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Abraham Lincoln, Nativism, and Citizenship

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Nativist movements in the United States in the 1840s and 1850s aimed to restrict the rights of recent immigrants because of their religion or ethnicity. During Abraham Lincoln's pre-presidential political career, he twice confronted such movements in his home state of Illinois. He opposed nativism, believing that adherence to the values expressed in the Declaration of Independence would unify native-born and naturalized Americans.

Keywords: Abraham Lincoln, immigration, nativism, xenophobia, citizenship.

Contents

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to examine Abraham Lincoln's reaction to nativist movements in the 1840s and 1850s. The article concludes Lincoln consistently opposed such movements.

American nativists, according to historian Tyler Anbinder, fear and resent immigrants and their impact in the United States and want to take some action against them, by violence, immigration restriction, or limiting the rights of

recent arrivals to the United States.[1] Lincoln always opposed nativism. Because Lincoln saw American citizenship as founded on the principles expressed in the Declaration of Independence, he believed that all white men who accepted that creed had equal claims to American citizenship. Both native-born and naturalized citizens should be members of the political community.

Nativist organizations in the 1840s and 1850s pressed for restrictions on the voting rights of immigrants, advocating changes in state voting laws that would lengthen the time needed for even naturalized citizens to vote. The federal naturalization statute in effect at the time permitted "any alien, being a free white person" to become a citizen after a five-year residence in the US, establishing good moral character, and taking an oath supporting the US Constitution and renouncing all allegiance to everywhere he previously had been a citizen or subject. Aliens did not have to speak English or be able to read to become a citizen.[2] Nativists called for 14- or 21-year periods after naturalization before a foreign-born citizen would even be eligible to vote. They also called for bans on office-holding by the foreign-born and for literacy tests for voting by immigrants.[3]

In his pre-presidential political career, Lincoln was a member of the Whig Party until 1856 when he became a member of the newly formed Republican Party. While the Democratic Party was reliably pro-immigrant, both the Whig and Republican parties were more divided over immigration, a division that was largely geographic. While many Whigs were nativists, nativism was more prevalent among Whigs in the Northeast than with Whigs in the Midwest (then known as the Northwest).[4] Midwestern Whigs – and then Republicans – were more likely to see immigrants as a key driver of economic development since a growing economy needed immigrants.[5]

1. Lincoln, Nativism, and the Whig Party

Democrats in Illinois regularly charged Whigs with anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic bias. Whig newspapers and politicians spent considerable time rebutting charges of nativism and wasted a lot of time accusing Democrats of being the real nativists. In 1844, after nativist riots erupted in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania between Protestants and Catholics, Lincoln and his fellow Springfield Whigs met to answer Democratic charges that Whigs were responsible for the riots because of their "supposed hostility" to "foreigners and Catholics." The assembled Whigs passed several resolutions denying they were anti-immigrant or anti-Catholic. They stated their opposition to any changes in the naturalization laws that would "render admission under them, less convenient, less cheap, or less expeditious."[6]

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1 *Anbinder, T.* Nativism and Prejudice Against Foreigners. In: A Companion to American Immigration, *Ueda, R.* (ed.). Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, p. 179.

2 An Act to establish an uniform rule of Naturalization and to repeal the acts heretofore passed on that subject. April 14, 1802, Ch. 28, U.S. Statutes at Large 2, 1845, pp. 153–155.

3 *Lee, E.* America for Americans: A History of Xenophobia in the United States. New York: Basic Books, 2019, pp. 39–73.

4 *Keyssar, A.* The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States. Rev. ed., New York: Basic Books, 2009, p. 53.

5 Boritt, G. S. Lincoln and the Economics of the American Dream. Memphis: Memphis State University Press, 1978, pp. 27, 98.

6 Abraham Lincoln ("AL"), "Speech and Resolutions Concerning Philadelphia Riots," June 12, 1844. *Basler, R.* (ed.). The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, 8 vols., New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953 ("CW"), AL, CW, 1:337–338.

Significantly, these resolutions rejected nativist proposals to increase the residency period for citizenship (the nativist American Republican party in June 1843 had proposed lengthening the five-year residency to 21 years).[7] A writer for the *Illinois State Register*, the Democratic newspaper in Springfield, noted how "Mr. Lincoln expressed the kindest, and most benevolent feelings towards foreigners; they were, I doubt not, the sincere and honest sentiments of *his heart*; but they were not those of *his party*."[8] Lincoln, in fact, was responsible for the Illinois Whig party adopting these resolutions at the state convention later that summer. As a member of the resolutions committee, Lincoln ensured that the Springfield resolutions were reported to the convention, which then "concurred with the sentiments" of the Springfield Whigs on " the rights of *foreigners* and *Catholics*."[9]

