

Steven Taylor, "Progressive Nativism: The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 28, No. 2 (Summer 2000).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

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Editor, *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*
c/o Westfield State University
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**Progressive Nativism:
The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts**

By

Steven Taylor

The mid-19th century success of the Know-Nothing Party was not merely the result of ethnocentric bigotry and religious intolerance, but also of a clash of political cultures. The Know-Nothing Party, whose official name was the “American Party,” is widely known for its strident anti-Catholicism and for its anti-immigrant positions. What is lesser known about the American Party is that in some of the northern states the Party was quite progressive on other issues.

In no state did the American party reap as much success as in Massachusetts. In 1854 the Party captured the governor’s office, the entire state senate, and virtually the entire state house of representatives. The American Party also took over the City of Boston and other municipalities in the Bay State. Once in office, the Party not only passed legislation that reflected the anti-immigrant positions of the national Know-Nothing movement, but the party also distinguished itself by its opposition to slavery, support for an expansion of the rights of women, regulation of industry, and support of measures designed to improve the status of working people. These progressive measures appear to be inconsistent with the anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic stance of the American Party. This article takes a look at the origins and the background of the Massachusetts Know-Nothing movement and the reason for what might appear to be stark contradictions.

The American Party had its origins in a nativist organization called the “Order of the Star Spangled Banner.” The Order was a secret society with lodges throughout the United States. Members of the Order took an

oath that they would not reveal information about the membership of the Order. When asked, they were to deny any knowledge, hence the sobriquet the “Know-Nothing Party” was given to the American Party. The Party’s candidates for office were required to be members of a local lodge. One of the major purposes of the Order of the Star Spangled Banner was to preserve what the members believed to be American culture, which they felt was endangered by Catholic immigrants, particularly those from Ireland. The state of Massachusetts, which had the highest percentage of Irish immigrants, was a stronghold of the American Party. When the Party came to power in Massachusetts in 1855, the state legislature (known as the “General Court”) and the governor, Robert Gardner, acted on the Order’s nativist agenda.

Upon taking control of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, the American Party proposed and passed legislation aimed at restricting the strength of the growing Irish community in Boston. The most drastic measure proposed was a constitutional amendment requiring that immigrants wait 21 years after naturalization before they could become voting citizens of the Commonwealth. Another proposed bill would require that they wait an additional two years before they could hold public office in Massachusetts. The 21-year amendment did not receive the necessary two-thirds vote required for adoption. Nevertheless, the General Court passed a resolution calling on the federal government to extend the residency period to 21 years before an immigrant could vote in federal elections. The Know-Nothing General Court also proposed a legislative redistricting that would reduce the number of seats in predominantly immigrant Boston. This benefited the rural areas, which were predominantly populated by “Yankee” descendants of English settlers.¹

While working to curb the voting power of immigrants, the Know-Nothing General Court passed measures aimed at limiting the influence of the Catholic Church. One of the most infamous acts passed was the establishment of a “Nunnery Committee” to investigate convents in Massachusetts.² In addition, the legislature also passed a bill requiring a daily reading of the Protestant King James Version of the Bible in public

¹ William G. Bean. *Party Transformation in Massachusetts with Special Reference to the Antecedents of Republicanism, 1848-1860*. Ph.D. dissertation, 1922, p. 202.

² Bean, *Party Transformation in Massachusetts*, p. 241.

schools, voted to ban aid to sectarian schools, and they voted to expunge a Latin inscription from above the desk of the Speaker of the state House of Representatives.³ The legislature also passed an amendment barring from office any person who owed allegiance to a “foreign prince, power, or potentate.” This was aimed at Catholics, whom the legislators believed were loyal to the Pontiff in Rome. Like the 21-year amendment, this did not receive the two-thirds vote necessary for a constitutional amendment.⁴

Nativist measures such as those listed above were proposed and/or passed in other states where the American Party had legislative strength. Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, and New Hampshire enacted laws restricting naturalization, while Connecticut and Massachusetts passed legislation requiring English literacy tests for those who wished to vote. Connecticut also passed a property law mandating that a lay board of trustees hold the title to church real estate.

