

Chapter 4. The Movement against Immigrants

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Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts,
The Campaign Bee, October 1855

In the 1850s the American Party, more commonly referred to as the Know-Nothing Party, acquired power in several northeastern legislatures and governments with a broad political agenda that included imposing strict limits on the voting rights of immigrants. Its crowning achievement was an amendment to the Massachusetts constitution to prevent naturalized citizens from voting until two years after obtaining citizenship. What this movement accomplished is actually the reverse of what its proponents had intended. Instead of reducing the political power of immigrants, the movement had the net effect of making immigrants more powerful. Although it appears debatable to what extent the nationwide countermovement, led primarily by German journalists, veterans of the revolutions of 1848, the Forty-Eighters, and members of the Turner societies, was decisive in facilitating the nomination and election of Abraham Lincoln, the details in the course of events show that these German-Americans as a whole played a role as a significant catalyst. Thus, a powerful movement to diminish the influence of immigrants failed and, ironically, the desperate struggle against it became a rallying point and a factor influencing national politics.

When a nation confronts a massive influx of foreigners, widespread hostility to immigrants is predictable. Between 1845 and 1855, close to three million arrivals from foreign lands represented 14.5 percent of the total population and created resentments that politicians exploited, perhaps most notably in Massachusetts. There conditions seemed ripe for the formation of a party that would take up the cause of resisting foreign influence in political life. As early as 1843, the American Party came into being in New York, a party

of nativism, and it demanded restrictions on the voting rights of naturalized citizens. Ten years later, the power of this party became magnified by the network of a secret society, the Know-Nothings, the name of which implied that members were not to divulge the society's secrets.¹ If asked about them, a member was instructed to say that he knew nothing. In 1853, the earliest lodges formed and quickly spread throughout the country. Massachusetts became the showcase for their most stunning successes.

The Know-Nothing ideology had a number of components, the most prominent of which was hidden in the membership requirements. Members were required to be native-born citizens, Protestants, and opponents of the Catholic Church, the so-called Papists. Many lodges also favored temperance laws and opposed the extension of slavery.² Above all, however, the common denominator was that immigration represented a danger. There was a widespread belief that the foreigners, mostly the Irish and Germans, were criminal elements. Abraham Lincoln expressed his opposition to the Know-Nothings as early as 1855: "I am not a Know-Nothing. That is certain. How could I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of Negroes be in favor of degrading white people?"³

Not everyone saw the lines drawn so clearly. Henry Wilson, a prominent Massachusetts politician and a radical opponent of the extension of slavery, became a member of a Know-Nothing lodge, and he was willing to make concessions to its extreme position on immigration. He justified his political alliance with the "American movement" by evidence of the evils and abuses that resulted from immigration; the immigrants brought with them social, religious, and political institutions alien to those of the U.S.

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It is evident from his assertive formulation that he was eager to get this organization's support. Yet he was treading a thin line between political expediency and principles. After gaining the endorsement of the Know-Nothings for a seat in the United States Senate, Wilson proceeded to oppose the extremism of that party.

The Know-Nothings cast a wide net of political interests, and in 1854, with the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, they were able to capitalize on an issue that drew many voters who may have had reservations on other sensitive topics into their camp. Nationwide, they claimed to have ten

thousand lodges and about a million members. The elections of late 1854 and early 1855 showed them to be successful in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire. In Massachusetts, they could celebrate a stunning victory; the election put Know-Nothing candidates in all offices of the state. The drive to restrict the voting rights of immigrants could begin in earnest.

This effort went through several phases. Initially, the Know-Nothing legislators forged ahead to implement a most extreme form of legislation, intending to bar all immigrants from voting or holding office. For the newly elected Senator Henry Wilson, who had praised the Know-Nothings, this went too far. He asserted that he was "doing all to kill" the measure because "its adoption will be disgraceful to the party and the state."⁵ Such efforts were made even more difficult, when, in wake of the provocation of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Republican Party emerged as the leading antislavery movement. Many Know-Nothing members flocked to the new party.

The overwhelming victory of the Know-Nothings in Massachusetts and the birth of the Republican Party resulted in an awkward situation for the German-Americans of the state. Adolf Douai, a prominent leader of German-Americans in Boston and a Forty-Eighter, reflected on this and what he tried to do about it. The Republican Party, as he perceived it, was an unlikely combination of politicians

. . . consisting primarily of old abolitionists, Free Soil Democrats, the remnants of the rapidly weakening Know-Nothing Party. The fact that so many Know-Nothings joined it, greatly undermined German initiatives. Many Germans, like all immigrants, saw their rights as citizens threatened by the Know-Nothings, most of all in New England, where legislatures at that time considered limiting the rights of citizenship for the period of twenty-one years, or at least seven.