Despite Lincoln's best efforts, most immigrants in Springfield in the 1840s associated Whigs with nativism. Whigs paid dearly for this perception as immigrants aligned heavily with Democrats. In 1848, about 70 percent of foreign-born voters in Springfield voted Democratic. One-quarter of all Democratic voters were foreign-born while only one-tenth of Whig voters were immigrants. Irish and German voters favored Democrats by a three-to-one margin.[10]

2. The End of Alien Voting

While the federal government was given authority over naturalization in the US Constitution, states decided who could vote; some states – like Lincoln's Illinois – allowed immigrants to vote before they naturalized.[11] The Illinois Constitution of 1818 stated that "inhabitants" – not citizens – were eligible to vote, and non-citizens regularly voted in elections. Although there were solid reasons why this practice of allowing non-citizens to vote might be problematic, Whigs only began fretting about alien voting when they started losing elections because alien voters voted heavily Democratic. Whigs blamed the 1838 loss of their candidate for governor and the razor-thin victory of Whig John T. Stuart over Democrat Stephen Douglas for congress on bloc voting by Irish canal workers.[12] When Lincoln wrote to John T. Stuart about the possibility of holding the congressional elections for the 27th Congress in the summer of 1840, he advised that the Whigs thought that the canal and other public works would be stopped by the summer "and consequently, we shall then be clear of the foreign votes, whereas by another year they may be brought in again."[13]

The *Sangamo Journal*, the Whig-affiliated newspaper in the capital city of Springfield, published several articles on "foreign voters" after the August 1838 elections. One article warned that immigrants from the different kingdoms of Europe had poured into the United States and that, in Illinois, these immigrants were working as laborers on public works like the Illinois and Michigan Canal.

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7 *Anbinder, T.* Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 11.

8 AL, "Speech and Resolutions Concerning Philadelphia Riots," June 12, 1844, CW 1:338.

9 "Illinois Mass Convention at Vandalia, July 17, 1844," *Sangamo Journal*, August 8, 1844, p. 3.

10 *Winkle, K. J.* The Second Party System in Lincoln's Springfield. *Civil War History* 44 (1998), pp. 281–282.

11 U.S. Constitution, Art. 1, sec. 8; Keyssar, The Right to Vote, pp. 27–28.

12 *Johannsen, R. W.* Stephen A. Douglas. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997, pp. 67–69; *Thompson, C. M.* The Illinois Whigs Before 1846. University of Illinois Studies in the Social Sciences, Vol. 4, Urbana: University of Illinois, 1915, pp. 79–80.

13 AL to John T. Stuart, January 1, 1840, CW 1:181.

These canal workers were predominately Irish and "instead of becoming *Americans*, they have brought Ireland with them." While Whigs criticized Irish immigrants, they extolled German immigrants as a "laborious, enterprising, moral and quiet people," a pattern Lincoln and other Illinois Republicans repeated in the 1850s.[14]

Stuart won his seat in Congress by only 130 votes out of over 36,000 votes cast. Lincoln and other Illinois Whigs worried about Douglas contesting the outcome. Lincoln and four other Whigs consequently prepared a form letter that was sent to Whig editors, stressing the importance of being ready for such a contest. The letter asked the editors to collect the proof necessary to challenge votes for Douglas. It inquired whether any errors had been made in tallying votes from the poll books, whether anyone who voted for Douglas was a minor or had not established residency, and whether "any unnaturalized foreigners voted for Mr. Douglas in your County." The third inquiry makes it clear that Lincoln and his colleagues had accepted the dubious Whig argument advanced earlier in the year in a lawsuit filed in Jo Daviess County that the Illinois Constitution didn't establish voting by non-citizens.[15]

The outcome in the race between Stuart and Douglas wasn't known for several weeks and the *Journal* erroneously concluded that Douglas had won by 130 votes. It lamented that Douglas would owe his seat "not to the citizens of this District, but to workmen on our public improvements, not American citizens – who have no fixed place of abode." The article also complained of illegal votes from Irish workers, which would be a common complaint of Illinois Whigs – and, later, Republicans.[16] Whigs complained about Irish canal workers; Republicans – including Lincoln – would later complain about Irish railroad workers, who allegedly either voted multiple times or had failed to establish residence.

The *Sangamo Journal* continued this campaign against alien voting throughout the fall. In December, the *Journal* claimed that it didn't object to votes from "Foreigners where they have made themselves citizens of the state." But the Irish canal workers "come in the spring – work during the summer – and leave the state in the fall – many never return. They are transient persons, and neither *citizens* or *inhabitants*."[17]

In 1839, Whigs filed a collusive lawsuit in Jo Daviess County to stop alien voting, hoping to obtain a favorable decision from the Illinois Supreme Court before the 1840 election. To get the issue before the court, the plaintiff Horace Houghton complained that Thomas Spraggins, the Whig election judge, knowingly allowed Jeremiah Kyle, a "native of Ireland" and not a naturalized citizen, to vote in the previous election. Dan Stone, the judge who heard the case, was a former Whig representative to the Illinois General Assembly. Stone held that the election judge violated the law because the defendant wasn't legally qualified to vote because he wasn't yet a citizen of the United States.[18]

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[14] *Sangamo Journal*, August 18, 1838, p. 2.