Also passed in both Massachusetts and Connecticut were acts dissolving Irish-American militia units that had previously been certified by the two states. Nativists had fears of an armed Irish populace. In Massachusetts nativists were particularly angry with Irish militia units after one such unit, the Columbian Artillery, stood guard to prevent a captured slave from escaping.⁵ Though the nativists demonstrated a great deal of intolerance toward immigrants, the American Party in Massachusetts and other Northern states was in the forefront of the political struggle against the expansion of slavery. The Party in Massachusetts went on record as opposing the Fugitive Slave Law, which mandated that free states return slaves to their Southern owners. Massachusetts Know-Nothings also favored a reinstatement of the Missouri Compromise, which prevented the extension of slavery into newly acquired territories. The Compromise was disbanded when Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, an act strongly opposed by Massachusetts Know-Nothings.

³ John R. Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts: The Rise and Fall of a People's Movement* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1984), pp. 101-102.

⁴ Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 136-140.

⁵ Bean, *Party Transformation in Massachusetts*, p. 241.

When the American Party took over the General Court, the legislators passed a resolution declaring that the Fugitive Slave Act was a violation of the 10th Amendment. The resolution stated that the Act violated “The Dictates of the Christian Religion” and the “higher law of God.” This resolution was followed by passage of the “Personal Liberty Law” which, in effect, mandated that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts ignore the Fugitive Slave Law. The Personal Liberty Law (1) forbade authorities from detaining runaways without the right of habeas corpus, (2) required that each detainee receive a jury trial, (3) prohibited state courts from participating in fugitive slave cases, (4) forbade state jails from housing escaped slaves, (5) barred all Massachusetts officials from participating in fugitive slave cases, (6) disqualified from state office any federal official who certified the return of a fugitive slave, and (7) banned from state courts any lawyer who represented a claimant in a fugitive slave case.⁶ This act was passed over the veto of Governor Gardner.

The Know-Nothing General Court also passed a resolution urging Congress to repeal the Fugitive Slave Law, condemning violence in Kansas committed by pro-slavery settlers, and pledging the support of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to protect anti-slavery settlers in Kansas.⁷ The legislature further demonstrated its racial progressiveness (for that time) by outlawing racial segregation in Massachusetts schools. They went on to return to the U.S. Senate Charles Sumner, who had represented African-American plaintiffs in the battle to desegregate the schools. In neighboring New York State, the Know-Nothings in the legislature sent anti-slavery statesman William Seward to the U.S. Senate, and in Connecticut the Know-Nothings sent anti-slavery lawyer James Dixon to the U.S. Senate.⁸

Other northern states’ American Parties demonstrated their opposition to slavery. At the Party’s 1855 convention in Philadelphia, the delegates from Massachusetts and the other New England states, as well as those from Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Wisconsin walked out over the national Party’s refusal to condemn

⁶ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, p. 155.

⁷ Bean, *Party Transformation in Massachusetts*, p. 277.

⁸ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, p. 150.

slavery. This split between Southern and Northern Know-Nothings would lead to the demise of the American Party after the 1856 election.

The slavery issue was only one of many in which the Massachusetts Know-Nothings belied their reputation for intolerance. A survey of the legislation passed by the General Court during the years the Know-Nothings were in control (1855-1858) reveals how the Know-Nothings were predecessors of the Progressive Movement that took place several decades later. One aspect of the progressivism of the American Party General Court was the incorporation of protections provided in the Bill of Rights. In the 1833 case of *Barron vs. Baltimore*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the protections of the Bill of Rights were not applicable to the states unless the states included them in their respective constitutions. During the period of Know-Nothing control of Massachusetts, the General Court moved to incorporate a number of protections provided by the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The freedoms contained in the first amendment -- freedoms of speech, the press, and religion -- were added to the state constitution, as was the second amendment guarantee of the right to bear arms. The legislature also proscribed any orders requiring citizens to provide lodging for soldiers. In addition, the General Court incorporated the constitutional protections for the accused and convicted. Bills were passed mandating paid counsel for destitute prisoners, trial by jury, banning excessive fines or bail, and outlawing cruel and unusual punishment.

