

“The bank,” Andrew Jackson told Martin Van Buren, “is trying to kill me, but I will kill it!” That is just the unwavering force that Edward Clay depicted in this lithograph, which praised Jackson for terminating the Second Bank of the United States. Clay shows Nicholas Biddle as the devil running away from Jackson as the bank collapses around him, his hirelings, and speculators. Edward W. Clay, c. 1832. Wikimedia.

Although its charter would not be renewed, the Bank of the United States could still operate for several more years. So in 1833, to diminish its power, Jackson also directed his cabinet to stop depositing federal funds in it. From now on, the government would do business with selected state banks instead. Critics called them Jackson’s “pet banks.”

Jackson’s bank veto set off fierce controversy. Opponents in Philadelphia held a meeting and declared that the president’s ideas were dangerous to private property. Jackson, they said, intended to “place the honest earnings of the industrious citizen at the disposal of the idle”—in other words, redistribute wealth to lazy people—and become a “dictator.”<sup>24</sup> A newspaper editor said that Jackson was trying to set “the poor against the rich,” perhaps in order to take over as a military tyrant.<sup>25</sup> But Jackson’s supporters praised him. Pro-Jackson newspaper editors wrote that he had kept a “monied aristocracy” from conquering the people.<sup>26</sup>

By giving President Jackson a vivid way to defy the rich and powerful, or at least appear to do so, the Bank War gave his supporters a specific “democratic” idea to rally around. More than any other issue, opposition to the national bank came to define their beliefs. And by leading Jackson to exert executive power so dramatically against Congress, the Bank War also helped his political enemies organize.

Increasingly, supporters of Andrew Jackson referred to themselves as Democrats. Under the strategic leadership of Martin Van Buren, they built a highly organized national political party, the first modern party in the United States. Much more than earlier political parties, this Democratic Party had a centralized leadership structure and a consistent ideological program for all levels of government. Meanwhile, Jackson’s enemies, mocking him as “King Andrew the First,” named themselves after the patriots of the American Revolution, the Whigs.

## VIII. The Panic of 1837

Unfortunately for Jackson’s Democrats (and most other Americans), their victory over the Bank of the United States worsened rather than solved the country’s economic problems.

Things looked good initially. Between 1834 and 1836, a combination of high cotton prices, freely available foreign and domestic credit, and an infusion of specie (“hard” currency in the form of gold and silver) from Europe spurred a sustained boom in the American economy. At the same time, sales of western land by the federal government promoted speculation and poorly regulated lending practices, creating a vast real estate bubble.

Meanwhile, the number of state-chartered banks grew from 329 in 1830 to 713 just six years later. As a result, the volume of paper banknotes per capita in circulation in the United States increased by 40 percent between 1834 and 1836. Low interest rates in Great Britain also encouraged British capitalists to make risky investments in America. British lending across the Atlantic surged, raising American foreign indebtedness from \$110 million to \$220 million over the same two years.<sup>27</sup>

As the boom accelerated, banks became more careless about the amount of hard currency they kept on hand to redeem their banknotes. And although Jackson had hoped his bank veto would reduce bankers’ and speculators’ power over the economy, it actually made the problems worse.

Two further federal actions late in the Jackson administration also worsened the situation. In June 1836, Congress decided to increase the





outside Independence Hall in Philadelphia, denouncing banking as a “system of fraud and oppression.”<sup>29</sup>

The Panic of 1837 led to a general economic depression. Between 1839 and 1843, the total capital held by American banks dropped by 40 percent as prices fell and economic activity around the nation slowed to a crawl. The price of cotton in New Orleans, for instance, dropped 50 percent.<sup>30</sup>

Traveling through New Orleans in January 1842, a British diplomat reported that the country “presents a lamentable appearance of exhaustion and demoralization.”<sup>31</sup> Over the previous decade, the American economy had soared to fantastic new heights and plunged to dramatic new depths.

Normal banking activity did not resume around the nation until late 1842. Meanwhile, two hundred banks closed, cash and credit became scarce, prices declined, and trade slowed. During this downturn, eight states and a territorial government defaulted on loans made by British banks to finance internal improvements.<sup>32</sup>

## IX. Rise of the Whigs

The disaster of the Panic of 1837 created an opportunity for the Whig Party, which had grown partly out of the political coalition of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay and opposed Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party. The National Republicans, a loose alliance concentrated in the Northeast, had become the core of a new anti-Jackson movement. But Jackson’s enemies were a varied group; they included pro-slavery southerners angry about Jackson’s behavior during the Nullification Crisis as well as antislavery Yankees.