Douai was referring to measures that were eventually reduced in severity. In the version presented to the citizens of Massachusetts, the restriction of voting rights applied only for the two years after naturalization. Douai and Dr. Kob appeared at a meeting of a joint committee of the Massachusetts House and Senate to speak in opposition to the proposed amendment.

We showed that this proposal would be of no use to the opponents of slavery in New England because the foreigners were a decreasing minority. Germans were all against slavery and almost all Irish had become Democrats by means of fraud. In fact, the proposition would greatly damage the cause of defeating slavery in the West.

There in four or five states the votes of the Germans were decisive. They were opponents of slavery, but they were unwilling to support an anti-slavery party that threatened their own rights as citizens in a knowledgeable, model state such as Massachusetts.

Douai was making an incisive and farsighted analysis of the potential nationwide impact of the German vote. As early as 1856 he could see that in the western states the German vote could be decisive. He found it necessary, however, to distance the Germans from the Irish. For the Know-Nothing legislators that distinction had no significance. To them the limitation on immigrant voting rights had to be clear and comprehensive. The only consideration seemed to be the number of years after naturalization the immigrant voting rights had to be restricted.⁶

For many German-Americans it was not evident that Republicans, many of whom were Know-Nothings, represented their crucial interests. Nevertheless, in the election of 1856, they engaged in an energetic campaign to elect John Frémont, a fervent opponent of slavery, as president. Even during this campaign, a shift became evident, away from the Know-Nothings and their immigration politics to a focus on the Republican movement against the extension of slavery. This shift was also evident in the actions of Senator Henry Wilson, who was now keenly aware of the significance of German-American voting rights.

Wilson's participation in the second annual festival of the *Turnverein* at Florence Grove outside Boston reflected the shift that was taking place. The Germania Serenade Band greeted the Turner clubs, the Frémont clubs of Boston and vicinity, and an audience of two thousand. The *Boston Atlas* reported on September 9 that Wilson addressed the crowd for "half an hour, during which he alluded to the sufferings of the free settlers in Kansas, of which a large number are Germans, and concluded by urging them to seek redress for the outrages thus inflicted upon their fellow countrymen, by casting their votes for John C. Fremont." Another speaker was the prominent revolutionary Gustave Struve. He discouraged his listeners from voting for the Democratic Party by asserting that such a vote "disgraced his fatherland." Other speakers included Adolf Douai and Karl Friedrich Kob. The assembly passed resolutions in support of Frémont and against the extension of slavery, considered "a crime against free labor, free speech, humanity, and men's rights and as high treason, endangering the existence of the Union, the Republic, and its development."⁷

Elsewhere, prominent Forty-Eighters joined in support of Frémont and the Republican Party. On October 8, German Republicans of New York met and welcomed Friedrich Hecker, who argued that the influence of the Know-

Nothing was bound to dissipate through Frémont's triumph.⁸ Forty-Eighter Reinhold Solger spoke in Philadelphia. The Boston *Atlas* quoted him:

Never, indeed, was a more glorious privilege conferred upon any number of men than that to the exercise of which the German citizens of the United States are being called at this great moment; holding, as they do, in their hands the scales of the world's history for all time to come. [Applause] And having to decide by the weight of their votes for all mankind the question whether or not the theory of free government is a delusion.

Solger concluded with a call for the Republican candidate.

And this will be an everlasting honor to our name: that, deaf to the voice of demagogues and undisturbed by the alarm of Know-Nothing persecution, we have been content to answer the flatteries or furies of the former, and the mistaken hostility of the latter, by simply pledging our lives to the welfare of this country, our hearts to the cause of its free institutions, and our votes to Frémont! [Dr. Solger took his seat under a storm of applause.]⁹

Friedrich Kapp, who acted as the chairman of the meeting, estimated that ten thousand persons attended. He sensed the spirit of the unsuccessful revolutions alive again in totally different conditions and locations.¹⁰

For Douai, who had campaigned with speeches in many places (Boston, Hartford, New Haven, New York, Hoboken, Newark, Philadelphia, Reading, Allentown, Bethlehem, and Easton) the defeat of Frémont was a painful disappointment, but he was proud of what he and the other Forty-Eighters had accomplished in support of the Republicans. He believed that the relative success of the very first Republican campaign "could be considered a revolution. Almost without money a voluntary, enthusiastic, and dedicated conversion work was successfully undertaken by Anglo-American Free Soilers and the German Forty-Eighters."¹¹ Despite Douai's belief that such efforts almost led to victory (if Pennsylvania had not been lost), many German-Americans were still reluctant to abandon their former association with the Democratic Party.