The Know-Nothing General Court went beyond the Constitution's provisions of criminal justice. The legislators outlawed imprisonment for debts, mandated state payment of defense witnesses if the defendants were acquitted, proposed a repeal of the death penalty, required inspections of prisons, mandated the removal of insane convicts from state prisons, placed a twelve-month limit on the suspension of habeas corpus rights, allowed convicted women to take care of their children while incarcerated, and allowed insane prisoners in the city of Boston to be transferred from the jail to an asylum.

In the realm of women's rights, the Know-Nothing Party passed legislation affirming the individual property rights of married women, exempting wives from the debts of their husbands, giving married women the right to sue, transact business, or work without the consent of their husbands, the ability to use one-third of their husbands' estates for living expenses if the husbands were in insane asylums, provided a \$500

exemption for widows or unmarried women or female minors in debt cases, and liberalized divorce laws to make it easier for women to sue for divorce and to receive alimony and custody of their children.

During this era, the Know-Nothing General Court also increased the protections and benefits of poor and indigent Bay Staters. They increased the exemption of the value of a house in execution for debts, provided bankruptcy protection for poor citizens, provided state financial support for almshouses, allocated money for the creation of a City Hospital in Boston for its poor residents and for a state hospital that would serve indigent citizens. The legislature also created a school for pauper children, which was in line with a commitment to improve educational facilities for all citizens. The legislature increased aid to public schools and libraries, provided free textbooks and paper, required vaccination of school children, required towns to provide public education to children from adjacent towns if the adjacent towns had no public school systems, enforced attendance regulations, passed a child labor law requiring children to attend a minimum of eleven weeks of school per year, established a nautical school for boys, drastically increased the allocation for schools for retarded children, the blind, and the mentally disturbed, appropriated money to create the New England School of Design for women,⁹ and unsuccessfully attempted to create a system of state agricultural schools.¹⁰

As a result of these increased expenditures on health facilities and education, the year 1855 saw the largest state budget up to that time.¹¹ There was a 45 percent rise in state spending in a single year, a 40 percent rise in welfare costs in one year, and a 50 percent hike in annual taxes on cities and towns. There were record expenditures for public schools, and the largest (up to that time) annual raise in school taxes.¹² To accommodate the increased expenditures, the legislature gave the state permission to create a deficit of up to \$600,000.¹³

⁹ Much of the information on the voting record of the state legislators is from the records of the proceedings of the Massachusetts General Court from 1855 through 1858.

¹⁰ Mulkern, *The Know- Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, p. 111.

¹¹ Bean, *Party Transformation in Massachusetts*, p. 289.

¹² Mulkern, *The Know- Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, p. 111.

¹³ Massachusetts General Court.

Large business corporations were also affected by the progressive agenda of the Know-Nothing Party. There was a dramatic increase in regulation of businesses. The legislature forced manufacturing corporations to cover the costs of vaccinating employees,¹⁴ established a Board of Commissioners to inspect the books of all insurance companies, and passed legislation to limit the creation of monopolies. There were also added protections for consumers. The legislators increased passenger safety protections on railroads and for ferry boats.¹⁵ They created a Board of Pilots to supervise and regulate harbor traffic,¹⁶ passed legislation regulating railroad fares, established a uniform system of weights and measures for grain sales, mandated prison terms for persons who sold more shares than there were actual stocks, and provided for punishments for the sale of diluted milk.¹⁷

Also reminiscent of the later Progressive Era, the Know-Nothings in Massachusetts acted against public corruption¹⁸ and supported electoral and political reforms. They mandated larceny punishments for public officials convicted of embezzlement and banned from electoral office persons previously convicted of bribery. They also passed a law that public officeholders possess the moral characteristics of “piety, justice, moderation, temperance, industry, and frugality.”¹⁹ In the area of electoral reforms, they passed legislation mandating election of officeholders by plurality,²⁰ supported legislative redistricting plans that would require one person-one vote,²¹ required mid-decade censuses to

¹⁴ Bean, *Party Transformation in Massachusetts*, p. 287.

¹⁵ Virginia C. Purdy, *Portrait of a Know-Nothing Legislature: The Massachusetts General Court of 1855*, Ph.D. dissertation, 1970, p. 87.