After they failed to prevent Andrew Jackson’s reelection, this fragile coalition formally organized as a new party in 1834 “to rescue the Government and public liberty.”<sup>33</sup> Henry Clay, who had run against Jackson for president and was now serving again as a senator from Kentucky, held private meetings to persuade anti-Jackson leaders from different backgrounds to unite. He also gave the new Whig Party its anti-monarchical name.

At first, the Whigs focused mainly on winning seats in Congress, opposing “King Andrew” from outside the presidency. They remained divided by regional and ideological differences. The Democratic presidential candidate, Vice President Martin Van Buren, easily won election





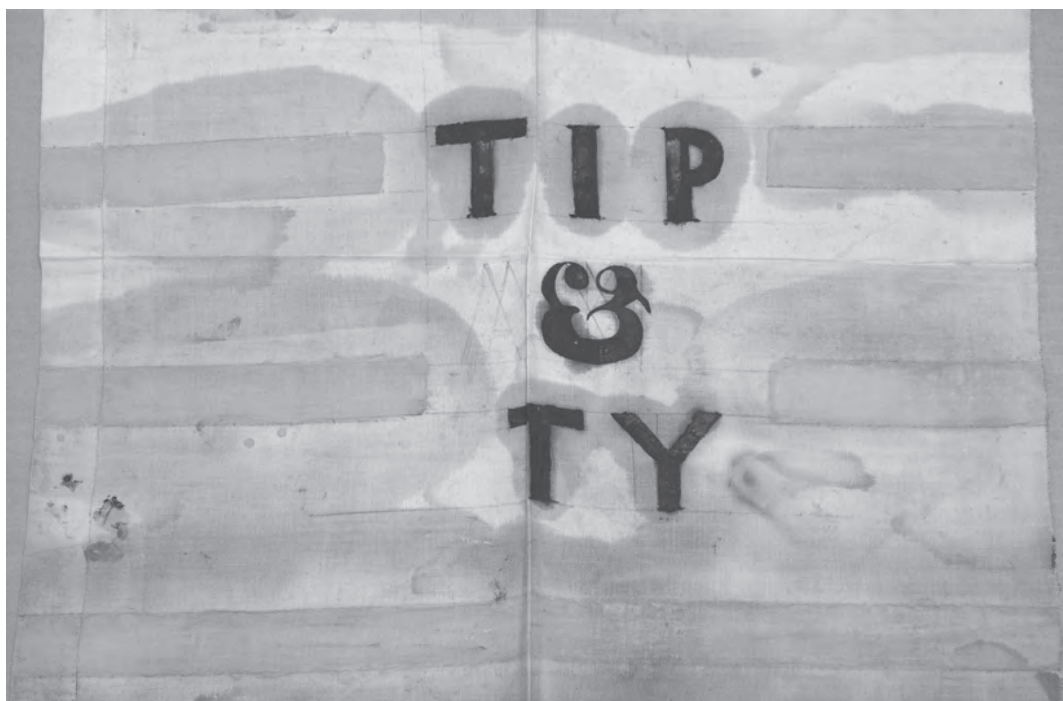


Andrew Jackson portrayed himself as the defender of the common man, and in many ways he democratized American politics. His opponents, however, zeroed in on Jackson's willingness to use the powers of the executive office. Unwilling to defer to Congress and absolutely willing to use his veto power, Jackson came to be regarded by his adversaries as a tyrant (or, in this case, "King Andrew I.") Anonymous, c. 1832. Wikimedia.

as Jackson's successor in 1836. But the Whigs gained significant public support after the Panic of 1837, and they became increasingly well organized. In late 1839, they held their first national convention in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

To Henry Clay's disappointment, the convention voted to nominate not him but General William Henry Harrison of Ohio as the Whig candidate for president in 1840. Harrison was known primarily for defeating Shawnee warriors led by Tecumseh before and during the War of 1812, most famously at the Battle of Tippecanoe in present-day Indiana. Whig leaders viewed him as a candidate with broad patriotic appeal. They portrayed him as the "log cabin and hard cider" candidate, a plain man of the country, unlike the easterner Martin Van Buren. To balance the ticket with a southerner, the Whigs nominated a slave-owning Virginia senator, John Tyler, for vice president. Tyler had been a Jackson supporter but had broken with him over states' rights during the Nullification Crisis.

Although "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too" easily won the presidential election of 1840, this choice of ticket turned out to be disastrous for the Whigs. Harrison became ill (for unclear reasons, though tradition claims



The popular slogan “Tippecanoe and Tyler Too” helped the Whigs and William Henry Harrison (with John Tyler) win the presidential election in 1840. Pictured here is a campaign banner with shortened “Tip and Ty,” one of the many ways that Whigs waged the “log cabin campaign.”  
Wikimedia.

he contracted pneumonia after delivering a nearly two-hour inaugural address without an overcoat or hat) and died after just thirty-one days in office. Harrison thus holds the ironic honor of having the longest inaugural address and the shortest term in office of any American president.<sup>34</sup> Vice President Tyler became president and soon adopted policies that looked far more like Andrew Jackson’s than like a Whig’s. After Tyler twice vetoed charters for another Bank of the United States, nearly his entire cabinet resigned, and the Whigs in Congress expelled “His Accidency” from the party.

