one theory specifically tailored to Maine. I argue that the collapse of the Second Party System occurred over two distinct yet interrelated periods. Stanley Harrold has articulated this view that political realignment occurred over multiple stages, with each triggered by a different phenomenon. The first stage, which occurred prior to 1854, witnessed the destruction of the Whig Party over “ethnocultural issues, including temperance, antiforeignism, and anticatholicism.” The second stage was thus triggered by the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854 and focused on opposition to the expansion of slavery and saw the rise of the Republican Party. This argument reaffirms the consensus that slavery played a large part in the partisan realignment, but concludes that it alone could not have upended the Whig Party and the entire political environment. The evidence from Maine lends credence to this hypothesis, with a clear demarcation occurring around the time news begins arriving about the atrocities in Kansas. However, there were certainly some bumps along the road in which it seemed for a moment that the Whigs could outlive the Democrats or that the Republicans might meet the same fate as previous third parties focused on slavery. This paper goes in depth into primary and secondary sources in hopes of telling the full story about Maine’s experience in the final years of the Second Party System.

This paper is divided into two primary sections. Chapter 1 focuses on local issues such as temperance and nativism and seeks to place them in an ethnocultural context. This section analyzes the development of both movements from their roots to how they became directly intertwined with partisan politics. It goes on to consider how each party interacted with the respective issues, and how their perspectives changed over time. Chapter 2 discusses the role of national issues, primarily slavery and its expansion, in the later years of the Second Party

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System. This chapter outlines some key concepts in the slave power concept and endeavors to answer how the national could become local. In other words, it seeks to determine why Mainers began to care about slavery and how that impacted the changing political environment. Both chapters are situated within the same time frame starting in the late 1840s and continuing up until the pivotal elections of 1856. The goal is for the chapters to interact with each other in order to form a more complete picture of what contributed to the collapse of the Second Party System in Maine.

Additionally, this project makes extensive use of nineteenth century newspaper sources. Increased political interest and activism in Maine stemmed in part from a substantial increase in political coverage in the print media in the 1840s and 1850s. The prevalence of newspapers boomed around the country in the mid-nineteenth century, with the number of daily newspapers increasing from around 900 newspapers in the 1830s to 2,526 by 1850. This was no different in Maine, as new publications emerged throughout the state in this time period. By 1856, there were at least sixty six regularly printed newspapers in the state. With this newfound ability to print and disperse more news, everyday Mainers had access to considerably more information in the 1850s than they had in the decades prior. One such area of increased knowledge was national politics, which newspapers turned to with hopes of filling pages and attracting readers. However, the stories that various newspaper publishers chose to cover and the angle from which they based their reporting differed significantly. Newspapers in the nineteenth century were explicitly political entities, meaning that any analysis of their publications must acknowledge this reality. The “party press” could be discreetly political but often partisanship was well known given that

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“before the Civil War, parties actually subsidized the operations of many newspapers” and that “editors or their reporters worked part time for state legislators or members of Congress.”

Each story printed in an openly partisan newspaper focusing on national news, and especially ones about the highly contentious topic of slavery, must be analyzed within the political bias of the original source. This does not mean that every report is inherently false or misleading, in fact quite the opposite. Nineteenth century newspaper sources are compelling pieces of historical evidence in this study precisely because they offer a unique opportunity to judge the partisan biases, perspectives, and talking points of both political elites and common citizens. Understanding the partisan affiliation of the newspaper and factoring that into consideration can help mitigate any lagging concerns about these fascinating primary sources.

Chapter 1: Ethnocultural Battlegrounds

As the leaves turned brown in Maine in the autumn of 1853, the Whig Party seemed to have gained a breath of fresh air. Just one year after suffering humiliating defeats around the country, the Whig party returned with a vengeance, holding the governorship for the first time in nearly fifteen years and winning back a majority in the state legislature. The Maine Whig Party capitalized on a number of favorable issues, most notably rising nativist and pro-temperance attitudes in the state. In analyzing the Whigs through this narrow time lens, the party seemed set to challenge the Democrats as the preeminent institutional force in Maine politics. However, this would instead be the last hurrah for Whigs in Maine politics. Within a few years, the party infrastructure no longer existed and past members had moved on without regret to other political entities. How could such a complete transformation have occurred in such a short period of time? What specific issues or constituencies contributed to this dramatic collapse? In this chapter, I will focus on the role of so-called ethnocultural factors in forecasting the downfall of the Whigs and the upheaval of the Second Party System in Maine. Ethnocultural issues often presented themselves at the local level, so this chapter also seeks to examine the reasons why Maine voters cared about these issues and how they considered them within the context of larger elections.

An explosion of research into pre-Civil War politics in the 1960s and 1970s led to new theories about the collapse of the Whig Party and the Second Party System. One of these schools of thought championed by many notable historians “de-emphasized ‘national’ issues like slavery and the tariff, and substituted ethnocultural conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, or between pietist in and ritualistic religious groups, as the major determinants of voting
behavior.”23 This group of ‘new political historians’ differed from prior scholarship by focusing much more on the local level. They specified their claims by asserting that voters “were ‘basically unmoved’ by the issues of slavery and sectional conflict and were more concerned with so-called ‘cultural’ questions like immigration and temperance.”24 As a state in which fierce debates rang out over the values of nativism and temperance, Maine represents an ideal case study with which to test this hypothesis. The presence of ethnic and religious minorities allowed for direct actions and confrontations that impacted the political dialogue and the political structure. A strong temperance movement, which led the drive for the first successful anti-liquor law in the nation, also contributed greatly to the contentious political environment in the state. Political debates over nativism and temperance hinged on discussions of religion, race, nationality, economics, urban and rural life, and much more. Despite its small population, Maine was home to a diverse set of communities with significant social, cultural, and political differences, necessitating a focus on state and local politics in this study. Overall, this chapter seeks to apply elements of the framework developed by the ‘new political historians’ to a uniquely Maine context. How well do their arguments about the importance of ethnocultural factors apply to the tumultuous period that was antebellum Maine politics?

Immigration and the Origins of Nativism in Maine

In the aftermath of achieving statehood in 1820, Maine began to develop a coherent political identity. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, the state was dominated by the Democratic

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Party. In the 1836 presidential election, for instance, Democratic Presidential nominee Martin van Buren won almost 23,000 votes compared to just over 15,000 for his rival, Whig candidate William Henry Harrison. While the state briefly flirted with Whig politics in 1840 amid Harrison’s victorious presidential campaign, by 1842 the Democrats had regained their hold of the state’s governorship and legislative houses, which they would maintain for over a decade. Despite the Democratic dominance of most elements of Maine politics, local issues ensured that the political scene remained contentious. These issues were fiercely debated by members of both the Democratic and Whig parties, with party members often possessing conflicting views with one another. As demand for results grew among the voting public, the noise around these issues grew even louder.

Rising intolerance of Catholics and other minorities in Maine had direct political consequences in differentiating the two major parties. Record numbers of migrants from Europe in the 1840s and 1850s activated existing biases against certain religious and ethnic groups which had the possibility of culminating in violence. Maine’s growing economy welcomed sizable numbers of Irish immigrants, who became “employed in large numbers to build canals and dams, and to work in the textile mills.” Despite their relatively successful economic assimilation in Maine, anti-Catholic ideology continued to be deeply rooted in many Protestant Americans, leading to severe nativist prejudice. While Maine did not have the same level of immigration from Catholic nations such as Ireland as some more heavily urban states, and the

rise of nativist politics during this period was certainly a national phenomenon, the presence of immigrants and of Catholics in the state is certainly enough to classify nativism as a local issue. According to the 1850 census, the state of Maine included about 32,000 foreign-born residents, approximately 5% of the total population. That same census recorded twelve Catholic churches in the state valued at a combined $20,700. Interestingly, a third of these churches were found in the sparsely populated Aroostook County in the far northern part of the state. Aroostook County was home to a number of Catholic French Canadians, who began moving across the border from the province of Quebec in large numbers starting around 1850. Many French-Canadian immigrants lived and worked in the forests of rural Maine, thus limiting their direct contact with and involvement in state politics. However, their presence was somewhat well known in popular culture, with noted author Henry David Thoreau describing the group as “savage” and inferior, both because of their religion and because they frequently intermarried with Native Americans. While the overall number of Catholic immigrants at this time was not enough to form a powerful political unit, their presence in the state and their interactions with and effect on others in the state undoubtedly played a major role in the shifting politics of the 1850s.

Conflict arose when Catholic immigrants began to engage with politics in meaningful ways. This development was met with fear and anger from many Protestants, who had “long regarded the Catholic Church and its hierarchical organization as antithetical to democracy.”

Conspiracy theories about Catholic immigrants and their relationship with the Democratic party

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31 1850 U.S. Census, Maine, 15.
33 Newton, “‘These French Canadian of the Woods are Half-Wild Folk’: Wilderness, Whiteness, and Work in North America, 1840-1955,” 132-34.
34 Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 118.
were prevalent in Maine, with traveling anti-Catholic lecturers a frequent sight around the state. One such lecturer asserted that “it is undeniably true that the Catholic interest receives many favors as a return for the concentration of its vote upon particular candidates or a particular party, and thus it gains a prominence which does not belong to it, and wields a power derived from the hands of Native Americans themselves.”

Amidst fierce scrutiny from all sides, Catholics questioned their place in the political system.

**Temperance and the Passage of the Maine Law**

Heavily related to increasing nativist sentiments in Maine were efforts to prohibit the production, sale, and consumption of alcohol. Temperance has a long history in Maine, with organized societies forming in the state by the early 1830s. For a time, these movements existed separate from the political system in the state, meaning that temperance activism was not confined to one party and rarely connected with other political ideals. However, as advocates of temperance gained power, their reach moved beyond the religion-centric “moral suasion” and toward enacting pressure to produce “coercive legislation.”

The entry of the temperance movement into the political environment politicized the issue and required, for the first time, that voters consider the platforms of each party and faction within the state government. The decentralized and disorganized nature of politics at the time made it difficult for each party to establish and enforce a clear position, leading to both parties having members on each side of the debate up through the adoption of the Maine Law in 1851. The Whig Party was especially

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35 *Northern Home Journal* (Gardiner, ME), August 3, 1854.
divided over the issue, with some members displaying great sympathy for the temperance cause and seeking to take advantage of its rising popularity and others fearful that taking a clear stance on the issue could drive away party members who disagreed with prohibitionism. Prior to the Maine Law, some Whigs had sought to brand themselves as “the temperance party, and the Democratic party as the rum party.” However, other Whigs refrained from taking such steps. Not to be outdone, the Democrats faced a similar dilemma of confronting the prospect of losing support if party leadership formally endorsed one position or the other. When it came time for the state legislature to approve the law, both parties ended up lending support to the temperance cause, with Democrats voting 56-35 in favor, Whigs joining them by a margin of 34-15, and all nine Free Soilers completing the winning coalition. Overall, each party evaluated the Maine Law based primarily on political expediency and strategy rather than moral conviction. This serves to highlight the lack of substantive policy difference between the two major parties at this point in history.

While the Democrats and Whigs lacked unity and consistency in their approaches to the Maine Law, advocacy groups and their allies in the press sought to make their voices heard and help shape policy. Not only were newspapers at this time frequently controlled by political parties, they also could be directed at specific interests and policies. The Gardiner Fountain and Journal was one such paper, dedicated to the Prohibitionist movement. In an appeal to subscribers to continue supporting and spreading their cause, the newspaper editors feature their role as members of the “Temperance Press” and argue that “the Temperance Press should be sustained, and should have a support fully equal to the secular, political, and literary Journals;

39 Republican Journal (Belfast, ME), March 27, 1846.
but this has never been the case in Maine.”41 While the Fountain and Journal reported on numerous issues beyond prohibition, it displayed a clear focus toward presenting the news in a manner favorable toward temperance. Frequently the paper even included direct calls to action for supporters of temperance by printing statements such as “Temperance men of Maine! Rum will scatter murder, disease and death in our state to the same extent, if we allow it to regain its foothold. Its breath is as deadly here as there…Think of this now, and act next September!”42 Newspapers also served as vital public spaces for political discussion. In-fighting frequently broke out among members of the same party, with one self-proclaimed ‘Temperance man’ lamenting the recent development that others in his party “termed [him], and those with whom [he] acted, rummies, who in 1840 [he] frequently picked out of the gutter and warned of their disgraceful conduct.”43 A fellow ‘Friend of Temperance’ proclaimed that temperance activists, namely those who “advocate the Whig cause under the name of temperance,” have “stigmatized as rummies and as of the rum party, all who do not bend the knee to the idol its masters have erected.”44

Despite these instances of disunion, the overall environment in Maine was largely sympathetic to the temperance movement. The Fountain and Journal, an admittedly biased source, claimed that “three fourths of the people of Maine are in favor of the temperance movement.”45 While this statistic most likely lacks any reliable evidence, it is undeniable that anti-liquor rallies in the state drew large crowds and the legislature had just voted overwhelmingly to ban alcohol. Maine was, after all, the first state in the union to approve a

41 Fountain and Journal (Gardiner, ME), Sept 15, 1853.
42 Fountain and Journal, August 26, 1852.
43 Republican Journal, March 27, 1846.
44 Republican Journal, April 9, 1847.
45 Fountain and Journal, September 15, 1853.
blanket ban on alcohol.\textsuperscript{46} In the immediate aftermath of the passage of the Maine Law in 1851, several more states including New England neighbors Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont.\textsuperscript{47} By 1855, thirteen states had enacted some form of Prohibition law, many modeled directly off the Maine Law.\textsuperscript{48} This evidence demonstrates that Maine was not the first state to enact temperance because it was the only state that desired to do so. Maine, like many other northern states, possessed a robust middle class that represented the “solid force” behind the growing prohibition movement.\textsuperscript{49} Where Maine differed was in the leadership and determination of its politicians, who were willing to move forward on the issue despite “the two major parties’ lack of unity on the question.”\textsuperscript{50} In the immediate aftermath of the enactment of the Maine Liquor Law in 1851, pushed by Neal Dow and the Maine Temperance Union, the favorable press described its passing as “glorious” and as a result of a “growing conviction among the people of this state for the last ten years, that the liquor traffic can be suppressed only by law.”\textsuperscript{51} The reaction among the general public was obviously more mixed, with many obviously determined to continue their drinking habits in opposition to the new legislation.

\textbf{Defining the Political Environment}

Throughout this massive shift in the law with regards to prohibition from the 1830s to the early 1850s, the Second Party System remained somewhat weak, but largely intact. Within each

\textsuperscript{49} Aaron and Musto, “Temperance and Prohibition in America: A Historical Overview.”
\textsuperscript{50} Gienapp, \textit{The Origins of the Republican Party: 1852-1856}, 49.
\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Fountain and Journal}, Gardiner, June 12, 1851.
major party, the vote was split. While one may think this could have had the potential to upend the existing party system, it was in fact not all that uncommon in an era in which the Democrats and Whigs had only a few policy positions that separated them. In response to this reality, Richard McCormick raised the question of whether “policy outputs affect[ed] voter allegiances at all” when considering voter choice and distinctions between the parties. While Holt lays out clear differences in policy on issues such as tariffs, it is more difficult to discern meaningful contrasts between the parties on ethnocultural issues. One such issue was the temperance debate, which was a massive issue in Maine politics and had the potential to tear apart the political system. However, the two parties lacked substantial differences with regards to the issue in their official platforms. While the Whigs supported temperance at a higher rate than Democrats, the latter party’s status as the dominant party in the state legislature with more than enough votes to prevent the bill from becoming law if they united against it meant that their divided support for the Maine Law was crucial to its passing. The debate over and passage of the Maine law contributed to the growing instability of the Second Party System not because it further divided the parties but because it helped create rifts within each organization. The fact that this occurred without substantive partisan differences suggests a potential answer to McCormick’s question that policy outputs did not meaningfully affect changing voting behavior. While each party found itself internally weakened, the political system itself remained largely intact in the aftermath of the law’s enactment in 1851. Because the Maine Law was not the proximate cause of the collapse of the Second Party System, other factors must have been in play.