¹⁶ Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, pp. 110-111.

¹⁷ Massachusetts General Court.

¹⁸ Ronald P. Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture: Massachusetts Parties, 1790s-1840s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 332.

¹⁹ Massachusetts General Court.

²⁰ Bean, *Party Transformation in Massachusetts*, p. 287.

²¹ Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, pp. 110-111.

ascertain that one person-one vote was maintained, required that state legislative elections be held on the same day as federal legislative elections, and eliminated property qualifications for office holding.²²

The Puritan heritage of the Massachusetts Know-Nothings was reflected in legislation on moral issues. One of the major social issues of the day was temperance and the stand the government should take on the consumption and sale of liquor. In Massachusetts and every other state where the Know-Nothings came to power, the Party passed temperance legislation, most such laws being modeled in one way or another after Maine's first-in-the-nation anti-liquor law. Anti-liquor laws were passed by Know-Nothings in Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and New York State.²³ The General Court of Massachusetts set up a system requiring licensing to sell alcoholic beverages, and whereby the state was the sole supplier of liquor to registered agents in the various municipalities.²⁴ This distribution would be regulated by a newly created Massachusetts Liquor Authority.²⁵ In addition to the regulations on the distribution of liquor, the General Court also cracked down on its consumption. The legislators mandated punishment for drunkenness, including imprisonment, required the dismissal of prison guards who consumed alcohol, and prohibited persons who drank from working on railroads.²⁶ Other measures that displayed the Puritanical roots of the Massachusetts Know-Nothings were their passing of stiffer penalties for keepers of gambling dens, speakeasies, and brothels, and of blue laws ensuring some observance of the Christian Sabbath.²⁷

The American Party's progressive record on social and economic issues of the day reflect the political culture of those who identified with

²² Massachusetts General Court.

²³ Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery*, p. 143.

²⁴ Purdy, *Portrait of a Know-Nothing Legislature*, p. 87.

²⁵ Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants: A Study in Acculturation* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1959), p. 235.

²⁶ Massachusetts General Court.

²⁷ Mulhern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, p. 104.

the Party. Massachusetts Know-Nothings lived in a political environment that was dominated by descendants of Puritan settlers. The Puritans had tried to establish a religious society in the New World, and their influence persisted, even after the founding of the United States and the constitutional provisions separating church from state. Massachusetts remained classified as a “commonwealth,” not as a state. Daniel Elazar defines the commonwealth conception of government as being one “in which the whole people have an undivided interest -- in which the citizens cooperate in an effort to create and maintain the best government in order to implement certain shared moral principles.”²⁸ The Puritans’ original vision was that of establishing a holy commonwealth based upon Christian ideals. Their descendants retained some of these ideals after the Commonwealth of Massachusetts became one of the United States. The “Yankee” descendants of the Puritans held fast to the belief that government should promote and uphold moral principles. For this reason Elazar describes the Yankees’ political culture as “moralistic.”

Moralists believe in an intrusive state where it is the duty of government to attempt to correct the ills of society. The descendants of Puritan settlers brought this philosophy into the early Federalist Party, which was dominant in New England. This moralism was later seen among Whigs in New England. Many of the leaders of the American Party in Massachusetts were former Whigs. Ronald Formisano wrote that “The Federalist and Whig Parties both expressed the ancient Puritan concern for society as a corporate whole; both attempted to use the government to provide for society’s moral and material development...”²⁹ David Donald noted that many of the leaders of the abolitionist movement were from old distinguished Federalist families, and many belonged to the Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Quaker, and Methodist denominations.³⁰

In mentioning the denominations that most abolitionists belonged to, Donald touches on the strong religious component of the moralistic

²⁸ Daniel J. Elazar, *American Federalism: A View From the States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), p. 91.

²⁹ Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture*, p. 290.