Aware that, despite the failed effort, the German role was significant, Douai and Kob believed that it was not too early to plan for a movement to prevail in the next election. Wasting no time, within three weeks after the election, Douai and Kob embarked on a plan to organize German-Americans on a national basis to resist the tyranny of the proslavery administration. On

the basis of recent events, they asserted confidently that German-Americans could be united into a solid block of voters, and on November 30 they published their proposals in the *Pionier*, a socialist journal edited by Karl Heinzen. Acting on a proposal made by the Frémont Club no. 5 of Boston on September 24, the authors proposed specific steps to establish a national committee, a structure that had links to local organizations, along with a news organ in German and English to represent views to the general public, and a convention to discuss details of organization and implementation. The provisional home of the central committee was to be New York.¹²

In Massachusetts German-Americans had to contend with the continued pressure from the advocates of Know-Nothing initiatives. The anti-immigrant agitation achieved a remarkable success with the ratification of the Two-Year Amendment in Massachusetts. The amendment, which prevented naturalized citizens from voting for a period of two years after obtaining citizenship, became law on May 9, 1859. The law undermined the participation of many German-Americans in the 1860s election. But the success of the Know-Nothings eventually proved to be a decisive turning point. It galvanized the German-American communities to condemn the amendment and to cause a shift among German voters from Democrats to Republicans. The focus on this single issue made the German vote more influential. The 1856 platform of the Republican Party in Philadelphia had guaranteed "equality of rights among citizens," but this general assertion did not prevent the Massachusetts legislature, with a significant number of Republicans voting with the Know-Nothings, to undermine those rights.

Even before the amendment passed, the Republican Club of New Jersey and the German Central Committee of New York met in February 1859 and expressed serious objections to the Massachusetts proposal. Adolph Douai even proposed secession from the Republican Party and the establishment of an independent party to represent German interests. Such an extreme measure could not be taken seriously, and it was not. The most realistic and productive initiatives to take issue with the amendment evolved at the same time in Iowa. *Der Demokrat* of Davenport, February 15, published an editorial by Theodore Olshausen (1802–69), a Turner and a prominent veteran of the revolution in Kiel and a widely respected newspaper publisher in Iowa. He wrote on "Nativism in Massachusetts," asking the German-Americans of Massachusetts to reject the "injurious and obnoxious measure."¹³

The *Daily Illinois State Journal* of Springfield, which probably closely represented the views of Abraham Lincoln, angrily denounced the proposed change: "It must be killed, or Republicanism in all the northwestern and not a few of the eastern states is needlessly and imminently imperiled." The paper proceeded to report other newspapers sharing its concerns, in Wisconsin,

Ohio, and Indiana. Such protestations reflected the practical experience in Springfield, where the same paper observed that recent successes of the Republicans in a city election were due in no small part to the participation of the German-Americans.¹⁴



Based on the 1870 census, this population map shows concentrations of German immigrants in the key states of Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Courtesy of the Library of Virginia. Lincoln was keenly aware of the power of German-American voting.

On April 18, Carl Schurz spoke in Boston against the amendment, and, according to the report of the *New York Daily Tribune*, the speech was “a noble

vindication of that truly American liberality which invites the oppressed and the exiled of all nations not only to make our country their home, but to share with us the duty and the responsibility of directing its public policy and shaping its destinies.”¹⁵ Olshausen and Schurz were preparing the basis for serious reflection within the Republican Party. The experience of the Republicans in their first national election undoubtedly played a role in the events that unfolded in subsequent weeks. Because the presidential candidate Frémont had been unable to win key western states, the Democratic Party prevailed. Frémont lost in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin. In these states there were substantial numbers of German-American voters. Looking ahead, Republican leaders could not afford to ignore them.