Though policy differences may not have been the key to determining voting behavior, there is nevertheless powerful evidence that political debates over the Maine Law had an

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immediate effect on the state political environment. In his analysis of state elections in Maine, William Gienapp found that the gap between the gubernatorial election of 1852 and that of 1850 “documents the extent to which traditional party loyalties had been disordered.” Specifically, Gienapp reports that “of those who voted in 1850, approximately 30 percent of the Whigs, 50 percent of the Democrats, and more than 80 percent of the Free Soilers either voted for a different party in 1852 or did not vote. In addition, a quarter of the non-voters in 1850 went to the polls in 1852.” This transformation can be attributed directly to the political fallout that occurred in response to the Maine Law. This election revealed greater divisions within the Democratic Party than the Whig Party. The vote totals from the state legislature on the Maine Law suggest approximately a 60-40 split on the temperance issue within the Democratic Party, more evenly divided than the Whigs’ 70-30 mark. Partisan discontent clearly was not confined to lawmakers, as evidenced by the sizable exodus of party members in 1852. However, these failures did not break the Democrats. The institution of a temperance law weakened the party internally, yet it did not have the power to threaten the broader party system.

While there was not a tremendous difference between the parties in support for the Maine Law in the state legislature, there were significant disparities in the perception of the different parties. This is evident among the Whigs, who were seen as the party more friendly to temperance. Neal Dow, the Portland mayor and anti-liquor fanatic, led an effort to emphasize the value of temperance among the Whig coalition in the lead up to the 1852 elections. Dow’s popularity and notoriety helped cement in voters’ minds an understanding that in 1852 that Whigs were the pro-temperance party, even if that did not truly match up to their official party

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platform or the views of all of their members. Holt sees this as a newfound strength for the Whig party, noting that “many Democratic temperance men may have defected to the opposition in the 1850s.” This argument can help explain moderate Whig successes in state-level races in 1852 and 1853.

Ethnocultural issues greatly impacted individuals and local communities in Maine in a way that national debates over slavery did not at this point in time. Debates raged in homes, churches, and towns over these issues which hit close to home for many Mainers. The impact of ethnocultural issues on Maine politics in the pre-Civil War period was compounded by their ability to feed off each other. The most consequential of these was the growing connection between the aforementioned issues of nativism and temperance that culminated in the 1850s. Originally, these connections appeared outside of a defined political context. Since its origins in America in the early nineteenth century, temperance was invariably connected to religion and social class. Early temperance unions were often “aggressive, middle-class crusades for abstinence” led by “evangelical” church leaders. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, temperance movements largely operated separately from political workings, as they sought to use religious and moral persuasion rather than governmental force to advance their cause. The ethnocultural power that resulted from a combination of nativism and temperance was only fully realized once both moved into the political realm. Holt explains this transformation by writing that “because almost all the immigrants opposed such laws, the prohibition campaign drew them into the political arena for the first time.” With immigrants engaged in politics at unprecedented levels,

56 Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 78.
58 Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 117.
nativist prejudices on the rise, and temperance emerging as a distinctly political issue, a potential political shakeup was clearly in the making.

Catholic immigrants almost unanimously opposed laws designed to limit the consumption of alcohol. The Irish immigrant community in particular developed a reputation as excessive drinkers. W.J. Rorabaugh’s extensive study *The Alcoholic Republic* found that recent Irish immigrants, of which there were plenty in the mid-century, responded to difficult working conditions and social isolation from others by “reduc[ing] their tensions with strong drink, which they consumed exuberantly and in great quantity. A number of observers of drinking among adult male Irish immigrants concluded, independently, that within a few years a majority had drunk themselves to death.”\(^{59}\) While Irish and other immigrants were quite religious, arguments for abstinence from alcohol based on religious morals did not have much success because they relied primarily on Protestant principles. Several highly publicized incidents in Maine and around the country contributed to the Irish community being branded as drunk and dangerous. One such event happened in Berwick, in which “some Irishmen notorious for their drunken carousals” attracted a large crowd “in the vicinity of several low rum shops” and started a street fight that culminated with the death of a local stable keeper.\(^ {60}\) These stories attracted extensive press coverage and helped the general public form unfavorable opinions of the Irish.

Partially in response to high Catholic drinking but likely more as a result of severe nativist prejudices, Protestant temperance supporters began to directly target immigrant communities. Portland Mayor Neal Dow was a substantial proponent of these efforts. Gienapp describes Dow as a symbol for the growing connections between the nativist and temperance

\(^{60}\) *Fountain and Journal*, June 9, 1853.
movements. While mayor, Dow “manifested unreserved hostility to immigrants, particularly the Irish.” He viewed them as at fault for anything that went wrong in the city of Portland.

On the other hand, Democrats actively courted support among the Irish and other immigrant communities. As recent immigrants became citizens and began participating in politics, many were “charmed by the name Democrat and repelled by the nativist wing of the Whig party,” thus they split decisively for the Democrats. In urban areas around the country such as Boston, new citizens of Irish descent quickly became vital members of Democratic coalitions and a relatively safe vote in favor of Democratic policy priorities. While Maine did not have the same level of immigrant population as Massachusetts, Irish Americans served a vital and growing role in state politics. A study of Maine politics and government found that in the 1850s, the Irish “began to aggressively enter politics and filled the ranks of the Democratic Party.” Perhaps in response to the bigotry they faced from leaders such as Dow, Irish immigrants in turn did not take kindly to “the self-righteous temperance men” whom they most often associated with the Whig Party. This new oppositional relationship came to define temperance and nativism in Maine in the early 1850s. It also began to play a heightened role in Maine politics, with Holt adding that “much of the increased political participation by immigrants in the early 1850s probably resulted from the new activism of temperance advocates on the state level after Maine passed its famous Liquor Law in 1851.” The next question would be how exactly these ethnocultural factors would affect Maine elections.

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65 Palmer, Maine Politics and Government, 11.
66 Holt, Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln, 78.
67 Holt, Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln, 78.
1852 and 1853: A Genuine Whig Revival?

As a whole, 1852 was a disastrous election year for the Whigs. At the national level, the party lost decisively in races for the Presidency and Congress. However, looking a little deeper, the results in Maine were more mixed. While votes for President took into account numerous factors, including the respective policies of Franklin Pierce and Winfield Scott, state level races such as governor and the state legislature were more likely a referendum on the existing policies in Maine and the leadership that helped put those policies in place. In 1852, the most prominent policy upon which many people likely based their vote was the anti-liquor law passed the year prior. In the end, the Whigs pulled out a victory in the race for Governor, though not without significant help from a splintered Democratic Party. After ten years of uninterrupted majorities in the state legislature and control of the governorship, the Democratic party suffered a temporary split along the lines of support or opposition for the Maine Law, with each faction supporting a different nominee for governor.\textsuperscript{68} This split occurred both because of policy differences largely over temperance and the Compromise of 1850, but also because of procedural differences and allegations of corruption and favoritism. Specifically, the ‘woolhead’ faction consisted of pro-temperance members, while the ‘wildcat’ section opposed the enactment of the Maine Law.\textsuperscript{69} With two Democrats running in addition to a Whig candidate and a Free Soiler, no one reached a majority of the vote, thus mandating that the Maine House of Representatives decide on the next governor.\textsuperscript{70} Whig candidate William Crosby held the support of a majority of that body, and thus he was selected as governor. The temperance press responded with glee to the decision of the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{68} Wescott, “A History of Maine Politics 1840-1856: The Formation of the Republican Party,” 150.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Wescott, “A History of Maine Politics 1840-1856: The Formation of the Republican Party,” 150.
\item \textsuperscript{70} Piscataquis Observer, September 23, 1852.
\end{itemize}
voters and of the state legislature, declaring that “best of all, Maine stands by the Maine Law. There is no dispute, no hesitation on this point.” The concurrent elections for state legislature were moderately successful for Whigs, especially the state senate, where they won a majority.

However, not everything was positive for the Whigs and the pro-temperance forces. The Democratic press also saw the election as somewhat of a win for them, given that overall Democrat votes outnumbered Whig and Free Soil support by over 10,000 tallies. Additionally, Neal Dow, who many saw as the forefront of temperance activism in Maine, lost his bid for reelection as mayor of Portland. This news was cheered by anti-temperance newspapers such as the Boston Daily Chronicle, which decried Dow as “Lord Mayor” and the Maine Law as a form of tyranny. The varying responses of the partisan media indicate that long-term power and

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71 Fountain and Journal, September 23, 1852.
72 Piscataquis Observer, September 23, 1852.
73 Republican Journal, September 24, 1852.
74 Fountain and Journal, August 26, 1852.
influence in Maine were still very much yet to be determined. Each side retained the allegiance of their key allies in the press and in the upper echelon of politics. While the Whigs were in sharp decline in the nation as a whole, they maintained a strong presence in Maine.

Returning to the summer of 1853, we encounter a political system constantly changing yet possessing relative stability. Both the Maine Whig and Democratic parties had cause for cautious optimism about their respective futures in the state, yet it was the Whigs in a stronger position. Both were still determining how best to position themselves as it related to nativism and temperance, the two most important local issues of the day. While the Whig party had by no means captured majority positions on these matters, they were in a stronger place than the rival Democrats to potentially capitalize on changing public opinion. Factions began to emerge within the Democratic Party centered specifically on debates over temperance policy. The party ran two separate nominating conventions in Maine in 1853, with the main party nominating a moderate anti-Maine Law man in Albert Pillsbury while an offshoot group endorsed the Maine Law and nominated Anson Morrill. As seen in the preceding table, this faction won 14% of the total vote and denied Democrats a majority victory. Pillsbury’s failures could be in part attributed to the fact that he “made no official statement concerning prohibition” despite the fact that debates over the issue largely dominated the campaign. Third parties such as the Free Soilers also staked a strong position among the electorate that could help shift the debate towards their preferred issues. Temperance activists sought to build off their strong showing in 1852 by expanding their role in the political process. The 1853 state temperance convention outlined specific measures for supporting favorable candidates regardless of party: “we will not ask whether a candidate is a

Whig or a Democrat – but, ‘is he in favor of the Maine Law.’”\textsuperscript{77} For temperance men, positions on other issues rarely should be considered, as instead they argue “let us then unite on the Maine Law man in all cases.”\textsuperscript{78} As Maine held state and local elections every year during this time, these positions could all be evaluated at the ballot box. Overall, the third party candidacies of Morrill and Free Soil nominee Ezekiel Holmes in 1853 ensured that temperance remained the most prominent political issue on which voters based their decisions.

The 1853 election marked yet another step forward for the Whig Party and pro-temperance advocates in Maine. In the governor’s race, sitting Governor William Crosby grew his vote totals from the year prior and again managed to maintain a strong enough coalition in the state legislature to be chosen for re-election. Even more significantly, the Whigs won a rare plurality in the state House of Representatives, securing 63 members compared to the Democrats 61, with 26 seats going to third party candidates.\textsuperscript{79} In the legislature, the Whig party picked up seats in many counties but most notably Kennebec County, whose fourteen allocated representatives went from a 7-7 split in 1852 to a 12-2 advantage for the Whigs in 1853.\textsuperscript{80} As the home of the \textit{Fountain and Journal} and a number of temperance conventions, Kennebec County was a center of pro-Maine Law activity. Its decisive turn toward the Whigs in 1853 indicates the completion of the politicization of temperance. Whigs in Kennebec County and other Maine Law strongholds were more willing to support temperance unconditionally, and thus they emerged victorious. The areas most likely to support the Whigs and thus the Maine Law were largely the more urban parts of the state, with Cumberland and Lincoln counties joining Kennebec County

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Fountain and Journal}, August 4, 1853.
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Fountain and Journal}, August 25, 1853.
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Fountain and Journal}, September 22, 1853.
\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Fountain and Journal}, September 22, 1853.
as the regions with the most Whig representation.\textsuperscript{81} These regions were also more involved in maritime trade and building industries, and included higher levels of immigrants,\textsuperscript{82} factors which can help explain their nativist and pro-temperance sympathies. On the other hand, Democratic support was centered in more distant parts of the state including Penobscot, Washington, and Oxford counties.\textsuperscript{83} As 1853 was a non-Presidential election year, it was highly promising for the Whigs to see such an endorsement of their local agenda.

However, despite these temporary successes, the enduring weaknesses of the Whig Party remained. Even as they won the governorship in two consecutive elections, their overall vote total remained stagnant. Crosby won 31\% of the total vote in 1852 and followed that up with a 32\% showing in 1853.\textsuperscript{84} He was able to win the election on both occasions primarily due to Democratic disunity and the support of pro-Maine Law third parties. The Whig Party’s inability to fully capture the temperance vote reflects their ongoing internal battles that would never be fully resolved. Gienapp notes that amidst a declining Whig voter base, the party was “as confused as their opponents by the rapidly emerging political instability.”\textsuperscript{85} The Whig Party was unable to establish itself as a clear brand in order to attract new voters.

In many ways, the party’s success in 1853 had not been because of anything it did to win support, but rather because of the heightened power of the temperance movement. Because temperance had grown to “completely overshadow all other issues in the state’s politics,” voters chose the party that they believed to possess more conviction on the issue.\textsuperscript{86} However, despite

\textsuperscript{81} Fountain and Journal, September 22, 1853.
\textsuperscript{83} Fountain and Journal, September 22, 1853.
\textsuperscript{84} Maine Register (Portland: Brown Thurston), 1853.
\textsuperscript{86} Gienapp, The Origins of the Republican Party: 1852-1856, 50.
this stroke of fortune, the Whigs were unable to take advantage of a favorable situation. Whig leader and former governor Edward Kent bemoaned the mindset of Maine Whigs as “tender toed and impractical” and “car[ing] more for some little paltry county election than the great issues before us.”  

Without defined policy objectives or an aggressive approach to politics, the Whigs struggled to attract new supporters. Party leaders also often lacked strategy and discipline, for example refusing opportunities to ally with ideologically similar groups such as the Morrill Democrats due to “the ambitions of rival leaders.” Finally and perhaps most significantly, many voters who had previously identified with the party became disillusioned by its inability to take courageous stands on important issues. Turnout around the country fell sharply in 1853 amid a “perceived congruence between Democrats and Whigs,” with third party options emerging to fill the gaps. While they had just won the governorship and a plurality in the state legislature, the Maine Whigs had a dwindling voter base and possessed no clear political identity.

Rising Tensions and Voter Discontent

The year 1854 brought more challenges that continued to amplify political tensions in Maine. Anti-Catholicism, which had been rising since the recent surge of immigrants, reached a boiling point in the summer of 1854. Anti-Catholic and anti-immigration ideologies were heavily connected, given that groups such as the Irish and French Canadians “dominated the Catholic church hierarchy.” Incited by one of the roving nativist preachers, a riotous mob looted and burned the house of worship being used by the Catholic church in the city of Bath. The Bath

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89 Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 246.
Mirror described the scene on that summer day: “the crowds dove in the doors and windows, entered the building, rang the bell, waved two American ensigns from the belfer[sic], and lastly fired it. The flames spread rapidly, and in a few minutes the building was in ruins.”

In the aftermath of the fire, many of the rioters were briefly detained by local authorities. The event was featured in the press around the state at this time, and was described as evidence of “a sort of riotous epidemic prevailing just now throughout the country.” That nativist epidemic was explicitly anti-Catholic, with sources demonstrating that the mob chanted “down with papal power” while torching the church. This was just one of many violent outbursts around the country that targeted Catholics in the mid-1850s.