³⁰ David H. Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era* (New York: Knopf, 1956), p. 28.

political culture. The dominant Whig Party appealed to Massachusetts' large Congregational church denomination, which had its roots in Puritanism. By the mid-19th Century many of the members of the inner circle of the Massachusetts Whig Party also belonged to the Unitarian Church, a sect that had broken away from the Congregational Church. Despite strong theological differences, Unitarians retained the Puritan sense of corporate and moral responsibility.³¹ This moralism provided the impetus for the abolitionist movement. Lipset and Raab speak of how religion influenced involvement in abolitionism. They noted that Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, and Northern evangelical Protestantism contributed to an abolitionist outlook because these religions opposed sinful behavior in public as well as private life.³² David Donald agrees, and said that abolitionism was a manifestation of the "Spirit of Puritanism."³³ Eric Foner said that New England Protestants had a tradition of "Moral Stewardship," which Clark Griffin calls a "Zeal for making others act correctly." This is based on a Calvinist tradition that there is a moral aristocracy whose earthly duty is to oversee the moral conduct of others. Conversely, Foner notes, Irish immigrants were "products of a culture opposed to reformism and which had a deep respect for class distinctions."³⁴ Formisano characterizes this difference as "Whig benevolence versus Democratic individualism."³⁵

In a study of New York State, Lee Benson notes that the anti-slavery Liberty Party received support from the "Ultraist" branch of Calvinism. Ultraists believed in the direct guidance by the Holy Spirit, and that it was a person's responsibility to proclaim to others what the Spirit had revealed to him/her.³⁶ In other words, Ultraists had a sense of

³¹ Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture*, p. 290.

³² Seymour M. Lipset and Earl Raab, *The Politics of Unreason: Right-Wing Extremism in America, 1790-1970* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1970), p. 64.

³³ Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered*, pp. 23-24.

³⁴ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 227.

³⁵ Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture*, p. 271.

³⁶ Lee Benson, *The Concept of Jacksonian Democracy: New York as a Test Case* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1961), P. 211.

mission. In regards to slavery, they believed that working to end the “peculiar institution” was a mission of God. Supporters of the Liberty Party in New York State tended to come from rural evangelical sects. Baptists were most prominent, followed by Presbyterians and Methodists. The westernmost region of New York State was a stronghold of transplanted New Englanders. In a study of Yankees in that region, Whitney Cross said that in rural areas there was strong abolitionist sentiment, and that it was based upon religion. Presbyterian groups and some Baptist associations in Western New York espoused abolitionism, and some sects in the area gave women equal rights in communion.³⁷ Likewise, in New England some abolitionists associated feminism with their cause.

Eric Foner also makes the connection between Calvinism and opposition to slavery. The Calvinistic belief that one’s life demonstrates whether or not he/she is one of God’s chosen is a belief that can also be applied to the economic realm. This economic Calvinism was earlier elucidated by Max Weber. Economic Calvinism holds the doctrine that industry, thrift, and economic success is evidence of one’s predestination. Therefore, both Weber and Foner say, a system of free labor allows individuals the opportunity to demonstrate their selection by God.³⁸

The temperance crusade also had strong ties to evangelical Christianity. The Temperance Movement was most successful in moralist strongholds such as New England, or the Upper Midwest, which was settled by many New Englanders. After Maine passed its comprehensive prohibition act, other states to follow its lead were New York Vermont, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Tennessee, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Iowa, and Pennsylvania. The heavily Scandinavian states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Delaware also passed prohibition laws. Daniel Elazar says that the Scandinavian settlers shared the Yankees’ moralistic political culture.³⁹

³⁷ Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District: the Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1950), pp. 222-224.

³⁸ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, p. 13, and Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Charles Scribner’s and Sons, 1958).

³⁹ Elazar, *American Federalism*, p. 100.

John Fenton, who wrote about politics in the Midwest, described the political culture of Minnesota and Wisconsin, and used the term *issue-oriented* to identify what Elazar calls moralism. According to Fenton, issue-oriented political parties are “conceived to be groups of people who come together out of some common concern with public policy and a desire to do something about it.” They are attempting to “secur[e] policy goals they regard as desirable.” Fenton states that the upper Midwest was “issue-oriented” because the settlers were New Englanders and Scandinavians who supported issues-based politics. This, Fenton says, is why issues-based third parties (such as the American Party) have enjoyed success in issue-oriented states.⁴⁰

