**Free Soil Party**

The Free Soil Party evolved in the 1840s in response to the growing split between pro- and anti-slavery movements in the United States. National politics was controlled primarily by two parties, Democratic and Whig. Within both parties there were supporters and opponents of [slavery](http://law.jrank.org/pages/10318/Slavery.html), and the issue became more heated as the U.S. added territory. Proponents of slavery wanted to extend it into the newly acquired territories, while opponents wanted the territories to remain free. The issue grew especially heated among members of the state [Democratic](http://law.jrank.org/pages/6057/Democratic-Party.html) Party in New York. Two groups emerged: the "Barnburners," who opposed slavery, and the "Hunkers," who supported slavery or were neutral on the question.

In 1844, the Barnburners pushed for the nomination of former president and fellow New Yorker **MARTIN VAN BUREN**. Southern Democrats supported **JAMES K. POLK**, who was more sympathetic to their views, and although the New York Democrats were well organized they could not defeat a strong Southern bloc. Polk won the Democratic nomination and beat the Whig candidate, **HENRY CLAY**, in the general election.

The Mexican War, which began in 1846, further exacerbated the slavery question. **DAVID WILMOT**, a Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania, introduced what became known as the [Wilmot](http://law.jrank.org/pages/11335/Wilmot-Proviso.html) Proviso. It called for a prohibition of slavery in any territory acquired by the United States in the war with Mexico. The Wilmot Proviso came up for a vote several times; it was routinely passed by the House and defeated by the Senate.

Democrats and Whigs wanted to avoid party division in the election of 1848, so they virtually ignored the slavery question. The Democrats nominated Lewis Cass, who was sympathetic to Southern slaveholders. In defiance, anti-slavery Democrats joined with the Barnburners in New York to create the Free Soil party. The party held its convention in Buffalo, New York, in August 1848 and adopted the slogan, "Free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men." The Free Soilers nominated Van Buren for president and Charles Francis Adams of Massachusetts for vice president.

The Free Soilers had a mixed reception. Many people saw them as a cynical group of Van Buren loyalists who had no real desire to abolish slavery but merely to take votes away from the major parties. Senator **DANIEL WEBSTER**, the statesman from Massachusetts (and himself a Whig), derisively called the party the "Free Spoilers." Yet the party drew a surprising amount of support from abolitionists, including **FREDERICK DOUGLASS**.

Hostilities even among different state Free Soil organizations kept the party from building enough strength to win the presidency, although the Free Soilers did make their presence known. Van Buren received 291,616 votes, not enough to regain the White House—but enough to take votes away from Cass and ultimately ensure a Whig victory for **ZACHARY TAYLOR**. The Free Soil party did respectably in Congress, electing 13 representatives and two senators.

The slavery question continued to divide the country, although the [Compromise](http://law.jrank.org/pages/5497/Compromise-1850.html) of 1850 attempted to provide a framework that everyone could accept by legislating which states and territories would be free and which would be slave. To those who had strong feelings about slavery, the Compromise of 1850 solved no problems, and the Free Soilers nominated John Parker Hale, an abolitionist from New Hampshire, as their candidate for president in 1852. By then, however, interest in the Free Soil party had dwindled. Hale received only about five percent of the popular vote.

By 1854 the Free Soil party had disappeared, but many of its supporters and former members still held sway in national politics. Well-known figures formerly tied to the Free Soilers included politicians such as Schuyler Colfax, **CHARLES SUMNER**, and **SALMON P. CHASE**, as well as newspaper editor Horace Greeley. These influential men became key figures in the creation of the [Republican](http://law.jrank.org/pages/9803/Republican-Party.html) Party, whose 1860 candidate for president was **ABRAHAM LINCOLN**.

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