The saga did not end there in Bath, either, as conflict resumed when a local priest attempted to lay the cornerstone of a new Catholic Church on the same ground as the building that had been burned down. However, this planned event was met with “a mob assembled, and amid the most shameful demonstrations, prevented the consummation of the religious ceremonies. The priests who were to conduct the ceremonies, seeing that bloodshed might ensue, gave directions that their purpose of aging the corner stone of the church with ceremony should be abandoned.” As in the original Bath fire and riot, blame immediately fell on nativists within the Know-Nothing political movement, which was described in the Democratic press as an “illiberal and riotous party.” Democrats could and did use these realities as political tools in their efforts to win support among immigrant communities. Some Whigs and others in the pro-
temperance, pro-nativist community joined in condemning this form of religious violence. The *Northern Home Journal*, a publication typically favorable to the interests of the Whigs and their nativist successors, unapologetically denounced the actions of the rioters in Bath, declaring that they were “cruel, illiberal, and unworthy of a Protestant people.”97 Despite these efforts to reduce tensions between Protestants and Catholics, nativism remained a highly salient political issue in Maine. Nativist sentiments were strong in Maine, and the Whig party failed to harness them for their electoral benefit, often being outflanked by the Know-Nothings or other nativist forces. Additionally, at the national level they occasionally abandoned their focus on those with nativist tendencies and instead “attempted to outbid the Democrats for the support of Catholics and immigrants.”98 Like on the temperance issue, by 1854 the Whigs lacked a concrete identity or any unique draws.


98 Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 244.
When the elections of 1854 approached, Maine found itself amidst a significant period of political realignment. While the period from 1850 to 1854 laid the foundation for the widening cracks in both the Whig Party and the Democratic Party, it was the period from the elections of 1854 through those in 1856 that witnessed the most extensive shift in the political environment. It is in this period that we can seek to answer the question of why the Whig Party collapsed but the Democratic Party remained despite the fact that they each had exploitable weaknesses. Some scholars argue that the Whig Party was essentially defunct after their losses in the 1852 election, yet their relatively strong performance in 1853 disproves that conclusion. However, it is undeniable that by the middle of the decade their time as a formidable player in Maine politics was over. What could have caused the collapse of such an institution in such a short period of time?

Perhaps more than any other election cycle, 1854 demonstrates the full range of political perspectives in Maine and the many individuals and groups that sought to represent those interests in state government. In addition to traditional Democrats and Whigs, several other forces won significant support in the election. Free Soil leader Austin Willey sought to court potentially disenchanted Whigs, while Shepard Cary led a group of Democrats uniformly opposed to the Maine Law.99 A more powerful third party candidate was Anson Morrill, again running as a fusion candidate with a pro-temperance platform. In this race Morrill aligned himself with factions of the Democratic Party while also being labeled as a Know-Nothing. The Know-Nothing party had enjoyed a rapid rise to prominence in many areas of the country in 1854, promising that they would “take action against immigrants and Catholics,... clean up politics, cast aside corrupt wire-workers and party hacks, and put common men in places of

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political power.”\textsuperscript{100} Morrill himself lent additional legitimacy to the party as an experienced veteran of Maine politics who had, as a Democrat, produced solid showings in previous gubernatorial elections. His campaign could be described as strongly anti-Catholic and supportive of temperance movements, a platform which was espoused at numerous county-level conventions in advance of the election.\textsuperscript{101} For instance, the Maine State Temperance Convention officially announced their support of Morrill for governor on the basis that his “character and past course are a guarantee that the interests of the Maine Law will not suffer at his hands.”\textsuperscript{102} With this endorsement and others, Morrill had successfully captured much of the temperance vote.

Morrill purposefully constructed his campaign to cut through the two party system. He believed that prohibition activism ought to move beyond the existing party infrastructure. In a later address given to the people of Maine on his temperance platform, Morrill and his allies proclaimed to “call upon the people of this state – of whatever party – as they cherish our free institutions and hope to transmit them unimpaired to our children” to support the Maine Law.\textsuperscript{103} Because Morrill was not directly affiliated with either party, he could win support from across the spectrum. Those within the entrenched party system also commented on this. One noted opponent of temperance, Maine politician H.G. Cole, decried the growing power of the Maine Law lobby: “There is not a man in Maine who knows how to deposit a ballot, that is not fully aware that this Maine Law party has been selling itself to each of the other parties, alternatively,

\textsuperscript{100} Holt, \textit{Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln}, 128.
\textsuperscript{101} \textit{Piscataquis Observer}, September 7, 1854.
\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Northern Home Journal}, July 13, 1854.
\textsuperscript{103} “Address of the State Temperance Convention to the People of Maine on the Subject of Prohibition,” George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College, 1857, 10.
as the one or the other becomes the highest bidder.” The inability of the Whig party to capture the rogue power of the prohibition interest helped spur their failure.

### Whigs in Decline: Party support in gubernatorial elections in selected counties, selected years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>1841</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1852</th>
<th>1853</th>
<th>1854</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>21%</td>
<td>28%</td>
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<td>51%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>44%</td>
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<td>38%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>15%</td>
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<tr>
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<td>40%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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* Bolded number denotes plurality support in that county

The sharp downfall of the Whigs accelerated in 1854, as the party was unable to field a competitive candidate in the gubernatorial election. The party had gone into election season with great hope, with many leaders seeing their party “on the threshold of becoming a powerful entity in the state’s politics” after decades of largely trailing the Democratic influence. However, this was not to be the case. The party nominated Isaac Reed, but he failed to garner any level of popular support, and what resulted was a race between Know-Nothing Democrat Anson Morrill and Democrat challenger Albion Parris. What made this even more concerning for the Whigs was that Morrill and Reed ran on “virtually identical platforms,” yet it was Morrill who earned

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105 Sagadahoc County was not formed until 1853. The land now known as Sagadahoc County was previously part of Lincoln County.
more votes. Voters had clearly tired of the Whigs and their inability to enact meaningful change on issues that mattered to people. The *Northern Home Journal*, a pro-Maine Law publication, contended that “Temperance men could not with certainty count upon [Reed].” Instead, Morrill was the preferred choice of most temperance advocates. This demonstrates the diminishing power of the Whig name and infrastructure in Maine politics and would be a sign of things to come.

In the end, Morrill won just about 50% of the statewide vote compared to 31% for Parris. In the absence of a strong Whig candidate, their support mostly transferred to Morrill, contributing to his victory. An analysis of the 1854 election results at the county level can help determine which groups supported each major candidate. In an extremely strong showing, Morrill won every county in the state with the exception of Aroostook County. What could explain this is the relatively large Catholic population in the county that did not respond as positively to campaigning against the influence of the Roman church. Additionally, Morrill did not merely replicate the Whig coalition from the days of Edward Kent, but rather grew it significantly in the populous and urban Cumberland, York, and Sagadahoc counties of southern Maine. Morrill won 53% of the vote in Cumberland County, a significantly larger share of the vote than the Whigs had ever won in the relatively urban county. This area constituted the political base of Portland mayor and champion of prohibition Neal Dow, indicating that campaigning with a pro-temperance platform may have led to positive election results. As a fusion candidate with no Whig opposition and considerable personal legitimacy, Morrill was an

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109 *Northern Home Journal*, September 14, 1854.
109 *Northern Home Journal*, September 14, 1854.
112 *Maine Register*, 1855.
ideal candidate to unite a large section of Maine political elements under one big tent. Gienapp observes that “Morrill drew votes from all previous political parties” including “a majority of Whigs along with a significant number of earlier non-voters.”\textsuperscript{113} Morrill’s showing was unprecedented and unexpected, and signified a watershed moment in Maine politics.

Morrill’s victory was met with elation by members of the pro-temperance and often pro-Whig press. In highlighting majorities for the Morrill coalition in regions across the state, the \textit{Northern Home Journal} expressed optimism about the future of Maine politics: “Let us hope that this change in party aspects may produce lasting good; and let all who are disappointed bear the affliction with becoming fortitude. We throw our hat as high as the highest on this victory.”\textsuperscript{114} This hope did not extend to members of the Whig establishment, who had to deal with a situation in which “thousands of voters, anxious for a new party and distrustful of the old organizations,” decided to abandon their longtime party in exchange for new and better choices.\textsuperscript{115} In the leadup to the 1855 elections, the Whigs sought to occupy a middle ground between the traditional Democrats and the upstart Morrill coalition. True to form, the Whig party platform in 1855 sought to forge a third path with regard to temperance:

\begin{quote}
While we regard the great cause of Temperance as a moral and not a political question, yet being called upon to express an opinion in relation thereto, we declare that we are in favor of effective laws for the judicious regulation and salutary restriction of the traffic in intoxicating liquors, but convinced that the present ‘intensified’ liquor law is in some of its provisions impracticable, unwise, and unconstitutional, we deem it a sacred duty to modify it (if possible) as to divest it of its radical and insuperable objections.\textsuperscript{116}
\end{quote}

Even after nearly all Mainers had already taken a side in the debate over the Maine Law, the Whigs still thought it possible and prudent to campaign on the promise of enacting some sort of

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{Northern Home Journal}, September 14, 1854.
\textsuperscript{116} \textit{Piscataquis Observer}, August 30, 1855.
compromise policy. Unfortunately for them, there was no real market for these ideas.

Additionally, the Whigs sought to denigrate Morrill and his supporters as a “triple alliance of Know-Nothingsm, Abolitionism, and Fanaticism” while emphasizing their own conservative bona fides.\textsuperscript{117} Having been surpassed on all sides and lacking coherent policy objectives, the Whigs struggled to gain support in 1855. Isaac Reed, running again for governor as a Whig, won less than 10% of the popular vote to finish a distant third.\textsuperscript{118} In the state legislature, the Democrats rebounded to gain an outright majority over Whigs and pro-abolition candidates.\textsuperscript{119} The Whigs’ final attempt to save their party had failed. Holt sums up the final years of the Whig Party as a tale of missed opportunities: “When powerful new issues - namely, anti-Nebraskaism, anti-Catholicism, and prohibitionism - emerged in 1854 and 1855 and produced a realignment against the Democrats, most anti-Democratic voters wanted nothing to do with the Whig party. Its credibility as an authentic opponent of the Democrats and representative of the people has already been destroyed.”\textsuperscript{120}

**Democratic Resurgence and Republican Dominance**

In the Whigs’ place emerged an upstart political party with tremendous promise in Maine and beyond. The 1855 election marked the entry of the Maine Republican Party into state politics, and it began to immediately take prominence as a political force. The coalition was made up of several existing groups, including disillusioned former Whigs and the Know-Nothing coalition that had propelled Morrill to victory in the gubernatorial election the previous year.

\textsuperscript{117} *Piscataquis Observer*, August 30, 1855.
\textsuperscript{118} *Maine Register* (Portland: Brown Thurston), 1856.
\textsuperscript{119} *Republican Journal*, September 21, 1855.
\textsuperscript{120} Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 247.
Media at the time commented on the promise of this new party, declaring that “one remarkable feature in the convention was the entire absence of previous political prejudices. Past differences were forgotten, and a common offering was made of issues now unimportant, upon the altar of patriotism.” Despite this breath of fresh air, the links to the old Whig regime were apparent, starting with the choice of former Whig governor Edward Kent as President of the state Republican convention. While much of the Republican policy focus was on national issues, by no means did they neglect to take firm positions on important state and local issues. The convention came out in strong support of prohibitionism, declaring that the “existence and execution of the Maine Temperance Law is a vital element in the organization and life of the Republican Party of this State, and is one of the chief safeguards of the lives, reputation, property, and homes of our people.” This convention culminated in the nomination of Morrill to run for reelection to the governorship on the Republican ticket. One key difference between the Republican campaign and those of the Whigs was a marked effort to label their candidate as an unquestioned “man of the people.” This populistic element of the Republican Party would come to define its electoral strategy and its approach to governing.

Despite the momentum of the growing Republican train, Democrat gubernatorial candidate Samuel Wells would claim victory in 1855. Though he lost to Morrill by a slim margin in the popular vote, neither candidate reached a majority. In a somewhat surprising move, Whigs in the state House of Representatives sided with Wells and propelled him to victory. The Republican Journal credited the Whigs for helping him over the finish line, stating that the editors “feel a great deal of gratification at the alliance for a local success in Maine between the

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121 *Piscataquis Observer*, March 1, 1855.
122 *Piscataquis Observer*, March 1, 1855.
123 *Piscataquis Observer*, March 1, 1855.
124 *Piscataquis Observer*, March 1, 1855.
honorable residue of the Whig Party and the Democracy…it was inevitable that the anti-Morrill strength of both Whigs and Democrats, must unite in the contest just passed.\textsuperscript{125} The two counties in which Wells and the Democrats gained the most votes from the year prior were Waldo County and Cumberland County. In the former, Democrats cut a nearly 20 percentage point deficit to Morrill to a near tie in the vote for governor.\textsuperscript{126} This strong showing came largely as a result of the impact of the \textit{Republican Journal}, the pro-Democratic newspaper operating in the county that campaigned tirelessly for their party’s candidates. Immediately following the election, the paper published a headline entitled “Waldo Redeemed!” and said that they “feel proud of this result.”\textsuperscript{127}

In Cumberland County, Democrats had won only 29\% of the vote in the gubernatorial race in 1854, but Wells won a plurality of 47\% in the county the following year.\textsuperscript{128} This massive change can be attributed primarily to the fallout from the Portland Rum Riot of 1855. When recently re-elected Portland mayor Neal Dow was accused of violating his own sacred liquor laws, his political enemies sought to raise the tensions, which led to a mob attacking police stationed outside of city hall.\textsuperscript{129} Dow responded by “order[ing] the state militia to fire on the crowd without warning,” leading to one dead and several others wounded. Anger and confusion immediately followed throughout the state’s press, with the \textit{Republican Journal} asking “if George Robbins was not illegally murdered in Portland, by virtue of what law was his life taken? These are the questions to which the people of Maine demand an answer.”\textsuperscript{130} The fallout from this situation proved catastrophic for Republican chances in the upcoming election of 1855.

\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Republican Journal}, September 14, 1855.  
\textsuperscript{126} \textit{Republican Journal}, September 14, 1855.  
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Republican Journal}, September 14, 1855.  
\textsuperscript{128} \textit{Republican Journal}, September 14, 1855.  
\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Republican Journal}, June 8, 1855.
Democratic-oriented newspapers printed claims linking the Republican ticket to the highly unpopular prohibition fanatics, saying “a vote for Morrill is a vote for Neal Dow.” Dow’s unpopularity in the immediate aftermath of this event hurt the electoral prospects of pro-Maine Law Republicans in the next election. This effect was especially clear in the city of Portland, which went 1,902-1,746 for Wells after having supported Morrill in 1854 by an overwhelming margin of 1,728-869. The increased turnout in Portland and the heavy shift toward the Democratic candidate indicate that the voters were seeking to punish Dow and his ally Morrill over Dow’s involvement in the deadly riot.