The Irish immigrants came from what Elazar describes as an *individualistic* political culture, and what Fenton calls *jobs-oriented*. Individualists do not view politics as a mechanism for the fulfillment of moral goals; rather they have a utilitarian view of politics. In other words, politics is seen as a means for individuals to advance themselves, not as a way to improve society as a whole. Elazar states that “political life within an individualistic political culture is based on a system of mutual obligations rooted in personal relationships.”⁴¹ He believes that persons in this political culture see little benefit in political reform and are somewhat tolerant of corruption among public officials. They are also supportive of patronage-laden political systems and pork-barrel projects, which is the reason Fenton calls them jobs-oriented. Individualists understand politicians having a desire to economically improve themselves. What they do not understand is moralists’ use of politics to crusade for social causes. This is why persons from individualistic backgrounds, such as Irish-Americans, did not support causes like abolition, even if they themselves were not directly benefiting from the institution of slavery. They saw the fight against slavery as something that should be kept out of national politics; hence they were at odds with the Yankees in the American Party.

Leaders of the Irish Catholic community in Boston railed against the idea of emancipation of slaves. This they did through speeches and through their organ, the *Boston Pilot*. In his study of the history of the

⁴⁰ John H. Fenton, *Midwest Politics* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), pp. 5-6.

⁴¹ Elazar, *American Federalism*, p. 95.

Boston Irish, Oscar Handlin states that Irishmen in Boston denounced black abolitionist Frederick Douglass and shouted out cheers for Jefferson Davis, while priests incited draft rioters.⁴² Much of the Irish Catholic position on slavery can be found in the *Pilot*. The *Pilot* was originally named the *United States Catholic Intelligencer*, and in an 1831 article the *Intelligencer* expounded on the Catholic position on slavery. The editors declared their opposition to the emancipation of slaves and stated that the government had no right to take away property (i.e. slaves) from owners.⁴³ Throughout the 1840s and 1850s the *Pilot* editorialized against abolition and emancipation, supported the Fugitive Slave Act, supported the *Dred Scott* decision and declared that slavery was a traditional institution that is supported by the Church.⁴⁴ When the Know-Nothing legislature banned school segregation, the *Pilot* editorialized that the measure was an insult to the Irish.⁴⁵

Temperance was another issue in which the Irish differed from many in the Yankee establishment. Like abolitionism, the temperance crusade had the involvement of evangelical Protestants. The leader of the temperance fight in New England was noted minister Lyman Beecher, father of anti-slavery writer Harriet Beecher Stowe. W. J. Rorabaugh notes that native reformers saw drinking as a social problem that the state had an obligation to control, while Catholicism emphasized the power of will, of free choice. Catholics believed that the imposition of morals was the role of the Church, not of the state.⁴⁶ The leaders of the Catholic Church did not join in the temperance crusade and the movement as a whole was opposed by the Irish community. Because of this opposition from the Catholic Church, the State Temperance Committee of Massachusetts identified Catholicism as an enemy.⁴⁷ This

⁴² Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, p. 131.

⁴³ *United States Catholic Intelligencer*, 1 October, 1831.

⁴⁴ Ray A. Billington, *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1938), p. 176.

⁴⁵ *Boston Pilot*, 6 October 1855.

⁴⁶ W. J. Rorabaugh, "Rising Democratic Spirits: Immigrants, Temperance, and Tammany Hall, 1854-1860," *Civil War History* 22 (June 1967): 138-157.

⁴⁷ Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*, p. 198.

immigrant opposition to the Temperance Movement was mobilized by Democrats in Maine, the site of the first prohibition law. There Democrats capitalized on ethnics' hatred of the law to recapture the state legislature in 1855.⁴⁸ Other Yankee-supported causes which the Irish opposed were prison reform, increased support for public schools, and equal rights for women.