The crisis of Tyler’s administration was just one sign of the Whig Party’s difficulty uniting around issues besides opposition to Democrats. The Whig Party succeeded in electing two more presidents but remained deeply divided. Its problems grew as the issue of slavery strained the Union in the 1850s. Unable to agree on a consistent national position on slavery, and unable to find another national issue to rally around, the Whigs broke apart by 1856.

## X. Anti-Masons, Anti-Immigrants, and the Whig Coalition

The Whig coalition drew strength from several earlier parties, including two that harnessed American political paranoia. The Anti-Masonic

Party formed in the 1820s for the purpose of destroying the Freemasons. Later, anti-immigrant sentiment formed the American Party, also called the Know-Nothings. The American Party sought and won office across the country in the 1850s, but nativism had already been an influential force, particularly in the Whig Party, whose members could not fail to notice that urban Irish Catholics strongly tended to support Democrats.

Freemasonry, an international network of social clubs with arcane traditions and rituals, seems to have originated in medieval Europe as a trade organization for stonemasons. By the eighteenth century, however, it had outgrown its relationship with the masons' craft and had become a general secular fraternal order that proclaimed adherence to the ideals of the Enlightenment.

Freemasonry was an important part of the social life of men in the new republic's elite. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Andrew Jackson, and Henry Clay all claimed membership. Prince Hall, a free leather worker in Boston, founded a separate branch of the order for African American men. However, the Masonic brotherhood's secrecy, elitism, rituals, and secular ideals generated a deep suspicion of the organization among many Americans.

In 1820s upstate New York, which was fertile soil for new religious and social reform movements, anti-Masonic suspicion would emerge for the first time as an organized political force. The trigger for this was the strange disappearance and probable murder of William Morgan. Morgan announced plans to publish an exposé called *Illustrations of Masonry*.<sup>35</sup> This book purported to reveal the order's secret rites, and it outraged other local Freemasons. They launched a series of attempts to prevent the book from being published, including an attempt to burn the press and a conspiracy to have Morgan jailed for alleged debts. In September, Morgan disappeared. He was last seen being forced into a carriage by four men later identified as Masons. When a corpse washed up on the shore of Lake Ontario, Morgan's wife and friends claimed at first that it was his.

The Morgan story convinced many people that Masonry was a dangerous influence in the republic. The publicity surrounding the trials transformed local outrage into a political movement that, though small, had significant power in New York and parts of New England. This movement addressed Americans' widespread dissatisfaction about economic and political change by giving them a handy explanation: the republic was controlled by a secret society.

In 1827, local anti-Masonic committees began meeting across the state of New York, committing not to vote for any political candidate



who belonged to the Freemasons. This boycott grew, and in 1828, a convention in the town of LeRoy produced an “Anti-Masonic Declaration of Independence,” the basis for an Anti-Masonic Party. In 1828, Anti-Masonic politicians ran for state offices in New York, winning 12 percent of the vote for governor.<sup>36</sup>

In 1830, the Anti-Masons held a national convention in Philadelphia. But after a dismal showing in the 1832 presidential elections, the leaders of the Anti-Masonic Party folded their movement into the new Whig Party. The Anti-Masonic Party’s absorption into the Whig coalition demonstrated the importance of conspiracy theories in American politics. Just as Andrew Jackson’s followers detected a vast foreign plot in the form of the Bank of the United States, some of his enemies could detect it in the form of the Freemasons. Others, called nativists, blamed immigrants.

Nativists detected many foreign threats, but Catholicism may have been the most important. Nativists watched with horror as more and more Catholic immigrants (especially from Ireland and Germany) arrived in American cities. The immigrants professed different beliefs, often spoke unfamiliar languages, and participated in alien cultural traditions. Just as importantly, nativists remembered Europe’s history of warfare between Catholics and Protestants. They feared that Catholics would bring religious violence with them to the United States.

In the summer of 1834, a mob of Protestants attacked a Catholic convent near Boston. The rioters had read newspaper rumors that a woman was being held against her will by the nuns. Angry men broke into the convent and burned it to the ground. Later, a young woman named Rebecca Reed, who had spent time in the convent, published a memoir describing abuses she claimed the nuns had directed toward novices and students.<sup>37</sup> The convent attack was among many eruptions of nativism, especially in New England and other parts of the Northeast, during the early nineteenth century.