If 1853 was a year of Whig resurgence, then 1855 was a year of Democratic resurgence. In halting the meteoric rise of the Republican party in Maine state politics, the Democrats were able to make sizable gains across the state, improving their percentage of the vote in each and every county. What caused the new Republican party, with fresh ideas and newfound alliances, to falter in its first real political action in Maine? Several factors could help explain this Democratic revival. The 1855 election was entirely confined to state and local level races, with no federal Presidential or Congressional candidates on the ticket. As the Whig Party put it, “the issue this year is not national but state and local.” This likely served to enhance the importance of local issues at the expense of national-level issues such as the expansion of slavery, an issue around which Republicans centered much of their pitch. Instead, the local issues of temperance and nativism took center stage, and traditional Whig or Know-Nothing positions on them did not possess the same level of electoral appeal that they once held. By 1855, the temperance movement was facing significant backlash from many segments of the population,

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132 Republican Journal, September 14, 1855.
133 Maine Register, 1856.
134 Republican Journal, September 7, 1855.
especially stemming from the Portland Rum Riot. The declining Whig party still had an impact on state politics at this time, so it was significant when their “convention failed to pass a strong resolution in favor of prohibitionism” for the first time since well before the enactment of the Maine Law.\textsuperscript{135} Many Republicans at the time blamed their loss on the liquor issue, and some leaders argued that the party should never make a pro-temperance position a key part of any future campaign.\textsuperscript{136}

That letdown did not last for long, and 1856 brought much better results for leading Republican candidates. Unlike the year prior, the 1856 elections included races for the Presidency and Congress, which oriented the campaigns primarily around national issues. A discussion of how slavery and other issues impacted the campaign will be a focus of Chapter 2. However, the local issues in 1856 played much more favorably to Republicans as well. This started with the newly recruited leader of the party, former Democrat Hannibal Hamlin. Hamlin possessed many advantages at the local level, including a potential to “attract wavering Democrats to the Republican cause” and the fact that, as a sitting U.S. Senator, he “had not participated in state politics in recent years and thus enjoyed the advantage that, as one Republican put it, he was ‘not mixed up with the vexed question of the Maine law.’”\textsuperscript{137}

Additionally, Hamlin brought his own personal popularity to a Republican ticket mired in accusations of radicalism over the issue of temperance. With Hamlin in the fold, enthusiasm for the Republican party grew exponentially. Not only did Hamlin recreate the winning Morrill coalition from two years prior, but he expanded it. In a three-way race involving incumbent Democrat Samuel Wells and a minor Whig candidate, Hamlin won over 50% of the vote in every

\textsuperscript{135} Gienapp, The Origins of the Republican Party: 1852-1856, 206.
county except for the Democratic linchpin of Aroostook, leading to an overall result of 57% for Hamlin and 37% for Wells.\textsuperscript{138} Hamlin was not the sole cause of Republican success, as the party also fared very well in races for the state legislature. After the 1856 elections, the Maine state senate was composed of 30 Republicans and only one Democrat, while 121 Republicans were elected to the state house compared to just 23 opposition Democrats and Whigs.\textsuperscript{139} This represented a massive shift since 1854, when the composition of the Maine house was much more divided with 41 Democrats, 40 Morrill-affiliated partisans, 45 Whigs, and 24 Freesoilers.\textsuperscript{140} The sheer dominance of Republicans in elected office emphasizes the lack of regional political identities, with relatively similar levels of support for Hamlin and other Republicans throughout the state. This is especially interesting given the different economic, social, and religious demographics of various parts of the state. Those distinctions were not nearly enough to stop the rapid growth of the Republican Party, which had appeal to a vast majority of the population.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Selected Counties</th>
<th>Vote Change 1854-1855</th>
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<td>D+30</td>
<td>R+10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cumberland</td>
<td>D+18</td>
<td>R+9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Franklin</td>
<td>D+20</td>
<td>R+13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kennebec</td>
<td>D+19</td>
<td>R+17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Piscataquis</td>
<td>D+5</td>
<td>R+10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Waldo</td>
<td>D+13</td>
<td>R+11</td>
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*Vote change in governor’s races, does not include third party candidates

\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Maine Register}, 1857.
\textsuperscript{139} \textit{Piscataquis Observer}, September 18, 1856.
\textsuperscript{140} \textit{Piscataquis Observer}, September 28, 1854.
The results of the 1856 election can be seen as the culmination of the political realignment process in Maine. Although faced with significant adversity along the way, the Republicans had built a broad and lasting coalition of supporters that provided them majorities in both state houses and control of the governorship. Leaving aside important national issues such as slavery for now, the Republicans had achieved this success largely by walking a fine line between the rival factions in debates over local issues like temperance and nativism so as to open their party up to members of all ideologies and backgrounds. But how, exactly, did a political organization rise from nothing to define state politics in just a few years? To help answer this question, we can look to the local level to analyze the emergence, growth, and sustained success of the Republican party.

A Case Study of Piscataquis County

Piscataquis County is a geographically large but sparsely populated region in northern Maine. The 1850 census records the county as having a religiously diverse population totaling 15,000, with churches of many sects of Protestantism able to be found in the county.\(^{141}\) Bordered to the north by the heavily Democratic Aroostook County, Piscataquis County has a history of supporting candidates of multiple party affiliations. In one of the county’s first electoral decisions after its founding, it supported Democratic candidate for governor John Fairfield over Whig incumbent Edward Kent in 1841 by a small margin.\(^{142}\) In 1850, the county sent a divided group to the state legislature consisting of two Democrats, one Free Soiler, and one Whig.\(^{143}\)

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\(^{141}\) 1850 U.S. Census, Maine.

\(^{142}\) Maine Register, 1842.

\(^{143}\) Piscataquis Observer, September 12, 1850.
Control of the county’s lone seat in the state senate alternated frequently between Democrats and Whigs, with neither party able to maintain power for more than a few years. Formal party structures existed for both major parties, with yearly conventions called to nominate candidates for relevant positions. During Presidential election years, such as 1852, much of the campaigning focused on supporting each party’s choice for President, with more of a focus on maintaining partisan loyalties than on truly debating the issues. However, while Democratic Franklin Pierce won a slight majority of the popular vote for president in Piscataquis County, Whig candidate Stephen Lowell won a convincing victory to represent the county in the state senate.144 On local issues, Piscataquis County was largely sympathetic to the temperance movement, with an 1854 convention of all interested citizens making clear their support for the Maine law.145 The frequency with which this electorate changed party representation, and the relative balance between the two major parties of the 1840s and early 1850s, makes it an excellent case study. In addition, the county was served by one principal newspaper, the Piscataquis Observer, based in the county seat of Dover. While this newspaper was decidedly pro-temperance and took stances on antislavery and Nebraskaism, it otherwise provides a clear factual recalling of political events in its home county and elsewhere.

The oscillating equilibrium of political control that defined Piscataquis County politics during the Second Party System would soon be disrupted by the rise of a new political group and ideology. Morrill and the Know-Nothing party won a strong victory in the county in 1854, taking 48% of the vote compared to 38% for the Democrat Parris. Reaction to this was largely jubilant, with the Piscataquis Observer describing a scenario in grave detail in which the triumphant Morrill supporter stepped right past their dead opponents, including a “strait Whig…covered

144 Piscataquis Observer, November 4, 1852.
145 Piscataquis Observer, September 7, 1854.
with the broken fragments of old platforms and dead issues.”146 While this language was most certainly hyperbolic, dismantling the existing system ushered in a period of political divisiveness and competitiveness unlike any seen before in this region. The Democrats in Piscataquis County were sufficiently scared of the upstart Know-Nothing party that they promised to “forget political antecedents, and cordially unite and invite Whigs and all others to join our efforts” to restore the political status quo and rid the state administration of Know-Nothings.147 However, these efforts were largely made in vain. The newly constituted Republican party commanded intense support, with its convention in Piscataquis County being described in the press as “the largest and most enthusiastic ever held” in the region.148 Even amidst the brief Democratic resurgence of 1855, Morrill carried the county as a Republican, albeit by a slightly smaller margin, 49%-44%.149 One explanation for this could be that the anti-Maine law attacks being levied against the Republicans in other parts of the state had less effect in Piscataquis County, which just a year prior had affirmed the enforcement of temperance measures.

By 1856, Republican dominance in the county had reached another level, with the Piscataquis County Republican convention drawing over 1,500 raucous supporters who proclaimed themselves friends of “Liberty and Union.”150 The Democratic convention, in contrast, painted the Republicans as a “sectional organization [whose] true end aim [was] the destruction of our constitution and the disunion of our confederation of states.”151 Despite this, governor-elect Hamlin defeated the united Democrats and Whigs in the county by a margin of

146 Piscataquis Observer, September 14, 1854.
147 Piscataquis Observer, September 28, 1854.
148 Piscataquis Observer, August 30, 1855.
149 Maine Register, 1856.
150 Piscataquis Observer, August 28, 1856.
151 Piscataquis Observer, September 4, 1856.
The rise of the Republican party in Piscataquis County demonstrates how an energized and politically active group of people can be driven to action by the promise of new and different governance. In a population whose views on local issues such as temperance and nativism remained constant, there was still room for extensive political change.

It is undeniable that ethnocultural issues at the local level had the chance to have a massive impact on voter choice. The collapse of the Whig party and rise of the Know-Nothings in the early 1850s transpired in large part due to reactions to nativist and anti-Catholic sentiment. The Know-Nothings in Maine were able to gain political prominence, if only for a moment, primarily due to local political outrage over the perceived excessive drinking habits and seemingly outsized political influence of Irish immigrants. Democrats were arguably even more successful at harnessing these issues, most notably in the aftermath of the Portland riot of 1855 and the surrounding disapproval of the Maine Law. In an environment in which they were otherwise on the defensive, the Democrats were able to deliver key victories in 1855 by emphasizing ethnocultural issues.

It soon became evident by the second half of the 1850s that prohibition did not have the political power it once possessed. This downfall began in earnest with the fallout from the Portland rum riot in the summer of 1855 that led in turn to Democratic victories in that year’s state and local elections. Consequences were felt almost immediately at the legislative level, with only five of the ninety-six representatives who voted to support the Maine Law in 1855 having been re-elected the following year. This ultimately led the state legislature to repeal the Maine Law in 1856.

Former Governor and longtime state temperance leader Anson Morrill lamented

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152 Maine Register, 1857.
153 “Address of the State Temperance Convention to the People of Maine on the Subject of Prohibition,” 5.
154 “Address of the State Temperance Convention to the People of Maine on the Subject of Prohibition,” 10.
these developments: “The year 1857 opens in painful contrast with 1855. Then Maine was the acknowledged leader in the temperance movement, extending its influence on other states, and stamping its policy of prohibition upon their legislation, its very name a watchword of progress; now we have become an object of pity and reproach.” All of this serves to demonstrate the diminished influence of the temperance issue and its inability to command political change by the time of the repeal of the Maine Law in 1856. It is difficult, therefore, to attribute any notable political changes past this point to the temperance issue. As the Republican Party made swift gains in Maine in 1855 and 1856, it did so because of issues beyond the well worn debate over prohibition. Expanding our focus to national issues is therefore necessary to accurately describe the second stage of this process of political change.

All in all, studying local ethnocultural issues is essential to developing a full understanding of the collapse of the Second Party System. Debates over nativism and temperance dominated the political discourse in Maine throughout the 1850s and helped define and mold political coalitions and constituencies. The brief rise and catastrophic fall of the Whig Party in this period can be almost solely attributed to ethnocultural issues. As the party generally refrained from adopting clear and unchanging policy positions, it had the potential to build winning coalitions over issues such as temperance and nativism when the conditions were favorable. However, that same tendency also precipitated the party’s untimely collapse, as it was unable to articulate clear positions on those same ethnocultural issues and thus struggled to attract new supporters or maintain its existing voter base. The same general argument can be made about the varying fortunes of the Democratic Party, which suffered a prolonged down period while the public favored the Maine Law and experienced a revival when a series of

155 “Address of the State Temperance Convention to the People of Maine on the Subject of Prohibition,” 3.
factors including the Portland Rum Riot turned opinion against temperance in 1855. However, ethnocultural issues cannot adequately explain how a new political entity could grow as quickly as the Republicans did. Third parties espousing similar ideologies in the 1840s and early 1850s including the Free Soilers and the Know-Nothings failed to create long-lasting coalitions. Therefore, in order to understand the conditions which made possible the meteoric rise of the Republican Party, we must also consider the important role of national issues in Maine politics.
Chapter 2: The National Becomes the Local

Although Maine was far from the slaveholding lands of the Southern United States and equally far from the raging and often violent battlegrounds of competing ideals that sprung up in the 1850s, antislavery sentiments were extremely strong among many citizens in the state. This had begun in the 1830s, with religious institutions often serving as organizing points for those of similar beliefs. By the 1850s, antislavery activism had risen dramatically in the state, with condemnations of the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act dominating the news cycle. In her study of the role of women in Maine antislavery, Alice Taylor notes that “between November 1853 and July 1854, more than fifty female anti-slavery societies, with an estimated membership of two thousand women, and forty male societies, with roughly one thousand members” were founded in the state of Maine.156 This rising grassroots movement culminated in tremendous Republican success at the ballot box beginning in 1854. The questions that will be confronted in this chapter include trying to examine what caused Mainers to care about the issue of slavery and its expansion. Was it out of true compassion for the enslaved, contempt for wealthy southern aristocrats, practical economic concerns, or any number of other factors? Complicating matters is the reality that many Mainers benefited either directly or indirectly from slavery, and others hoped to avoid the subject altogether in hopes of preventing sectional conflict. This chapter seeks to take all these factors into consideration in analyzing how antislavery came to define Maine’s political system.

Abolitionism and Early Political Anti-Slavery in Maine

Prior to the 1840s, the abolitionist movement in Maine and around the country was largely splintered, small, and powerless. As a growing state reliant on the maritime economy, Maine was disconnected from the upper-class abolitionist hotspots of Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and some parts of the Midwest.\footnote{John Brooke, \textit{There is a North: Fugitive Slaves, Political Crisis, and Cultural Transformation in the Coming of the Civil War}, 46.} Other anti-slavery activism centered mostly among religious communities, with its benefactors struggling to make appeals to the broader public. As has been long established in the field, these early abolitionists focused primarily on opposing slavery on a moral level, which connects to the religious aspect of their activism. However, debates over the expansion of slavery to newly acquired territories in the West allowed for abolitionists to make new arguments that resonated more with many Northerners. In his article “Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Exercise,” historian Gary Kornblith argues that this transition occurred with national debates over the potential annexation of Texas as a slave state in 1845.\footnote{Gary Kornblith, “Rethinking the Coming of the Civil War: A Counterfactual Exercise,” \textit{The Journal of American History}, Vol. 90, No. 1 (Jun., 2003), 77.} In addition, the Mexican-American War of 1846-48 led to the realization that even more recently acquired territory could soon be admitted as pro-slavery, which could potentially upset the delicate balance of power in Washington. Because of this scholarship, I will focus my review of the role of slavery and other consequential national issues in Maine politics beginning in the mid-1840s, around the time when these expansion of slavery debates were raging in the nation’s capital. To what extent did these arguments reach Maine, and what were Mainers’ opinion on them? Did they play a role in the political realignment that was to follow?
Many early anti-slavery arguments that found support in Maine focused on the anti-democratic threat that accompanied a westward expansion of slavery. Historian Russell Nye notes the power of the ‘slave power conspiracy’ on Northerners who may not have been greatly concerned about the moral misgivings of slavery in his article “The Slave Power Conspiracy: 1830-1860.” Abolitionists used this theory to claim that slaveholders “intended to establish slavery on a nationwide and possibly hemispheric basis.”\(^\text{159}\) While this argument may have been perceived by some as far-fetched, another that caught the attention of many Northerners was an “accusation that Slave Power aimed eventually to subvert the liberties of white men.”\(^\text{160}\) Peter Ripley expands on this in his introduction to Volume 3 of his collection *Black Abolitionist Papers*, adding that “events of the 1850s—the Fugitive Slave Law, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, attempts to annex Cuba as a slave territory, the campaign to reopen the African slave trade, and the Dred Scott decision—further revealed the domination of pro slavery forces over the federal government.”\(^\text{161}\) This argument can be found in many newspapers in Maine with an abolitionist tilt, including the *Piscataquis Farmer*. As part of a feature against Democratic Presidential candidate James K. Polk, who supported the annexation of Texas as a slave state, the newspaper writes “Thus far, the pro-slavery power, by the concentrated interest of having $1,200,000,000 of so called property represented, has triumphed over the power of liberty and free labor.”\(^\text{162}\) This article assigns a monetary value to enslaved people and demonstrates no consideration for their wellbeing. Instead, it focuses on how slaveholders can use their capital wealth to degrade the influence of free white men. While men in Maine would certainly not be competing for jobs and


\(^{162}\) *Piscataquis Farmer* (Dover, ME), October 11, 1844.
wages in the same way as white men living in these western territories, the concepts of liberty and free labor were powerful ones for many independent-minded Americans.