While reflecting the political culture of the Yankees, the mix of nativist and progressive positions of the American Party also reflected the positions of the organized interests that formed the American Party's coalition. Abolitionists, free-soilers, temperance advocates, and nativists were organized interests of that era. These organized interests coalesced under the banner of the American Party, which resulted in the advocacy of a variety of policies designed to please each element of the coalition. In his work on interest groups in the post-Depression 20th century, Theodore Lowi wrote that the most important differences between the political parties "is to be found in the interest groups they identify with. Congressmen are guided in their votes, Presidents in their programs, and administrators in their discretion by whatever organized interests they have taken for themselves as most legitimate; and that is the measure of the legitimacy of demands."⁴⁹ The legislative output of the American Party in Massachusetts represented the priorities of the interest groups that were a part of their coalition: nativist lodges, abolitionists and former leaders of the Free Soil Party, working class groups, and temperance organizations such as the Massachusetts Society for the Suppression of Intemperance.

Free-soilers and abolitionists were well organized in Massachusetts. As one of the first states to outlaw slavery, support for the institution had not been strong in the Commonwealth. Even among the prominent businessmen there was a powerful faction who was opposed to slavery. These anti-slavery businessmen were referred to as "Conscience Whigs." From the beginning of the United States' Second Party System until the demise of the Whig Party, Massachusetts was a one-party state, with the Whigs being the Party in control. On the national level the Whig Party was not anti-slavery, but many northern Whigs opposed slavery and its

⁴⁸ Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men*, p. 241.

⁴⁹ Theodore Lowi, *The End of Liberalism: Ideology, Policy, and the Crisis of Public Authority* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 72.

extension into the territories. The Conscience Whigs were from the established merchant class, and were Puritan in background. They tended to be more involved in overseas commerce than in domestic manufacturing. David Donald wrote that the old family men were displaced by the new business atmosphere. According to Donald, they had “too distinguished a family, too gentle an education, too nice a morality [which] were handicaps in a bustling world of business.”⁵⁰ One generation later this gentry would become the “Mugwumps” and would go on to become the backbone of the Progressive Movement.⁵¹

Donald describes the opponents of slavery as the “sons of the old New England of Federalism, farming, and foreign commerce” who were becoming displaced by a bourgeoisie based on manufacturing, trade, and railroads. They opposed Jacksonian democracy and the new money-grabbing industrialists. They also scorned *laissez faire* capitalism, which was Jacksonian. They were conservative in the classical sense of the word. They associated slavery with the new industrial order. Donald quotes Richard Henry Dana, who said, “I am a Free Soiler because I am of the stock of old Northern gentry, and have a particular dislike on the part of our people to the slave-holding oligarchy.”⁵² Roy Nichols states that persons of Puritan stock blamed their waning influence on the “sin” of slavery, and longed for a return to the days when their influence over U.S. culture and politics was unrivaled by other socio-ethnic groups.⁵³ Many northern conservatives believed that the demise of slavery might bring about a return to the traditional values of an earlier era.

The Conscience Whigs finally left their party in 1848 because of the nomination of the pro-slavery Taylor/Fillmore ticket.⁵⁴ They bolted to the fledgling Free Soil Party, whose ticket did well enough in

⁵⁰ Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered*, p. 33.

⁵¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), p. 91.

⁵² Donald, *Lincoln Reconsidered*, pp. 31 and 35.

⁵³ Roy F. Nichols, *The Disruption of American Democracy* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1948), p. 43.

⁵⁴ Kinley J. Brauer, *Cotton Versus Conscience: Massachusetts Whig Politics and Southwestern Expansion, 1843-1848* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1967), p. 241.

Massachusetts to deny Taylor a majority in that state. The ranks of the Free Soilers were increased when the Kansas-Nebraska Act was signed into law.⁵⁵ Another measure that angered many Whigs was the Fugitive Slave Bill, passed by Congress and signed by Whig President Millard Fillmore. The Kansas-Nebraska Act and the Fugitive Slave Law were very unpopular in Massachusetts, even among many manufacturers who had theretofore supported the Whig Party. This dwindling support of the Whig Party in Massachusetts paved the way for the rise of new parties. Consequently the American Party received the support of Free Soilers and abolitionists, two groups who had once been loyal to the Whig Party.