A deluge of warnings emanated from Iowa. On April 11, a lengthy letter whose author identified himself as “An Iowa Farmer and True Republican” appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune*. Without the vote of the foreign-born citizens, he insisted, the Republicans could not prevail. He saw thousands of German-Americans continually joining the ranks of the Republicans “so that today, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, New York and perhaps Pennsylvania, can be counted Republican through the strength of the German Republican vote.” The author, as it later became evident, was Nicholas J. Rusch (1822–64), a native of Kiel, who had studied at the University of Kiel and was forced to emigrate because of illegal activities before the outbreak of the revolution. He was a resident of Scott County near Davenport, where he established himself and became prosperous as a farmer. In 1857, successful in a campaign for the office of senator in the Iowa state legislature, he became one of the foremost German-American leaders in the movement against the Two-Year Amendment.¹⁶

German-Americans received key support from John A. Kasson (1822–1910), a native of Vermont who practiced law in St. Louis, where he undoubtedly met recent immigrants from Germany. The spirit of the recent revolutions was not foreign to him. Before coming to Iowa in 1857 he had been selected to deliver the speech welcoming the Hungarian revolutionary Louis Kossuth, and he expressed his empathy with the plight of those who escaped from reactionary repression. Iowa Republicans were quick to recognize his potential for the party; they chose him to become chairman of the Republican State Central Committee. He immediately realized the significance of the German discontent. Under his influence and direction, the State Central Committee, of which Nicholas Rusch was also a member, formulated resolutions to urge Massachusetts to reject the amendment by which “naturalized citizens are deprived of their rights as guaranteed by the constitution and existing laws.” In a letter accompanying the resolutions, Kasson stated that the amendment could “seriously retard the progress of

the essential principles of the Republican Party throughout the country.” The resolutions and the letter were dated April 18 and received wide circulation in Iowa.¹⁷

At the same time, United States Senator James W. Grimes (1816–72) confided to his fellow Senator James Harlan (1865–66): “We can do nothing in Iowa without the Republican Germans.”¹⁸ To place more emphasis on the seriousness of their concerns, German leaders directed questions to leading Iowa politicians.

1. Are you in favor of the naturalization laws as they now stand and particularly against all and every extension of the probation time?
2. Do you regard it a duty of the Republican Party as the party of equal rights, to oppose and war upon each and every discrimination that may be attempted to be made between the native born and adopted citizens, as to the right of suffrage?
3. Do you condemn the late action of the Republicans in the Massachusetts legislature, attempting to exclude the adopted citizens for two years from the ballot box, as unwise, unjust, and uncalled for?

The authors of the questions were: G. Hillgaertner, Henry Richter, John Bittmann, Theodore Olshausen, Theodore Guelich, and J. B. Webber, almost without exception veterans of the 1848 revolution and active members of the Turners.¹⁹ Their common experience is reflected in their focus and determination to pursue a goal that they considered just. The challenge posed by these questions brought about unambiguous statements by Iowa senators Harlan and Grimes. Harlan declared that “the German Republicans have been and must continue to be an effective element in its organization.”²⁰

This widespread recognition of German voting power went hand in hand with the recognition by German-Americans that the new Republican Party could represent their interests in a number of ways. This party, originating in response to the Kansas-Nebraska Bill, was opposed to the extension of slavery and thereby supported the cause of free labor in the new territories. Although the issue of slavery dominated, it did not exclude others that supported a movement toward the Republicans. For the German-Americans, the issues raised first by the Free Soil Party and carried forward by the Republicans, were of great interest. Immigrants were eager to claim land in the West. German-Americans were not alone. Southerners perceived the opening of vast lands for settlement in the Homestead Act with great suspicion. President Buchanan vetoed the Homestead Act and thus gave the Republicans a strong cause to fight for. A broad base of interests combined under the Republican banner.²¹

The most prominent German leader among the Republicans was Nicholas Rusch; his unprecedented success in Iowa politics reflected the growing strength of the German community. On June 22, 1859, Rusch officially became the party's nominee as lieutenant governor and thus helped assure a Republican victory. The developments in Iowa were not unique. The Massachusetts initiative provoked similar reactions in Illinois and set the stage for events of national significance.

Notes

¹ Tyler Anbinder, *Nativism & Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings & the Politics of the 1850s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 3 and 11.

² *Ibid.*, 24 and 104–6.

³ Letter to Joshua Speed, August 24, 1855.

⁴ *The Campaign Bee*, October 1855. Cf. Ernest McKay, *Henry Wilson: Practical Radical: A Portrait of a Politician* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1971), 92–93.

⁵ Anbinder, 127 and 140–41.