Not long after its introduction in the public sphere, newspapers began to harness the ‘slave power conspiracy’ for electoral purposes. In an effort to turn voters away from President Polk and his Democratic Party, the Piscataquis Farmer writes “we have shown time and time again, that the present Polk party was managed and ruled by the Slave holding interest - and that the only way in which a man could, as we believe, oppose the extension of slavery - and aid in the protection of northern laborers, against slave and pauper labor, was to vote in opposition to the Slave party.”\textsuperscript{163} It was certainly possible to characterize the Democratic Party as the slave party, given their support of Manifest Destiny and slavery’s westward expansion. However, the opposition Whigs could hardly be called an anti-slavery party, given their constant fluctuations on the issue. As such, it is almost certain the newspaper prioritized having leadership in Washington that supported the causes of Northern white men over truly working toward an end to slavery. In this case and many others, anti-slavery activism seemed to be merely a means toward electoral and partisan victory rather than evidence of true belief in the cause.

Despite their party’s broader stance in favor of the expansion of slavery, Maine Democrats often possessed more nuanced perspectives on the issue, employing party identity, slave power ideology, and occasionally religious morality when crafting their views. Democratic U.S. Representative Hannibal Hamlin stated his case in opposition to the expansion of slavery in a speech to the House of Representatives in January 1847 when he declared that new states “must enter free or not at all” and his hope that Congress “may be able to pass a declaratory act forever prohibiting slavery in any territory we may hereafter acquire.”\textsuperscript{164} Hamlin also made clear

\textsuperscript{163} Piscataquis Farmer, September 18, 1846.
\textsuperscript{164} Republican Journal, February 12, 1847.
his opposition to sitting still and allowing the matter to be decided by states, stating that “a silent acquiescence is equal to an affirmative vote in favor of slavery.”

While the Democrats may have been the *slave party* to some, the party was also home to many anti-slavery elected officials, including Hamlin and other members of the Maine delegation. Another Northern Democrat sympathetic to the antislavery cause was Rep. David Wilmot of Pennsylvania, namesake of the Wilmot Proviso, which would ban slavery in the Mexican Cession and which Hamlin supported. Wilmot championed “the rights of white freemen” and a country “where the sons of toil, of my own race and own color, can live without the disgrace which association with negro slavery brings upon free labor.”

Leonard Richards describes this “fusion of antislavery with racism” among Northern Democrats, which had wide appeal among voters and caused much consternation among southern pro-slavery forces. Despite backlash from Southern colleagues over their differing views of westward expansion, Hamlin and others remained among the Democratic party ranks.

As politicians debated national issues in Washington, anti-slavery attitudes grew stronger within the Maine state government. In June of 1848, the Maine Senate passed a resolution which reads partially as follows:

> The sentiment of this State is profound, sincere, and almost universal, that the influence of slavery upon productive energy is like the blight of mildew; that it is debasing and degrading in its influence upon free labor; that it is a moral and social evil; that it does violence to the rights of man as a rational, thinking, and accountable being; influenced by these and other important considerations, this State will firmly oppose the introduction of slavery into any territory acquired as an indemnity for the claims of Mexico.

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165 *Republican Journal*, February 12, 1847.
168 *Republican Journal*, July 7, 1848.
This resolution does not express opposition to slavery’s expansion solely due to potential political and economic ramifications, as has been the case in previous instances. Instead, the resolution comments on the “moral and social evil” of slavery, imitating the language of the earlier committed religious abolitionists. The resolution extends further instructions as well, “that our Senators in Congress are hereby instructed, and our representatives requested, to support and carry out the principles of the foregoing resolutions.” Well before anti-slavery became a key feature on the platform of any national party, Maine voters and political leaders had taken a clear moral stance on the issue.

A key topic that this chapter seeks to address is the extent to which newspapers helped shape the political culture by reporting on pressing news from faraway places, choosing to cover stories based on their moral or political stances, or conveying opinions on right and wrong to readers. Building on this, how did political, economic, or religious elites use the press to advance their political positions? Most newspapers in the mid-nineteenth century were affiliated with, or at least favorable toward, one party over another. Examining these newspapers, along with their partisan biases, could provide evidence for how mass media plays a role in shaping citizens’ political attitudes. An alternate theory that will also be explored in this chapter posits that citizens' political attitudes, particularly a growing disenchantment with the institution of slavery. In this scenario, newspapers adapted their coverage and focus to best fit the interests and persuasions of their readers. In all likelihood, a combination of these two theories likely best explains the growing public opinion against the expansion of slavery into western territories and the newfound confidence to criticize slavery on moral grounds in a political setting.

169 Republican Journal, July 7, 1848.
Tracing Slave Power and Free Labor Ideology

Discussions over the role and influence of ‘slave power’ began to feature significantly in American political discourse in the 1830s and early 1840s. In response to moral arguments made by abolitionists, many southern slaveholders responded by asserting that slavery was both a moral good and a practical necessity, with “natural, historical, and moral justification.”\(^\text{170}\) This positive argument on behalf of slavery led some to believe that the ultimate goal was legalizing slavery nationwide, and perhaps even forcing any powerless individual into slavery. Abolition activists such as the Massachusetts Antislavery Society capitalized on this somewhat irrational fear by declaring slavery to be “the deadliest foe of the rights of labor.”\(^\text{171}\) Nye writes about how, in order to advance their aims, some abolitionists promoted the idea that white immigrants or low-wage laborers could be drafted into slavery to serve the interests of the upper class. This was the central thesis behind free soil and free labor ideology. In discussing the motivations of the Free Soil party, Richards argues that “some men and women clamored for free soil because they opposed slavery, or because they opposed its expansion. But others joined the free-soil ranks largely because they hated and feared blacks.”\(^\text{172}\) Austin Allen goes as far as to call free soil-ism “an inherently racist form of antislavery.”\(^\text{173}\) These ‘slave power’ narratives decentralized the role of actual enslaved people and instead promoted fear among the white population. Through this somewhat deceptive strategy, the realities of slavery were brought much closer to home for white northerners, impressing upon them the need for an abolition movement.

Effects of the slave power and free labor arguments only slowly made their way to the ballot box. The presidential election of 1848 represents an interesting case study in this regard. By this point, messages concerning the danger of the slave power had been featured in newspapers throughout the north for over a decade, giving voters more than enough time to examine the theory’s merits and consider what should be done. Political parties rose to meet the demand for a party unapologetically opposed to the expansion of slavery. The most notable example of this in the 1840s was the Liberty Party, which moved beyond the moralistic, religious arguments of previous antislavery activists and instead developed a “secular appeal” by “emphasiz[ing] Northern economic and political self-interest.” By 1848, the Free Soil Party, led by former President Martin van Buren, had taken the torch as the leading antislavery party on the ticket. While slave power conspiracies grew in popularity, the Free Soil party never truly gained a foothold in Maine or in the nation as a whole. Van Buren won just over 12% of the vote in Maine in 1848, a similar percentage to his national vote share. Given the significant reckoning that would occur throughout the northern states just a few years later, how could a candidate opposing the expansion of slavery in the immediate aftermath of the Mexican-American War, which had prompted many of those questions and concerns, have done so poorly?

The result of the 1848 presidential election demonstrates the strength in the party’s respective infrastructure and the continued power of loyalty. This manifested itself through the “association” party members felt with each other, which they understood as “akin to a modern-day fellowship or fraternal order, with members ‘bonded’ to one another so that defections

would produce feelings of shock, anger, and even grief among the deserted.” As such, it was extremely difficult to break the two major parties’ hold on power. An analysis of voting patterns in Illinois from 1844 to 1856 found that for most of the period, both Democrats and Whigs retained high levels of party loyalty, with few members defecting to other upstart political parties. Additionally, a potential political realignment in the late 1840s was thwarted by general political similarities between the two parties. This has led some historians such as Richard P. McCormick to raise the astute question of whether “policy outputs affect voter allegiances at all?” His analysis focuses primarily on the lack of substantive policy differences between the Democrats and the Whigs throughout the 1840s, and posits that the existence of a developed party infrastructure and the presence of powerful and effective party leadership can best explain differences in political persuasion at the state level. This can help explain why states or localities with similar demographic makeups could contain significant partisan differences. As a whole, multiple factors complicated voter choice, with both Democrats and Whigs able to maintain large numbers of voters year after year.

The candidates for president in 1848 demonstrated the immense political, geographic, and issue-based diversity within both parties. Democratic nominee Lewis Cass hailed from the Midwestern state of Michigan, while Whig candidate and eventual President Zachary Taylor was a Louisiana slaveholder. Furthermore, the Whigs did not even ratify a policy platform at their party convention prior to the 1848 election, allowing them to campaign differently in different

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states. Standing in contrast to this lack of clarity were the Free Soilers, who centered their campaign around the idea of ‘slave power.’\textsuperscript{180} Despite the popularity of their issue-based appeal, institutional power and political loyalty won out, and Van Buren and the Free Soilers won no electoral votes. While some historians such as Leonard Richards and Jonathan Earle have argued for 1848 as a turning point election, I instead see it as a reinforcement of the status quo. Even in the face of a strong third party challenge, the Second Party System remained intact and continued to dominate at the polls in 1848. Joel Silbey emphasizes that historians must consider the 1848 election without the context of future events but rather using the knowledge that was available to political leaders and voters at the time.\textsuperscript{181} Without the benefit of hindsight, 1848 appeared just like any other election in the previous few decades. Therefore, our next task is to determine what changed in the years following that led to the upheaval of the existing political system.

\textbf{National Politics and the Compromise of 1850}

Despite this strong showing, the cracks in the foundation of the existing party system were nevertheless growing. As debates raged in Washington DC over how to treat the new territories acquired from Mexico, Mainers sought to make their voices heard in these important matters. The Maine state legislature sought to clarify its position on this growing issue in the late 1840s, though the results were hardly unanimous. In June 1848, the Maine House of Representatives considered a resolution to pass judgment on a federal bill that stated in part that Congress “has no power under the Constitution to interfere with or control the domestic


institutions of the several states…”182 Of course, the peculiar institution in question here was the proliferation of slavery. Perhaps surprisingly, this vote attracted relatively little controversy, and the resolution to support this language in the Congressional bill passed the Maine House by a commanding vote of 90-28. Representative Hiram Rose of Newport best explained why the bill passed despite the overall unpopularity of slavery among the political class in Maine. During consideration of the bill, Rose contended that the proposed legislation “was a copy of one of the resolutions of the Democratic National Convention, with sole reference to slavery in the states where it exists. Thus understood, he could see no objection to it.”183 This vote demonstrates the continued allegiance of Maine Democrats to the national party infrastructure. While ordinary Maine Democratic voters had vastly different interests and perspectives than southern members or party leaders, Maine House Democrats prioritized the position of their party as a whole over that of a large and loud segment of their constituent base. The Democrats viewed this party solidarity as an important victory, with George Sewall of Old Town emphasizing that “the Whig Party were without a creed [while] the Democrats, he was proud to say, had one.”184 However, party unity and cohesion is not the only viable reading of this situation, as it also represented a party moving farther away from the desires of their constituents.

Just one year later, the script seemingly flipped when a similar resolution was brought before the same Maine State House of Representatives aiming to “abolish slavery and the slave trade in the District of Columbia by all constitutional means.”185 This measure was introduced by the same member, Democrat George Sewall, who had declared victory after the passing of the previous year’s resolution to protect slavery where it existed. This time, Sewall changed his tune

182 Piscataquis Observer, June 29, 1848.
183 Piscataquis Observer, June 29, 1848.
184 Piscataquis Observer, June 29, 1848.
185 Republican Journal, June 15, 1849.
and successfully championed an anti-slavery measure, which passed the House comfortably 112-14. What could explain this supposed change of heart? The language included in this bill indicated a clear moral stance on slavery, reading that “the people of Maine regard slavery with feelings of profound abhorrence as conflicting with the great principles of freedom and free government, detrimental to political progress, and ought not to be upheld or sanctioned in the capital of our glorious union, the very sanctuary of Liberty.”\textsuperscript{186} However, any slight shift in state legislators’ opinions on the morality of slavery was not the cause of this change. Many lawmakers who voiced their disgust of slavery at the moral level nevertheless condoned it in certain instances in certain parts of the country. This can be seen as evidence of the successes of political antislavery, as historian Bruce Laurie found in his study of Massachusetts Free Soilers that “political action was an effective [anti-slavery] strategy and not a naive plunge into a smarmy world of compromise and accommodation.”\textsuperscript{187} These efforts demonstrated that antislavery activism did not have to be bound and defined solely by religious morals.

Any moral position was likely overshadowed by questions of political expediency. As the 1848 resolution shows, many Maine legislators, and specifically Democrats, were willing to overlook any personal moral qualms with slavery so as not to disrupt party unity or inadvertently advocate for systemic change. This was especially true with regard to the future of slavery in regions in which it was already established. Holt supports this notion by writing that at this time, “in both the North and the South, party regulars managed to fend off extremists” from both sides of the slavery issue.\textsuperscript{188} The evidence demonstrates that this was the case in Maine at this time, where the Democratic party remained relatively unified on the issue. The shift among Democrats

\textsuperscript{186} Republican Journal, June 15, 1849.
\textsuperscript{187} Allen, “Coalitions without Compromise: Reconsidering the Political Abolitionists,” Review of Beyond Garrison: Antislavery and Social Reform by Laurie, 58.
\textsuperscript{188} Holt, Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln 67.
to support an anti-slavery resolution in 1849 likely stemmed from the directives and support they received from the national party establishment. This evidence tracks with the ‘legal-institutional’ school of thought supported by McCormick and others, which “places partisan motives at the center” of all legislative actions.\textsuperscript{189} At this point, the Democratic Party’s broader strategy regarding the slavery issue involved conceding on banning the slave trade in Washington DC, which would eventually become law through the Compromise of 1850.

While the Compromise failed to unify the entire national party, it was highly popular among and supported by moderate Democrats in the North who “hoped it would forever settle the sectional issue.”\textsuperscript{190} These grand expectations help explain why northern Democrats such as George Sewall were willing to change their tune on touching slavery in a place it already existed. The Democrats understood that much of their party platform was unpalatable to liberal New Englanders, so they allowed their Northern members to be on the front lines clamoring for change, but only to the point where it continued to help the party. With regard to the issue of the Wilmot Proviso, “the Democrats ran two very different campaigns” with Southern members emphasizing the presidential nominee Lewis Cass’ pledge to veto the bill and Northern members stumping in support of free labor ideology.\textsuperscript{191} This voting pattern illustrates the immense control of the national party system on state legislators in this period.

Despite the strategically limited nature of anti-slavery activism within the Democratic-dominated Maine government, many of its representatives in Washington, DC, advocated ardently for anti-slavery positions. One such leader was Ephraim K. Smart, U.S. Representative from Maine’s 5th district, who delivered a thundering speech warning of the evils of slavery on

\textsuperscript{189} Renda, review of \textit{The Second American Party System}, by McCormick, 382.

\textsuperscript{190} Holt, \textit{Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln}, 71.

\textsuperscript{191} Holt, \textit{Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln}, 70.
January 24, 1849. Smart’s position is especially notable because he himself was a Democrat and hailed from Waldo County, a traditional Democratic stronghold. Smart cited recent resolutions in Maine as rationale for his speaking on the issue: “the Legislature of Maine has instructed the Senators and requested the Representatives of the state to vote to exclude slavery from all territories now Free. Being fully aware of the feeling of my district, and my State I have the honor in part to represent, upon the question of slavery or freedom in the Territories, it is my duty to represent that feeling in this House.” While this specific position, keeping slavery out of places where it has already been banned, may not have been highly controversial, Smart still articulates a thoughtful and data-driven argument in support of free labor as the ideal method for westward expansion. Smart makes a variety of points in support of his argument, including pulling from economic, agricultural, and military sources to demonstrate the existing superiority of the way of life in the North over the South. In the end, the Republican Journal, a Democratic newspaper centered in Waldo County, characterized the speech as “clear, forcible, logical, and the finest effort that has been made the present session [to oppose the expansion of slavery.]” However, the paper also notes that the public nature of the speech has potentially opened Smart up to charges of “recreancy and demagoguism” among some constituents. However, Smart clearly stated that he believed he was speaking on behalf of all Mainers who shared his convictions with regard to stopping the expansion of slavery.