Working-class Yankees, who were referred to as “loco focus,” were another group who joined the American Party’s coalition. Loco focus perceived themselves to be victims of the representatives of the monied interests. Many of the loco focus had been Democrats, but they bolted their Party in 1848 to coalesce with Free Soilers. The Coalition succeeded in attracting both groups because it adopted antislavery planks and also advocated reforms to regulate industry and curb the development of monopolies.⁵⁶ In 1850 the Coalition took over the General Court and the governor’s office. While in office they passed a number of electoral reforms, regulations of industry, and they sent to the Senate Charles Sumner, an ardent foe of slavery. The Coalition was voted out of office in 1852, but it returned in 1854 in the form of the American Party, which included loco focus and abolitionists in its coalition.

The working-class in Massachusetts had been mobilized prior to the Coalition and the advent of the Know-Nothing movement. In the 1830s native-born workers formed the “Workingmen’s Movement.” This was a movement of artisans who had been displaced by industrialization. They formed a “Workingmen’s Party” that fought for a 10-hour day, higher wages, equal taxation, and public education.⁵⁷ The Workingmen feared competition with immigrants, whom they believed would accept employment without making such demands. The American Party appealed to these fears of immigrant labor and of an unregulated factory

⁵⁵ Billington, *The Protestant Crusade*, pp. 174-175.

⁵⁶ Bean, *Party Transformation in Massachusetts*, p. 34.

⁵⁷ Formisano, *The Transformation of Political Culture*, p. 222.

system. Moreover, an economic recession in 1854 assisted these class appeals. Inflation and wage stagnation helped move working class people to the lodges, and to the polls in support of the American Party. Mulkern wrote that the Know-Nothing landslide of 1854 was heaviest in those towns “most subject to industrialization, urban growth, poverty, and population flux.”⁵⁸

Also included in the American Party’s coalition were temperance advocates. Lipset notes that among New Englanders of the antebellum era, nativism, opposition to slavery, and support for prohibition often went hand-in-hand.⁵⁹ Throughout the moralistic Northeast there were political coalitions between abolitionists and prohibitionists. Such fusions existed in New Hampshire, Connecticut, Vermont, Maine, and Pennsylvania.⁶⁰ At that time abolitionism, prohibitionism, and nativism were considered to be consistent with one another.

The Protestant religious background of the Yankees resulted in their adopting a moralistic, issue-oriented approach to politics, and their Federalist roots led them to support an activist government that would work toward achieving their moralistic aims. The aims that they supported were those that were the priorities of the elements of the coalition in control of the government. These policies were opposed by the individualistic Irish American community. Irish Americans had fled their homeland because of an intrusive and oppressive British Crown; hence they had low regard for government intervention. According to Mulkern the Know Nothing party saw the Irish as a “‘formidable’ political force . . . whose illiberal pro-slavery and anti-reformist views threatened the traditional views of the Yankee majority.”⁶¹ An article in the September 14, 1855 Boston *Daily Bee*, a newspaper that served as a mouthpiece of the American Party, gave the following warning about extending suffrage to immigrants:

⁵⁸ Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, pp. 67-68, 84-85.

⁵⁹ Lipset and Raab, *The Politics of Unreason*, p. 80.

⁶⁰ Clifford S. Griffin, *Their Brothers’ Keepers: Moral Stewardship Politics and Southwestern Expansion in the United States, 1800-1865* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1960), pp. 224, 232-233.

⁶¹ Mulkern, *The Know-Nothing Party in Massachusetts*, p. 78.

Foreign ruffians with *insides black as sin*, may come and superciliously demand not merely the right to vote, but the power to rule us, and the old party dictators will give them all and more too, at the word of foreign command. . . .

For our own part we would rather trust the ballot box in the hands of the honest and intelligent Free black than in those of any foreigner within the bounds of our whole continent.⁶²

The above summarizes one of the major reasons for the strength of the American Party in Massachusetts. Massachusetts nativists had very different political priorities from the immigrants. The differences were based on them coming from very different political cultures. The nativists feared that their political culture would be endangered should the Catholic immigrants be granted full suffrage rights. They felt far less threatened by black voters, who were fewer in number, who were native-born and Protestant, and whose politics did not challenge the prevailing moralistic political culture. The nativist measures supported by the American Party were a means to stifle the challenge from members of a political culture that was alien to the traditional establishment.

⁶² *Daily Bee*, 14 September, 1855.