Many Protestants saw the Catholic faith as a superstition that deprived individuals of the right to think for themselves and enslaved them to a dictator, the pope, in Rome. They accused Catholic priests of controlling their parishioners and preying sexually on young women. They feared that Catholicism would overrun and conquer the American political system, just as their ancestors had feared it would conquer England.

The painter and inventor Samuel F. B. Morse, for example, warned in 1834 that European tyrants were conspiring together to “carry Popery through all our borders” by sending Catholic immigrants to the





United States. If they succeeded, he predicted, Catholic dominance in America would mean “the *certain destruction of our free institutions*.”<sup>38</sup> Around the same time, the Protestant minister Lyman Beecher lectured in various cities, delivering a similar warning. “If the potentates of Europe have no design upon our liberties,” Beecher demanded, then why were they sending over “such floods of pauper emigrants—the contents of the poorhouse and the sweepings of the streets—multiplying tumults and violence, filling our prisons, and crowding our poorhouses, and quadrupling our taxation”—not to mention voting in American elections?<sup>39</sup>

## XI. Race and Jacksonian Democracy

More than anything else, however, it was racial inequality that exposed American democracy’s limits. Over several decades, state governments had lowered their property requirements so poorer men could vote. But as northern states ended slavery, whites worried that free black men could also go to the polls in large numbers. In response, they adopted new laws that made racial discrimination the basis of American democracy.

At the time of the Revolution, only two states explicitly limited black voting rights. By 1839, almost all states did. (The four exceptions were all in New England, where the Democratic Party was weakest.) For example, New York’s 1821 state constitution enfranchised nearly all white male taxpayers but only the richest black men. In 1838, a similar constitution in Pennsylvania prohibited black voting completely.

The new Pennsylvania constitution disenfranchised even one of the richest people in Philadelphia. James Forten, a free-born sailmaker who had served in the American Revolution, had become a wealthy merchant and landowner. He used his wealth and influence to promote the abolition of slavery, and after the 1838 constitution, he undertook a lawsuit to protect his right to vote. But he lost, and his voting rights were terminated. An English observer commented sarcastically that Forten wasn’t “white enough” to vote, but “he has always been considered quite white enough to be *taxed*.”<sup>40</sup>

During the 1830s, furthermore, the social tensions that had promoted Andrew Jackson’s rise also worsened race relations. Almost four hundred thousand free blacks lived in America by the end of the decade.<sup>41</sup> In the South and West, Native Americans stood in the way of white expansion. And the new Irish Catholic immigrants, along with native working-class



whites, often despised nonwhites as competitors for scarce work, housing, and status.

Racial and ethnic resentment thus contributed to a wave of riots in American cities during the 1830s. In Philadelphia, thousands of white rioters torched an antislavery meeting house and attacked black churches and homes. Near St. Louis, abolitionist newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy was murdered as he defended his printing press. Contemplating the violence, another journalist wondered, “Does it not appear that the character of our people has suffered a considerable change for the worse?”<sup>42</sup>

Racial tensions also influenced popular culture. The white actor Thomas Dartmouth Rice appeared on stage in blackface, singing and dancing as a clownish slave named “Jim Crow.” Many other white entertainers copied him. Borrowing from the work of real black performers but pandering to white audiences’ prejudices, they turned cruel stereotypes into one of antebellum America’s favorite forms of entertainment.

Some whites in the 1830s, however, joined free black activists in protesting racial inequality. Usually, they lived in northern cities and came from the class of skilled laborers, or in other words, the lower middle class. Most of them were not rich, but they expected to rise in the world.

In Boston, for example, the Female Anti-Slavery Society included women whose husbands sold coal, mended clothes, and baked bread, as well as women from wealthy families. In the nearby village of Lynn, many abolitionists were shoemakers. They organized boycotts of consumer products like sugar that came from slave labor, and they sold their own handmade goods at antislavery fund-raising fairs. For many of them, the antislavery movement was a way to participate in “respectable” middle-class culture, a way for both men and women to have a say in American life.

Debates about slavery, therefore, reflected wider tensions in a changing society. The ultimate question was whether American democracy had room for people of different races as well as religions and classes. Some people said yes and struggled to make American society more welcoming. But the vast majority, whether Democrats or Whigs, said no.

## XII. Reference Material

This chapter was edited by Jonathan Wilfred Wilson, with content contributions by Myles Beaupre, Christopher Childers, William Cossen, Adam Costanzo, Nathaniel C. Green, Robert Gudmestad, Spencer McBride, Kevin Waite, and Jonathan Wilfred Wilson.