The importance of newspapers in conveying information about the political happenings of national significance across long stretches of land cannot be overstated. Along with an unprecedented quantity of information available to voters, newspapers also introduced citizens to

192 Republican Journal, Feb 2, 1849.
193 Republican Journal, Feb 2, 1849.
194 Republican Journal, Feb 2, 1849.
a multitude of new arguments and ideas about the status and future of slavery in the United States. These new ideas came courtesy of copies of relevant and timely laws enacted by states or by the federal government, transcripts of speeches from the legislature in Augusta or D.C., and reports directly from places of great national interest. While most arguments found in the text certainly reinforced the partisan stance of the newspaper editors, occasionally publishers sought to expose their readers to new and different reasoning. One such example of this was a speech given by Henry Clay published in full by the Republican Journal in 1850. The Democratic-aligned Republican Journal did not often agree with Clay, a high-profile leader of the Whig Party, yet felt it was important to publish Clay’s speech because it represented a matter of great national importance. In their introduction to the speech, the newspaper editors wrote that “the general reader must bear with us for a time. The position of our leading men on this great and exciting subject, it is important for the people to know, and the doings of our present congress in connection with this sectional trouble, will become important matters in our national history. It is well that everyone be put in possession of the fullest reports of these speeches, that he may be enabled to place a just estimate upon them.” While this may be true, it is essential to also consider this situation through a political framework. In this speech, Clay sought to advocate on behalf of the Compromise of 1850, which was also supported by Maine Democrats and therefore the Republican Journal. While the editors may have cloaked their inclusion of this speech as in pursuit of the full truth, it is more than likely that political concerns played a role as well. Political factors must also be considered alongside financial ones, and the people largely demanded thorough accounts of proceedings in Augusta and Washington.

195 Republican Journal, February 8, 1850.
The explosion of newspaper coverage coincided with one of the most significant political events of the antebellum period that helped hasten the decline of the Second Party System in Maine – the Compromise of 1850. By no means were most Mainers opposed to compromises designed to maintain peace and stability throughout the country. Rather, many supported the official major party platforms, which largely involved protections for slavery in places where it already existed and ambiguous debates over its future in territories further west. Overwhelmingly, Mainers in 1850 were not willing to undertake personal risk to argue on behalf of abolitionist causes. The Compromise diverged from previous efforts to reduce sectional tensions by bringing the debate over slavery directly to Maine households. This occurred primarily through the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act bolstered in the broader compromise. Northerners who had previously been non-confrontational about the slavery issue suddenly found themselves the target of a federal government dominated by southern slave interests. Their supposed targeting played directly into theories of slave power, in which a structure commanded by slaveholders could wield power over northern whites. The Fugitive Slave Act provided fodder for these arguments, and specifically the provision that “gave federal commissioners the authority to summarily decide the fate of the accused” and “imposed heavy fines on northern whites who hid fugitives or helped them in any way.” Of particular concern was the denial of a jury trial to those accused under the law. This emboldened advocates of slave power to claim that the federal government was perhaps beholden to slaveholders and thus the law could be carried out unjustly. Another criticism of the law came from a states’ rights angle. Historian Michael Woods has written that “in the early 1850s, northern Democrats who later became Republicans

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used the states’ rights ideas to denounce the act’s centralizing features.”

Mainers with anti-slavery sympathies used the new vehicles for dissemination of information to spread messaging about the dangers of the Fugitive Slave Act around the state. The Piscataquis Observer made an impassioned philosophical and religious argument against the Act, stating:

> Until such a disgraceful law is expunged from our Statute books, we want to hear no more about ‘Free America!’ for there is not a monarch in the world that contains a more tyrannical or despotic law than this same act of our ‘glorious free Republican America!’ We do not believe that a man can be found in Maine mean enough to accept an appointment under this act, but if there is, he ought to receive the brand of Cain, that he may be known and shunned by his fellow man, as a thing more loathsome than a leper.

These attacks worked, and public opinion of the Act and the entire compromise was almost universally negative among the people. Citizens came together throughout the state to pass resolutions denouncing the law, with one declaring that because it is “in direct violation of the commands of God, we are bound by a law higher than any human enactment, utterly to disregard its provisions.” Others noticed inherent contradictions in the way the government regulated slavery, with conciliatory politicians such as Whig President Zachary Taylor declaring that slavery was something that should be “left exclusively to the respective states,” but still approving laws that “nationalized the regulation of slavery.” This perceived intrusion of the government into one’s daily life led many people to begin practicing forms of anti-slavery activism that had been previously unthinkable, most notably displaying open contempt for laws passed by Congress.

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198 *Piscataquis Observer*, October 24, 1850.

199 *Fountain and Journal*, October 25, 1850.

200 Brooke, “There is a North:” Fugitive Slaves, Political Crisis, and Cultural Transformation in the Coming of the Civil War, 102.
The fallout from the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act brought forward the slave power arguments long forwarded by abolitionists into the political mainstream. Their appeal grew far beyond the radical fringes to which they had once been confined. This shift began during deliberations over the compromise, with E.K. Smart noting in his speech in 1849 that “the Missouri Compromise line, and all the ‘compromise bills’ that have been introduced, are urged upon Congress by some, at least, I think, with a view of future acquisitions where the soil is indisputably rich enough to sustain the rude and uninformed culture of slaves.”\footnote{Republican Journal, February 2, 1849.} The fact that this moderate and respected Congressman openly questioned the intentions of members of his own party’s southern faction lent credence to the idea that the slaveholding interests would never stop trying to expand their reach over society, an idea that deeply threatened many Northerners and their way of life.

Voting on the Fugitive Slave Act revealed clear chasms within both major political parties. While the northern Whigs remained largely united and only about 5% of them voted in favor of the Fugitive Slave Act, over half of northern Democrats joined southern representatives to support the measure.\footnote{Richards, The Slave Power: The Free North and Southern Domination 1780-1860, 111.} As a whole, analysis by Alvin Moore finds that 80% of legislators from the ‘Upper North’ voted against the Fugitive Slave Act, while majorities of both Democrats and Whigs in the ‘Deep South’ and border regions voted in favor of the bill.\footnote{Alvin Edward Moore, “An Analysis of the Congressional Roll Calls and the Voting Patterns of the Compromise of 1850,” American University, unpublished master’s thesis, 1958, \url{https://www.proquest.com/docview/2572546727?pq-origsite=gscholar&fromopenview=true}, 101-102.} More significantly, support for the Fugitive Slave Act was stronger in Maine than any other state in the ‘Upper North,’ with four out of the state’s seven U.S. Representatives voting yes.\footnote{Moore, “An Analysis of the Congressional Roll Calls and the Voting Patterns of the Compromise of 1850,” 103.} While all four of these Representatives were Democrats, the remaining two Democrats from Maine joined
the lone Whig to vote no. Analyzing vote counts from the Compromise of 1850 can lead one to believe that it was the Democratic Party, not the Whig Party, that was just a few years away from total collapse. After all, Democrats in Maine were entirely divided on both sides of this highly polarizing issue, while nearly all Whigs in northern states fell into line against ratification of the Compromise. Whigs were certainly split in other areas of the country, most notably the border states, but this fails to explain their rapid demise in Maine. While fallout from the Compromise of 1850 cannot explain their collapse, it can help explain why the Whig Party failed to grow and attract new voters when it faced questions on other issues. When the bubble that was the Democratic Party would eventually burst and members who had questioned the party’s commitment to the institution of slavery began their quest for a new party, the Whigs were nowhere to be found. The Whig Party did not market itself as a suitable alternative for anti-slavery Democrats, instead continuing to avoid the issue even once it became clear it was a political winner in Maine.

Perhaps because of the debates engulfing both parties, the largely unpopular Fugitive Slave Act did not immediately upend the existing political order in Maine or in the United States. Despite the growing unpopularity of Democrats on the national level, the party continued to win majorities in statewide races in Maine. This was the case in the 1850 gubernatorial election, in which Democrat John Hubbard won a ten point victory over Whig candidate William G. Crosby.205 Similarly, Democrats retained their control of the state legislature, and used their power via the indirect election of Senators to send Democrat Hannibal Hamlin back to Washington. Hamlin’s re-appointment was seen positively and “to the satisfaction of a large majority of the people of Maine.”206 Some of this success on the state level could have been due

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205 Maine Register, 1851.
206 Fountain and Journal, August 2, 1850.
to the fact that 1850 was not a presidential election year, and thus national issues were not prioritized among the voting populace. Nevertheless, the Maine delegation sent to Congress to vote on federal bills such as the Fugitive Slave Act remained unchanged after the 1850 elections, with five Democrats compared to only two Whigs.207

Overall, the Democratic Party was able to maintain its status as the ‘big tent’ party in Maine, with its candidates having enough anti-slavery credentials to maintain high levels of public support in this politically tumultuous time. Slavery was clearly not the defining political issue, and discontent with a federal law had not yet begun to significantly impact local and statewide elections in Maine. Hamlin’s strong approval ratings came from members of both parties who were able still to put aside their differences to support a man who has “assiduously devoted his talents and energies to the interests of the Union.”208 More importantly, the two party structure in which the groups disagree on certain policy issues but, at least within the state of Maine, support a similar view of the purpose of government, remained strong.

Slavery’s Emergence as a Defining Issue in Media and Politics

Despite the seemingly strong appearance of partisan stability, calls emerged in the early 1850s advocating for change. Dissidents built off of the momentum gathered by past third parties including the Liberty and Free Soil parties and continued to prioritize opposing the extension of slavery in their platforms. Abolitionist groups that had once commanded only miniscule attention were now serious political players. One anti-slavery organization hosted a convention in January 1852 in Augusta, with commentators noting that the large Winthrop Hall was “pretty fully

207 Republican Journal, September 27, 1850.
208 Fountain and Journal, August 2, 1850.
attended,” with Mainer as well as distinguished guests from surrounding states making the trip to the state capital.\textsuperscript{209} This momentum carried through to the federal and state elections later that year, which produced a mixed bag of results. To the naked eye, Democrats seemed to have won the day. Bowdoin College graduate Franklin Pierce won commanding victories in Maine and across the nation which propelled him to the White House, and Democrats once again won a strong majority in the Maine House of Representatives.\textsuperscript{210} Pierce chose largely to avoid the slavery issue entirely, instead focusing on economic, military, and foreign policy matters. This strategy proved successful, with the admittedly pro-Democratic newspaper the \textit{Republican Journal} labeling election day 1852 as one of “glorious Democratic triumphs.”\textsuperscript{211} The Whigs, by contrast, suffered “a Waterloo defeat, such a complete disaster and rout.”\textsuperscript{212} The only race in Maine in which Democrats did not win outright was the gubernatorial election in which neither incumbent Democrat John Hubbard nor Whig challenger William Crosby reached a majority. The evenly split Maine Senate chose Crosby as the next governor, giving the Whig party their last statewide victory in Maine.\textsuperscript{213} On the surface, the elections of 1852 could be characterized as a great success for Democrats and a terrible defeat for Whigs.

How did debates over slavery impact Democrats’ tremendous 1852 election cycle at the national level? After all, the issue of the Compromise of 1850 and the Fugitive Slave Act nearly ripped northern Democrats apart at the seams. In the early days of the 1852 campaign, prominent Democrats soon discovered that “the rift over the Compromise of 1850 was too wide to make an explicit declaration feasible, so they settled for a statement that the party would ‘abide by’ the

\textsuperscript{209} \textit{Piscataquis Observer}, January 29, 1852.
\textsuperscript{210} \textit{Republican Journal}, October 1, 1852.
\textsuperscript{211} \textit{Republican Journal}, October 22, 1852.
\textsuperscript{212} \textit{Republican Journal}, November 5, 1852.
\textsuperscript{213} \textit{Fountain and Journal}, January 13, 1853.
Compromise measures and faithfully execute them, including the fugitive slave law.”214 While this division within the party should have opened up a lane from which the Whig Party could launch a political attack, their own weakness prevented this. The Whigs also emerged from their convention a divided group, with a slight majority of delegates endorsing a measure endorsing the Compromise and the fugitive slave law and promising to maintain it.215 Importantly, this lack of substantive policy difference prevented Whig candidate Winfield Scott from capitalizing on increasing anti-slavery feelings in northern states. Because there was little to separate Maine Democrats and Whigs with regard to anti-slavery policy, this national issue cannot explain why the Whig Party collapsed on itself.

However, it can provide an explanation for how and why they failed to bounce back. In seeking to appeal to everyone, they instead appealed to no one. There was a political need to be met, yet the Whigs refused to satisfy it. Holt attributes the Democratic Party’s strong 1852 showing to its attempts at “reuniting its northern and southern wings behind the longtime pledge to crush slavery agitation, and attracting the bulk of the country’s new voters.”216 While the Democrats united the two wings of their party behind a clear and succinct set of principles, the Whigs continued to run separate, inconsistent, and unconvincing campaigns. On the national level, “in the wake of Scott’s rout, deeply disillusioned Whigs looked for a realignment of parties.”217

A third group that has not been considered up to this point are abolition activists who sought to prevent slavery expanding west. This group traditionally backed either establishment

216 Holt, Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln, 72.
Whigs or various short lived third parties, neither of which represented an avenue for long term success. However, something changed in 1852, as abolitionists began to understand that future political antislavery would require development of a sustainable party outside of the Whigs. Michael Holt pinpoints the beginning of this realization in 1850, when both parties agreed to “accepting the Compromise of 1850 as a final settlement of the slavery issue…which came over the bitter protests of many northern Whigs who wanted to run against the Compromise.”\textsuperscript{218} The political tightrope walked by the Whigs for years, which involved allowing Northern and Southern members of the party to advocate positions on slavery and its expansion that best suited their respective constituencies, had snapped. Whig leaders and supporters committed to the anti-slavery cause needed to look beyond their party. The lack of enthusiasm for the candidacy of Whig presidential nominee Gen. Winfield Scott in 1852 confirmed to many Maine Whigs that the party was in decline. Many anti-slavery Free Soilers from Maine, who had supported van Buren four years prior and clearly disapproved of the national Democratic party position on slavery, chose to abstain rather than support the Whigs, “perhaps due to conflicting feelings.”\textsuperscript{219} Anyone who wished to see fundamental change in the treatment of slavery in American politics soon realized they would need a new political home.

Even in the wake of their humiliating defeat in 1852 in which they sought to avoid the slavery issue altogether, the Whig Party failed to effectuate a productive shift in policy. Whig leaders such as William Seward attempted to cater the party’s strategy to the issues of the day, including suggesting that northern Whigs come out in vehement opposition to the Nebraska bill in January 1854.\textsuperscript{220} However, the party was so divided at the national level that this strategy was

\textsuperscript{218} Holt, Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln, 244.
\textsuperscript{220} Holt, Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln, 266.
only carried out with highly flawed efficiency. Even in a target-rich environment in which the Democratic Pierce administration openly endorsed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Whig Party was unable to mount an effective political offense.\textsuperscript{221} While the Whigs achieved temporary success in Maine in 1853 over temperance issues, their inability to take a clear stance on the slavery position contributed to their rapid downfall.