⁶ “. . . the Progressive Society (*Fortschrittsverein*), of which I am a member, and the Turner Society (*Turnverein*), which became united into a single society, collected 900 signatures for an appeal to the legislature, which I delivered and, contacting several members of the House and Senate, stressed that this appeal contained the reasons against the measure. We came several days too late. The House had hurried the bill in three readings, so much that we could only present our appeal to the Senate. It was in vain. . . . When the voting took place about the constitutional amendment, very few people took part, and the majority voted for the amendment” (Adolf Douai, “*Lebensbeschreibung*,” manuscript deposited with the Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin, 179). Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are mine. FB.

⁷ *Boston Atlas*, September 12, 1856. The *Boston Daily Advertiser* reported on August 15, 1855 about the first of the *Turnverein* festivals at Florence Grove. At this event Dr. Huth, the president of the Boston Turner Society, was the speaker.

⁸ *New York Daily Tribune*, October 8, 1856. The *Tribune* estimated the size of the crowd at 5,000.

⁹ Reporting on the speech delivered on October 11: *Boston Atlas*, October 18, 1856.

¹⁰ Kapp wrote to Feuerbach on October 12, 1856. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Friedrich Kapp: Vom radikalen Frühsozialisten des Vormärz zum liberalen Parteipolitiker des Bismarckreichs. Briefe 1843–1884* (Frankfurt a. M.: Insel, 1969), 73. Wolfgang Hinners, *Exil und Rückkehr: Friedrich Kapp in Amerika und Deutschland, 1824–1884* (Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag, 1987), 109. Edith Lenel, *Friedrich Kapp: 1824–1884: Ein Lebensbild aus den deutschen und den nordamerikanischen Einheitskämpfen* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1938).

¹¹ “*Lebensbeschreibung*,” 179.

¹² The following persons signed the proclamation: “Dr. Kob, Dr. Finois, C. Schmidt, Dr. Douai, and A. Babo.” *Der Pionier*, September 24, 1856.

¹³ F. I. Herriott documented the history of the German reactions to the Two-Year Amendment, first in Iowa, then in Springfield, Illinois, and, finally, in Chicago, during the crucial Nominating Convention of the Republican Party in 1860. “The Germans of Iowa and the ‘Two-Year’ Amendment of Massachusetts,” *Jahrbuch der Deutsch-Amerikanischen Historischen Gesellschaft von Illinois* 13 (1913): 213–15; Herriott, “The Premises and Significance of Abra-

ham Lincoln's Letter to Theodor Canisius," *Jahrbuch der Deutsch-Amerikanischen Historischen Gesellschaft von Illinois* (1915): 181–254; and Herriott, "The Conference in the *Deutsches Haus* Chicago," *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1928): 100–91.

¹⁴ *Daily Illinois State Journal*, March 25, April 2, 5, and 6, 1859. On Lincoln's relationship to this paper, see further discussion below.

¹⁵ Herriott, "The Germans of Iowa and the 'Two-Year' Amendment of Massachusetts," 235.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 222. "The Conference in the *Deutsches Haus* Chicago," 178. On Rusch see also Joachim Reppmann, *Freiheit, Bildung und Wohlstand für Alle! Schleswig-Holsteinische "Achtundvierziger" in den USA 1847–1860* (Wyk auf Föhr: Kuegler, 1994), 48.

¹⁷ Herriott, "The Germans of Iowa and the 'Two-Year' Amendment of Massachusetts," 226–31. Kasson was a delegate to the Chicago convention and played a key role for the formulation of the so-called "Dutch Plank" on the platform committee. He was elected to the House of Representatives six times. Cf. Edward Younger, *John A. Kasson: Politics and Diplomacy from Lincoln to McKinley* (Iowa City: State historical Society of Iowa, 1955). Cf. Norma Lois Peterson, *Freedom and Franchise: the Political Career of B. Gratz Brown* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1965).

¹⁸ Herriott, "The Germans of Iowa and the 'Two-Year' Amendment of Massachusetts," 229–37 and 281. Herriott refers to the same statement by Grimes in two passages, but assigns two different dates, April 14 and April 16.

¹⁹ On Hillgaertner, Bittman, Olshausen, and Guelich, see the biographical appendix in Zucker, *The Forty-Eighters: Political Refugees of the German Revolution of 1848*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 237–44.

²¹ Reinhard H. Luthin, *The First Lincoln Campaign* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1944), 177.

