**Know-Nothing Party**

The Know-Nothing movement was actually a group of secret anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish and anti-immigrant political organizations that called itself the American party. The movement, comprised principally of native-born, white, Anglo-Saxon males, came into being in the 1850s, grew rapidly, and waned almost as quickly.

In the early 1800s, as immigrants continued to flow into the United States, a number of American citizens grew increasingly alarmed. Waves of Germans, who mostly spoke in their native tongue, and Irish, whose thick brogues were difficult to understand, were two groups who inspired the great opposition. The clannish Irish, who were Catholics, were particularly feared and despised. Many Protestants felt that all Catholics were controlled by and took orders from the pope in Rome.

Certain groups of already established Americans who called themselves "Nativists," formed secret societies dedicated to stopping the flow of immigrants. The depth of nativist animosity was demonstrated in 1834 when a group of anti-Catholic laborers and townspeople chased a group of students and Ursuline nuns from their school and convent near Boston and then burned the buildings.

In 1835 a group of New Yorkers organized a state political party, the Native American Democratic Association. Association candidates, running on a platform that opposed Catholics and immigrants, with support from the Whigs (members of a political party formed in 1834 to oppose **ANDREW JACKSON** and the Democrats) gained 40 percent of the vote in the fall elections. In the 1840s more groups appeared in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and other metropolitan regions of the country. Various local groups appeared and disappeared over time. Eventually the themes of hostility to Catholics and immigrants and the corresponding opposition to the costs of trying to support and educate indigent foreigners found favor with groups attempting to organize on a national basis.

In 1849 a secret fraternal organization bearing the name of the Order of the Star Spangled Banner was launched in New York and similar lodges began to form in other major American cities. When asked about their nativist origins, members would respond that they "knew nothing" and soon found themselves so-labeled. Secretive at first, the organization soon found support for proposals that included stringent restrictions on immigration, exclusion of foreign-born persons from voting or holding political office and a residency requirement of more than 20 years for U.S. citizenship. Because many Know-Nothing supporters felt that liquor had a pernicious effect on immigrants, they sought to limit alcohol sales. They also supported daily Bible readings in schools and tried to ensure that only Protestants could teach in the public schools.

As it shed its clandestine beginnings, the Know-Nothing movement spread rapidly. By 1852 supporters of the Know-Nothing movement had achieved significant results with many of their candidates winning seats in local and state elections. With the passage of the [Kansas-Nebraska](http://law.jrank.org/pages/7963/Kansas-Nebraska-Act.html) Act of 1854, the movement gained more supporters. Although originally allied with the Whigs, the phenomenal success of the Know-Nothings as well as growing debate over [slavery](http://law.jrank.org/pages/10318/Slavery.html) helped cause the decline and demise of the [Whig](http://law.jrank.org/pages/11293/Whig-Party.html) Party. The Know-Nothings elected the governor and all but two members of the Massachusetts state legislature as well as 40 members of the New York state legislature. By 1855 Know-Nothing adherents had elected thousands of local government officials as well as eight governors. Forty-three Know-Nothing candidates were elected to the U.S. House of Representatives and there were five Know-Nothing senators.

Yet even as the number of Know-Nothing adherents reached its peak, the movement was beginning to decline. Despite their numbers in elective office, the Know-Nothings were largely unsuccessful in passing significant legislation. They introduced a bill in Congress that called for the prohibition of immigration of foreign-born paupers and convicts. They also introduced legislation in several states that required registration and literacy tests for voters.

In 1856 the Know-Nothings held their first and only national convention in Philadelphia where, as the American party, they supported former President **MILLARD FILLMORE** as their presidential candidate. The meeting illustrated the growing divide between antislavery and proslavery factions within the party when a group of antislavery delegates abruptly left the convention. Fillmore received 21 percent of the popular vote and eight electoral votes, finishing a poor third behind Democrat **JAMES BUCHANAN** (who had been nominated instead of unpopular incumbent **FRANKLIN PIERCE** and who won the election) and Republican John Fremont.

The dismal showing of Fillmore and the increasing controversy over slavery continued the rapid disintegration of the Know-Nothing movement. Many antislavery adherents joined remnants of the Whigs in the newly emerging [Republican](http://law.jrank.org/pages/9803/Republican-Party.html) Party, while proslavery supporters joined the [Democratic](http://law.jrank.org/pages/6057/Democratic-Party.html) Party. By 1859 the Know-Nothing movement had lost support in all but a few Northern and border states and was no longer of any significance on the national stage.

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<http://law.jrank.org/pages/8005/Know-Nothing-Party.html>