While both the national Democratic and Whig parties sought to overlook the issue of slavery, many newspapers in Maine decided to amplify their coverage of it. Up until this point, slavery was merely one of many political matters that could be found in the pages of local Maine newspapers. Coverage sometimes focused on slavery in an international context, and often the stories were overshadowed by other issues regarded as more relevant to the people of Maine. Marissa King and Heather Haveman emphasize the role of mass media in building an anti-slavery movement, writing that “by weaving invisible threads of connection among their audience members, mass media can sustain invisible communities whose members share ideas, values, and principles.”\textsuperscript{222} By the mid-1850s, slavery was the dominant topic of discussion in newspapers all around the state, allowing for community building among distant peoples. An analysis of the series of newspapers centered in Kennebec County represents an interesting case study to determine the scope of this change. In the mid-nineteenth century and beyond, the city of Gardiner was a “robust printing center” which “steadily chronicled local goings on and kept up with the news of the state and nation” through a multitude of newspapers, pamphlets, and books.\textsuperscript{223} Gardiner was an industrial city and an early railroad hub, making it an important

\textsuperscript{221} Holt, Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln, 248.  
\textsuperscript{223} Dawn Thistle, “Have you tried one of our Time Machines?,” Gardiner Public Library, October 18, 2016, https://gardinerpubliclibrary.org/have-you-tried-one-of-our-time-machines/#more-265.
economic center in Maine. Gardiner is one of the largest communities in Kennebec County, a traditional area of strength for the Maine Whig party. In 1841, the Whig gubernatorial candidate won over 57% of the vote in Kennebec County despite losing the state as a whole by over 12 points.\(^{224}\) As anti-slavery sentiment grew among many of Maine’s publications in the 1840s, Gardiner’s preeminent newspaper, at this time known as the *Cold Water Fountain*, did not follow. Despite the political bent of the city, the publication largely ignored the issue of slavery. In 1844, the word “slavery” was used on a total of four pages across the whole year, and in 1846 that number was zero.\(^{225}\) As more national attention was placed on the future of slavery with the conclusion of the Mexican-American War and the adoption of the Compromise of 1850, Gardiner’s newspaper increased its coverage, though only slightly. In the years between 1848 and 1853, the word “slavery” is mentioned on an average of about twelve pages per year. While this is an increase over the previous decade, many of these mentions focused on an international context, and rarely does the newspaper take a stance on any key issue involving slavery. Despite evolving public opinion, the editors of the newspaper chose not to enter the growing fray.

A combination of public opinion and changing elite ideas of morality forced the Gardiner newspaper industry to evolve. The *Fountain and Journal*, as the paper had been long known, was

\(^{224}\) *Maine Register*, 1841.

\(^{225}\) *Cold Water Fountain* (Gardiner, ME).
rebranded as the *Northern Home Journal* in January 1854. In introducing the paper’s new identity, the editors made their role clear: “And while the Northern Home Journal will be entirely neutral in party and sectarian matters, its conductors will consider themselves free to rebuke inconsistencies, to explore corruption, or to speak a word in favor of any desirable reform - cut where it will. This is an essential ingredient of independence.”

This mission differed significantly from that of preceding newspapers, who had often taken a deferential approach when reporting on political issues. The effects of this change could be seen quickly, particularly in the rapid change of how the issue of slavery was reported. Between 1854 and 1856, the word “slavery” was mentioned in the newspaper on an average of 64 pages per year. Essentially, almost every weekly issue of the paper had at least one story that highlighted debates over slavery. Often it was many more considering that each issue included only two or three pages of news content with many stories on each page.

This pattern held for newspapers around the state, as slavery received considerably more attention than in previous years. Stories about slavery dominated the headlines even when there were highly engrossing local stories to report, such as when original reporting on the Bath church fire and riot of July 1854 shared prime real estate in the paper with a story detailing the migration of free soilers to the Kansas territory. Equally important to the quantity of reporting was the willingness of print media to promote their opinions on the issue, and most sources took a decidedly anti-slavery stance.

Studying newspapers can be very informative in investigating how new ideas came to enter the public consciousness. After all, the vast majority of Mainers heard about events around

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226 *Northern Home Journal* (Gardiner, ME), January 5, 1854.
227 *Northern Home Journal*.
228 *Northern Home Journal*, July 13, 1854.
the country via newspapers as intermediaries. Because these newspapers were rarely objective and instead chose to highlight certain events from certain political angles, it is reasonable to infer that changing public opinion around national issues was the result of a top-down diffusion of information and ideas. Under this theory, most Mainers were not naturally inclined to support the plight of the enslaved, but were instead convinced to do so based in part on the sensationalist stories they consumed in the newspaper. However, it is also possible that newspapers provided a means by which national issues could be localized to the benefit of the political environment. Slavery could be directly tied into existing local issues. Neal Dow, for instance, despised slavery because he supported temperance, and he felt strongly that “rum and slavery fed off each other.” The introduction of slavery into local political debates could therefore provide a launching pad for more thorough discussion. To more fully consider these ideas, it would certainly help to take a look at the key components found in stories about slavery at this time.

Coverage of the violent confrontations over the future of slavery in the West proved tremendously popular with the news consuming public in northeastern states. In his book *Seeding Civil War: Kansas in the National News: 1845-1858*, Craig Miner argues that newspaper publishers created a “verbal mania,” with presses on both sides of the issue quickly developing propaganda campaigns to benefit their allies. Maine newspapers were among the first in the nation to train their focus on the Kansas-Nebraska Act and the violence that followed. My analysis found that both the *Piscataquis Observer* and the *Northern Home Journal* dedicated coverage to the issue on at least fifty-five pages every year from 1854 to 1856. This translates to a situation in which new stories were being reported from out west almost every week for three

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229 Eschner, “Why Was Maine the First State to Try Prohibition?”
years. Importantly, both of the newspapers in question here were explicitly anti-slavery, and their coverage was tilted in that manner.

In his research of newspapers from this period, Miner found that newspapers sought to create a culture of martyrdom by “focus[ing] on the ‘innocent victims’ of a spate of incidents, each of which was blown out of proportion.”231 This conclusion certainly holds true among the anti-slavery papers in Maine. In many issues, extended space was dedicated to reports from sympathetic sources on the Kansas frontlines. These articles often highlighted the both real and symbolic importance of the conflict, and the need for Northerners to get involved:

I expect the great battle, yes, the final battle between freedom and slavery, to be fought upon the virgin soil of Kansas territory. I shall not be surprised to see blood flow in our midst over this question; and if there are any young men in Maine who want to do their country, and humanity and God a good deed, let them at once come to Kansas, and come with a determined heart, that knows no fear.232

While it doesn’t appear as though many Mainers took this advice and joined the anti-slavery militia forces out west, this type of rhetoric had massive effects on the political situation in Maine. Part of this is because “Maine was already established as a prominent exporter of people,” often to places with more fertile soil including the West.233 Some Mainers may have had direct personal connections with people in those regions, thus intensifying their interest in the brewing conflict. Many others could be drawn in by reports from Kansas reaching Maine with gripping stories of martyrs who had given their lives for the purpose of maintaining freedom in the Union. To many readers in Maine with anti-slavery sympathies, the newspaper coverage demonstrated that Northerners in Kansas were not only protecting new lands from the

231 Varon, “Reading Kansas: Media Bias and the Territorial Struggle over Slavery,” review of Seeding Civil War: Kansas in the National News, 1845-1858 by Miner, 95.
232 Piscataquis Observer, April 26, 1855.
tyranny of the slave power, but they were defenders of democracy itself. Many articles highlighted the anti-democratic tendencies of those on the pro-slavery side, with reporting such as “the Missourians forced the judges away from the polls, and chose such as they like…One of our printing presses was threatened with demolition.”

This style of emotional coverage of a highly charged issue helped turn a national issue into a local one that truly affected voting decisions. No longer could Mainers who desired change sit on the sidelines while entrenched institutions continued to have their way.

**Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Elections of 1854 and 1855**

The first chance for the reinvigorated anti-slavery coalition to make themselves heard at the polls came with the elections in the fall of 1854, but they lacked an effective party vehicle through which to gain power. Voters were presented with multiple choices in this election, including traditional Democrats, traditional Whigs, anti-slavery ‘Morrill’ Democrats, and Know Nothings. On the national level, the bill’s supporters included almost all southern representatives and about half of northern Democrats, though the remaining northern Democrats saw the legislation as a violation of the “sacred compact” of the Missouri Compromise.

Various positions on slavery were hotly debated in this election cycle, with candidates making both moral and political arguments on behalf of their stances. Whig U.S. Representative Israel Washburn characterized the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a “great question now before the people” and focused on the influence of slave power and the need to repeal the new legislation.

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234 *Piscataquis Observer*, April 26, 1855.
236 *Piscataquis Observer*, September 7, 1854.
be noted that Whigs running in state level races did not focus on the issue nearly as much as Washburn and other candidates for office in Washington. Even Democrats joined in to oppose the new law, albeit for vastly different reasons. At the Piscataquis County Democratic Convention, “anti-Nebraska resolutions were unanimously adopted.”237 However, Democratic Congressional nominee Samuel Blake sought to place the blame for the misguided law on the Whig Party. Blake claimed that the Act “originated in an amendment proposed by a Whig Senator from Kentucky, and was carried by the South voting in almost a solid body, Whigs and Democrats, as if upon a local question…The Democratic members of our legislature almost unanimously resolved against it.”238 Nowhere in his speech did Blake make any references to slavery. Instead, Blake based his and Democrats’ opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act entirely on its violation of the Missouri Compromise and its potential to enrage sectional debates.

By contrast, Anson Morrill opposed the extension of slavery in a way that Free Soilers and other opponents of the institution found appealing. He argued that “the doctrine should be no further concessions to the demands of the South…Henceforth non extension of slavery into any territory belonging to the United States.”239 Upon accepting the nomination for governor, Morrill detailed his firm belief against the Kansas-Nebraska Act and implored his supporters to join him in calling for its removal.240 The manner in which Morrill discussed his policy positions on slavery issues was unique for the time, and this contributed to his electoral success. Edward Schriver describes the heated debate within the abolitionist movement in Maine as to whether it would be prudent to support a politician for governor who was not a “Pure Free Democrat.”241 In

237 Piscataquis Observer, September 7, 1854.
238 Piscataquis Observer, September 7, 1854.
240 Piscataquis Observer, June 15, 1854.
the end, the group decided to back Morrill, which brought the anti slavery-ticket increased legitimacy and ultimately a victory in the gubernatorial election. This debate represents the culmination of the years-long shift to political antislavery from previous iterations of the movement that focused on moral and religious arguments. Committed abolitionists had to compromise slightly on their principles, but this allowed them to wield influence in the political system. While this decision was made by political elites, it was necessitated by an evolving public that yearned for a candidate to adequately and forcefully express their anti-slavery values. After decades of Democratic dominance in Maine and little attention placed on slavery at the governing level, the voting public’s demand for change led to a complete transformation of the party system in an extremely short amount of time.

While antislavery advocates experienced unprecedented success, the Maine Whig party had become almost entirely defunct. In 1854, the Whig Party had “adopted the most pronounced antislavery platform of any of the state's parties,” yet had still “suffered a decisive defeat at the state level at the hands of a broad-based independent party.”242 The one area in which the Whig Party remained strong was at the federal level, where Whigs constituted four of the six representatives elected to the U.S. House.243 Remaining Whig supporters could be broken down into two camps: those who had left the party in search of greener pastures and those party loyalists who remained in search of a way forward. Among the former group, many had chosen to support Morrill or join other anti-slavery factions. However, a sizable contingent of Whigs in Maine took another approach and instead decided to side openly with their long-standing rivals,

243 Northern Home Journal, September 14, 1854.
the Democrats. This was not an entirely new approach, as Marc Kruman has pointed out that “Whigs and Democrats had long come together to weed out ‘revolutionary republicanism.’”

Nevertheless, the power of the politically insurgent force was much larger than in previous years. Kenneth Shover describes the fear that these establishment Whigs expressed, given that they “saw the movement to form a new and necessarily sectional party as absurd, unnecessary, and infinitely dangerous.” If one adopts this mindset, it is clear to see how these Whigs saw joining their former rivals as the safer option. Thomas J. D. Fuller and E. Wilder Farley were committed Whig U.S. Representatives when in 1855 they voiced their concerns about the growing anti-slavery movement and its potential to upend American politics. In a meeting of Maine Whigs in August 1855, Fuller “contrasted the ‘self styled Republican Party’ with the old Republican Party. The latter was founded upon principles of equal rights, religious liberty, free suffrage, &c. The position of the former is exemplified in the prescriptive principles of the Know Nothings and the arbitrary provisions of the Maine Law.” In all likelihood, the ‘old Republican party’ to which Fuller refers was not an actual, formal political organization but rather a broad conception of previous upstart political entities that brought in new ideas but did little to challenge or threaten the status quo. This supported a goal of both the Democratic and Whig parties in this election cycle of emphasizing their commitment to the principles of past American leaders including Jefferson, Jackson, and Polk. Farley added on by directly discussing the impact of slavery in his speech, declaring that he would “endeavor to satisfy you that upon the question of African slavery, they are just as wrong as upon Know Nothingism and

245 Shover, “Another Look at the Late Whig Party: The Perspective of the Loyal Whig,” 552.
246 *Northern Home Journal*, August 30, 1855.
247 *Piscataquis Observer*, September 5, 1855.
the Maine Law.’”\textsuperscript{248} The positions taken by these party leaders directly speak to some of the reasons behind the Whigs’ demise. Holt argues that “in 1853, 1854, and 1855, the party disintegrated because of the apathy, alienation, and voter defection” that were not properly addressed.\textsuperscript{249} The evidence supports applying this theory to Maine.

The Whig party in Maine witnessed the shift in public opinion in favor of combatting the expansion of slavery and did nothing to adjust their platform to cater to these new conditions. Instead, they emphasized their “conservative” nature and complete unwillingness to come to any sort of compromise with the fusionist ticket.\textsuperscript{250} Undoubtedly, this is a case of public opinion fundamentally changing the political structure, and elites being too slow to catch up. Whig leaders such as Fuller and Farley’s call for remaining Whigs to support Democratic candidates in 1855 yielded some short-term success. Though he lost the popular vote to incumbent Governor Morrill, Democratic candidate Samuel Wells was elected governor after Whigs and Democrats in the State Senate combined to support him. However, there would not be another Democrat elected to statewide office in Maine for another twenty five years. Rather than seek to qualify their positions to appeal to more voters, the committed Whigs’ quest for stability had instead granted them a slight reprieve and the complete destruction of their party.

By contrast, Morrill ran as the nominee for the newly minted Republican Party and gave slavery policy a large role in his campaign. He positioned himself as unapologetically “opposed to the admission of any more slave states to the Union,” and the passion within his campaign could be measured by the fact that he held “the largest and most enthusiastic ever held.”\textsuperscript{251} Five of the six main points on Morrill’s campaign platform focused directly on national issues,

\textsuperscript{248} *Northern Home Journal*, August 30, 1855.
\textsuperscript{249} Holt, *Political Parties and American Political Development from the Age of Jackson to the Age of Lincoln*, 248.
\textsuperscript{250} *Piscataquis Observer*, August 30, 1855.
\textsuperscript{251} *Piscataquis Observer*, August 30, 1855.
including calling for a repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law and a general call to “regard slavery sectional and freedom national.”\textsuperscript{252} While it was likely due to the fact that the popularity of temperance had faded as a result of the Portland Rum Riot, Morrill nevertheless made slavery policy a central part of his re-election effort. While he ultimately lost at the ballot box, Morrill laid the groundwork for future Republican candidates to win state level office on a platform centered on fighting the expansion of slavery.

**Republican Ascendancy Culminates in a New Party System**

Building off the successes of the previous year, the coronation of the Republican Party in Maine in 1856 was swift and seamless. The *Northern Home Journal* was quick to praise the Republican convention as one in which “patriotism rose superior to partyism. Old differences were forgotten, and the good of the country only was looked to, - the saving it from demagogues, who are periling its existence for base and selfish ends - who are sapping the very foundation of freedom, and aiming to make slavery a national institution.”\textsuperscript{253} Throughout the 1856 election season, newspapers reported on multiple conventions of citizens convened around the state to demonstrate support for Republican candidates. One meeting in Kennebec County attracted as many as three thousand “friends of freedom” committed to “out-rally [their] pro-slavery friends at the polls, as well as at the preliminary meetings.”\textsuperscript{254} The 1856 Republican County Convention in Piscataquis County was attended by approximately 1,500 people, a number higher than the

\textsuperscript{252} *Piscataquis Observer*, August 30, 1855.  
\textsuperscript{253} *Northern Home Journal*, June 26, 1856.  
\textsuperscript{254} *Northern Home Journal*, August 21, 1856.
vote total of any previous candidate in the county.\textsuperscript{255} Overall, it is clear that enthusiasm for Republicans was high across the board.

Democrats were unable to mount an effective case to halt the Republican momentum. Pro-Democratic newspapers resorted to attacking gubernatorial candidate and former Democrat Hannibal Hamlin by claiming his outrage over popular sovereignty and the Kansas-Nebraska Act was not genuine.\textsuperscript{256} Even if this was the case, the result was still to concede ground to Republicans on the ideological issue of slavery and its expansion. Matthew Karp emphasizes further differences between the parties’ approaches, writing that “while national Republicans flirted with revolutionary populism, in 1856 both Democrats and the nativist American Party stressed the virtue of established institutions, the certainty of legal precedent, and the wisdom of a veteran political leadership.”\textsuperscript{257} This pitch would involve a return to the status quo on the issue of slavery’s expansion, a position that was untenable to the majority of Mainers. Douglas Egerton also notes that Democrats sought to “depict their northern free soil opponents as militant abolitionists determined to liberate southern slaves.”\textsuperscript{258} This strategy may have worked in the border states, but in Maine public opinion was not on their side. Overall, while Democrats hoped that their institutional and desire for victory would carry them forward, Republicans placed all of their trust in an electoral populist reckoning over the future of slavery.

Results from federal and state elections in 1856 demonstrated that slavery had become the dominant factor in Maine politics. What was left of the Whig party lacked a clear political identity and instead drifted further toward the Democrats to the point where at their state

\textsuperscript{255} Piscataquis Observer, August 28, 1856.
\textsuperscript{256} Republican Journal, August 29, 1856.
convention they “refused to condemn the Pierce administration, the Democratic national platform, or the repeal of the Missouri Compromise.” While the Democrats remained in a relatively strong position in the leadup to the election, the Republicans were unquestionably ascendant, with a grassroots political movement of former Whigs, Know-Nothings, and anyone disapproving of the current Democratic administration in Washington coming together in pursuit of change. This evidence supports Karp’s argument of a ‘populist’ Republican movement.

Seats in the Maine House of Representatives in selected counties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>1854 Dems</th>
<th>1855 Whigs</th>
<th>1856 Morrill Dems</th>
<th>1855 Abolition /Morrill Dems</th>
<th>1856 Republicans</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cumberland</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennebec</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>Lincoln</td>
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<td>Penobscot</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>11</td>
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Republicans cultivated supporters from a diverse array of political backgrounds. Using voting data, Gienapp estimated that about three quarters of Whigs and one quarter of Democrats in 1854 voted Republican just two years later. They joined nearly all Morrill supporters from his past two gubernatorial campaigns to form a powerful political coalition. Local political leaders all over the state called meetings to discuss policy goals and to nominate candidates for various offices. The Republican movement in Maine was truly state-wide, and the evidence

demonstrates this. At the gubernatorial level, former Democratic Senator Hannibal Hamlin ran as a Republican in 1856 and won a twenty point victory over the incumbent Wells, winning every county but one along the way.\textsuperscript{262} In the state legislature, Republicans claimed 117 out of a possible 144 seats, with majorities in every county outside of a one seat deficit in the perennially Democratic Aroostook County.\textsuperscript{263} The chart above demonstrates the dominance of the Republican performance in 1856 in Maine’s five most populated counties. Democrats could not maintain any of the advantages they had created for themselves in 1855, instead losing ground to Republicans in every notable county. Slavery policy drove much of this change even in state level elections, as there was a tripling in the number of state representatives who were expressly abolitionist.\textsuperscript{264} With temperance relegated to a second tier issue, campaigning on the future of slavery was more than enough for Maine Republicans to win state level elections.

Republicans made similarly strong gains at the federal level. The party won each of the state’s seven Congressional districts and sent an entirely Republican delegation to Washington.\textsuperscript{265} In the presidential election, Maine delivered its electoral votes to Republican Presidential candidate John C. Fremont, who defeated James Buchannan in the state by over twenty-five points.\textsuperscript{266} This represented a notable change from four years prior, when the state supported Democrat Franklin Pierce over Winfield Scott by a margin of over ten points.\textsuperscript{267} The scope and scale of these stunning victories helped convey the totality of the political transformation that had occurred in Maine. The Democratic political infrastructure, which had

\textsuperscript{262} Maine Register, 1857.
\textsuperscript{263} Republican Journal, September 12, 1856.
\textsuperscript{264} Republican Journal, September 14, 1855.
\textsuperscript{265} Piscataquis Observer, September 18, 1856.
\textsuperscript{266} Maine Register, 1857.
maintained the party’s dominance around the state, had been broken. Populous counties that had almost always gone for Democrats in the decades previous, such as Cumberland and Oxford, were instead won by Republicans by double digit margins. Some Democratic leaders such as Governor Wells placed their faith in an idea that traditional Democratic coastal regions would support the party because he believed that “if Maine goes for the Republican, the South will not employ her ships.” However, these arguments clearly failed, as counties with large maritime industries such as Cumberland and Kennebec voted overwhelmingly for Republicans. Overall, the Republican Party had emerged as the dominant institution in Maine, a status it would retain for decades to come. With the Whig Party out of the equation, a new two party system emerged that pitted the largely establishment Democrats against the rising Republicans. Many third party groups such as the Free Soilers embedded themselves within the Republican Party, giving it the upper hand entering this new political period.

What does this evidence on the changing value of slavery as a political tool in Maine politics tell us about the reasons behind the collapse of the Second Party System and the emergence of the Republican party? First, slavery was not a primary initial factor in the initial weakening of the Whig party in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Though the potential spread of slavery into new western territories and the fear and disgust that resulted from the Fugitive Slave Act prompted Maine politicians to respond, these factors did not play a significant role on Mainers’ voting behavior. As such, the Whig collapse that began with the ‘Waterloo defeat’ of 1852 cannot be attributed in large part to an increased focus on slavery. Though tensions over slavery were almost to the point of boiling over, it had not yet happened. We must instead look to the ethnocultural factors discussed in the previous chapter for evidence of this decline.

268 *Northern Home Journal*, August 21, 1856.
Second, once the issue of slavery took hold in Maine and around the country, it demanded that an adequate party infrastructure rise to meet the demands of voters. The existing political infrastructure of the Second Party System had been designed to promote stability at all costs, which explains how the Whig party drifted closer to the Democratic party as its existence became threatened in the mid-1850s. In part because of their desire to maintain a national appeal, neither of the existing parties were able to change their respective platforms to accommodate voters in Maine who sought to prioritize anti-slavery principles. This necessitated the development of an alternative party designed specifically for this purpose, a role filled by the Republican Party. The Republican Party was a grassroots organization created from the bottom up, molded to meet the needs of the voters who had been left behind by the old parties in large part due to the slavery issue. Given these constraints, the collapse of the Second Party System was inevitable, with a split between party leaders and public sentiment requiring the creation of a new political scheme.
Conclusion

The story of the collapse of the Second Party System in Maine is undoubtedly a complicated one, with multiple factors accelerating the change from every direction. In order to accurately study and reflect on this period in history, one must consider all of these potential causes together.

Ethnocultural factors most directly led to the collapse of the Whigs and the broader Second Party System. Evolving public opinion on nativism and temperance opened up new political opportunities on which both Democrats and Whigs struggled to capitalize. Even as the state government took proactive and unprecedented steps to demonstrate its commitment to these issues, party organizations failed to assert their positions in a way designed to attract more voters. This was most clearly seen in the aftermath of the passage of the Maine Law in 1851 with support from both parties. What could have been a unifying moment given the broad popularity of the law within middle class and political circles instead led to division within each party apparatus. While both parties were affected, it was the Democrats for whom intra-party divisions were most impactful. Within the next few years, the Maine Democratic Party experienced several internal splits caused by debates over temperance policy that served to potentially threaten its future. As the main party leaders stayed largely silent on the issue, factions emerged led by party members such as Anson Morrill and Shepard Cary who emphasized commitment to opposite sides of the temperance debate. Each faction would grow to command voters disillusioned with the existing state of affairs in which the Democratic Party lacked political clarity.
In part due to this instability, control of the political institutions in Maine changed hands frequently between 1850 and 1854 as various events at the local level shaped party positions, political engagement, and voter behavior. In addition to splits within the Democratic Party, third party movements emerged to help shape the political discussion. The Know-Nothing movement sought to emphasize a commitment to nativism. The targeting of immigrants and Catholics by this group and those allied with it tied back in with debates over temperance, as proponents of prohibitionist laws often designed them to appeal to those with nativist biases. Anson Morrill was the most successful at harnessing the combined power of these forces, focusing his victorious 1854 third party campaign on his principles of temperance and nativism.

The chaos of the early 1850s would only consume one of the two major political parties, and it was not the one that was seemingly faced with the most internal turmoil. Instead, it was the Whig Party that emerged from this period so drastically weakened that it would never again win another statewide race. How could this have happened? Political change in Maine occurred as a result of an ongoing process to mobilize moral and ethnocultural issues into votes. In the aftermath of the passage of the Maine Law, the Whig Party in the state became a reasonably effective vehicle for advancing temperance policy. Whig candidate William Crosby won his election as governor in 1852 and re-election the following year on this basis. However, while Crosby and the Whigs won the votes of many pro-temperance Mainers, they never truly centered prohibition in their political stance. Even as the party saw electoral successes, it stubbornly refused to formalize any official position on temperance. This almost certainly out of fear of losing the support of anti-Maine Law Whigs, but in the end the party’s approach alienated everyone and led to high degrees of apathy and discontent among Whig leaders and supporters. Many of the Whig voters that propelled them to statewide victories were not committed party
members but rather political opportunists. Therefore, while numerically the party may have appeared strong, it was instead quite stagnant. When outside forces such as the decreasing popularity of temperance or the rise of rival third party options began to challenge its status, the party collapsed. With no defined base of support and little means by which to attract new voters, the party was soon easily outflanked by other political forces.

By contrast, the Democratic Party did not fall victim to these same forces despite being faced with many similar circumstances. While the Maine Democrats did experience a significant fall, going from the undisputed dominant party to a clear second behind the surging Republicans, they maintained a constant presence in state politics throughout this time. When an upstart third party group threatened to upend state politics in 1854, the Democrats set a policy agenda different from that of Anson Morrill. While they failed in 1854, changing political winds as a result of the Portland rum riot led to Democratic success in 1855. While the Democrats had previously resisted defining strict policy positions on temperance, by the middle of the decade they had established clear policy differences in comparison to the rising Know-Nothings and Republicans. Some of this can be attributed to the influence of Democratic-aligned newspapers pushing a narrative and securing the continued loyalty of party members. In what soon amounted to a conflict between entrenched institutional forces and an upstart majoritarian party, the Democrats were able to consolidate many groups resistant to change under their umbrella.

Studying ethnocultural factors can tell us a lot about the reasons for the collapse of the Whig Party, the rise and fall of issue-centric third movements such as Free Soilism and Know-Nothingsm, and the ultimate survival of the Democratic Party in the place of its Whig rivals. However, it cannot on its own account for the factors that allowed for the rise of a powerful, unique, and new political entity. Multiple third party movements emerged in Maine to somewhat
significant but always temporary success. Until slavery completed its rapid rise to become the defining issue within Maine politics, these third party movements possessed no leverage or authority. When slavery emerged as a key political factor in Maine, first as a result of the unpopular Fugitive Slave Act and more fully in response to sectional violence in Kansas, the existing party system failed to adequately address Mainers’ increasingly anti-slavery viewpoints. Amidst the decline of the Whig Party and the collapse of the broader Second Party System emerged an avenue for a party committed to halting the expansion of slavery to find success.

Slavery emerged as a defining national issue in no small part due to the influence of partisan newspapers and their ability to spread information rapidly across large geographic areas. In telling stories from the legislative fights in Washington and the violent conflicts in Kansas, newspapers drove partisan narratives and motivated voters to go to the polls. The press served as the necessary link that made it possible for the national to become the local. The power of the press was not confined to slavery. The temperance press in particular seamlessly transitioned from supporting a cause to supporting political movements with the rise of Morrill and later the Republican Party. This granted invaluable resources, exposure, and legitimacy to these upstart movements.

This study focuses exclusively on Maine both to consider broader implications of the collapse of the Second Party System nationwide and to distinguish the process in Maine from circumstances in other states. Maine represents an ideal case study for this period in history for a number of reasons. First, political power in Maine fluctuated prior to the 1850s, with both Democrats and Whigs occupying the governorship and controlling the state legislature. In an environment in which both parties were relatively strong, one can more accurately assess changes to that political system. Second, Maine is unique for its status as a leader in the
temperance movement. Given that the Maine Law was the first of its kind passed in the country, the state is an ideal case study for considering the various reactions to the enactment of a law enforcing prohibition. Third, Maine possessed a requisite level of ethnic and religious diversity to consider this as a factor within an ethnocultural framework. Fourth, Maine’s geographic distance from the areas in which slavery was practiced provides for an unimpaired analysis of how national issues truly became local. Finally, Maine’s practice of holding gubernatorial and legislative elections every year permits deeper and more detailed analysis of the impact of various events on the political system.

Overall, Maine uniquely demonstrates the immense yet distinct influence that ethnocultural issues and debates over the expansion of slavery had on changing the political system. Slavery was not a primary factor in the initial weakening of the Whig party in the late 1840s and early 1850s. Though the potential spread of slavery into new western territories and the fear and disgust that resulted from the Fugitive Slave Act prompted Maine politicians to respond, these factors did not play a significant role on Mainers’ voting behavior. As such, the Whig collapse that began with the ‘Waterloo defeat’ of 1852 cannot be attributed in large part to an increased focus on slavery. Though tensions over slavery were almost to the point of boiling over, it had not yet happened. We must instead look to the ethnocultural factors discussed in the previous chapter for evidence of this decline. Second, once the issue of slavery took hold in Maine and around the country, it demanded that an adequate party infrastructure rise to meet the demands of voters. The existing political infrastructure of the Second Party System had been designed to promote stability at all costs, which explains how the Whig party drifted closer to the Democratic party as its existence became threatened in the mid-1850s. In part because of their desire to maintain a national appeal, neither of the existing parties were able to change their
respective platforms to accommodate voters in Maine who sought to prioritize anti-slavery principles. This necessitated the development of an alternative party designed specifically for this purpose, a role filled by the Republican Party. The Republican Party was a grassroots organization created from the bottom up, molded to meet the needs of the voters who had been left behind by the old parties in large part due to the slavery issue. Given these constraints, the collapse of the Second Party System was inevitable, with a split between party leaders and public sentiment requiring the creation of a new political scheme.

Political systems collapse and are resurrected when highly contested issues emerge in the public debate and the existing parties are unable to meet the evolving needs and desires of voters. In 1850s Maine, this resulted in the complete collapse of one institutional force and its eventual replacement with another. Given the unprecedented scope of political infrastructure among the modern parties, it is more difficult to see the situation of the Whigs repeating itself. Instead, the fate of modern parties may track more closely with that of the Democratic Party in Maine, which faced serious internal divisions and external pressures but ultimately survived.
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