[15] "To the Editor of the Chicago *American*," June 24, 1839, CW 1:151.

[16] "Illinois Election," *Sangamo Journal*, August 25, 1838, p. 2; see also "The Belleville Representative," *Sangamo Journal*, February 23, 1839, p. 2.

[17] "Stuart and Douglass," *Sangamo Journal*, December 15, 1838, p. 2.

[18] "Important Decision," *Sangamo Journal*, November 29, 1839, p. 2; "The 'Alien Case,'" *Sangamo Journal*, December 17, 1839, p. 2; "The Alien Case – No. II," *Sangamo Journal*, December 27, 1839, p. 2.

The case then headed to the Illinois Supreme Court where it would be heard by a court consisting of three Whigs and one Democrat. Facing what they believed to be certain defeat, the Democrats sought to delay the case at least until after the 1840 elections and also introduced a "court-packing" bill that would increase the size of the court from four to nine. The case was continued from the December 1839 term to the June 1840 term and, after Stephen Douglas found an error in the circuit court record, the case was continued again to the following December. That ensured the alien vote still would be allowed in the state and national elections that year.[19]

When the supreme court finally reached the case in the December 1840 term, Theophilus W. Smith, the Democratic judge on the court, wrote a long, discursive opinion that held the challenged alien voter was legally qualified to vote under the Illinois Constitution because "inhabitant" meant resident. Consequently, voting was not limited to citizens.[20] Apparently hoping to stave off the pending court-packing bill, the three Whig judges surprisingly concurred in the result reached by Smith.[21]

After a long and contentious battle, the court-packing bill passed, largely due to Douglas's efforts.[22] Douglas, who was so closely identified with the court bill that it became known as the "Douglas bill," was selected by the legislature as one of the five new judges on the court. Lincoln's over 700 references to "Judge Douglas" in his speeches in the 1850s were meant pejoratively; Lincoln was reminding his audiences about Douglas's prominent role in the court-packing scheme and his subsequent selection to the court, which foes of Douglas considered a payoff.[23]

While the alien voter case was pending in the supreme court, Springfield had moved to incorporate as a city. Democrats believed that the city's charter was a Whig plot spearheaded by Lincoln and Edward D. Baker.[24] The charter necessarily had to address who could vote in municipal elections. Other cities had not mentioned citizenship as a requirement for voting in their city charters.[25] Springfield was a Whig stronghold, and its charter pointedly stated that voters consisted of "all free white male inhabitants, citizens of the United States."[26] The charter's language on voting codified the Whig argument against alien suffrage, but also reflected the fact that alien voters in Springfield had

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19 *Ford, T.* A History of Illinois. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995, 1854, pp. 14–153; *Johannsen, R. W.* Stephen A. Douglas, pp. 82–87.

20 *Spragins v. Houghton*, 3 Illinois Reports 377, 414, 1840 (opinion by Justice Smith).

21 Miller, R. L. Lincoln and his World: Prairie Politician, 1834-1842. Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2008, pp. 419–420.

22 Ibid., pp. 420–425.

23 I ran a search for "Judge Douglas" in the online version of Lincoln's *Collected Works*, which resulted in 738 matches. The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln. Available: https://quod.lib.umich.edu/l/lincoln/ [last viewed 01.08.2020].

24 *Miller, R. L.* Lincoln and his World, p. 380.

25 An Act to Incorporate the City of Alton, July 21, 1837, Laws of the State of Illinois, Passed by the Tenth General Assembly, at their Special Session. Vandalia: William Walters, 1837, p. 19; see also An Act to Incorporate the City of Chicago, March 4, 1837, Laws of the State of Illinois, Passed by the Tenth General Assembly. Vandalia: William Walters, 1837, p. 52.

26 *Winkle, K. J.* The Second Party System in Lincoln's Springfield, pp. 267, 272–273; An Act to Incorporate the City of Springfield, February 3, 1840, Laws of the State of Illinois, Passed by the Eleventh General Assembly, Springfield: William Walters, 1840, pp. 8–9.

unanimously voted Democratic in the 1838 election.[27] The limitation on suffrage in the charter was met some resistance in the legislature, but still passed handily. The Sangamon County delegation split its vote, 4 to 2, with Lincoln voting in favor of the charter.[28] Voters ratified the charter in the subsequent election in Springfield.[29] The Whig victory on limiting suffrage was short-lived. In the wake of the supreme court's ruling on alien voters, the Democratic-controlled legislature amended Springfield's charter in the following session, repealing the citizenship provision and substituting language allowing "every inhabitant" of Springfield "who is entitled to vote for state officers" to vote in city elections.[30]

The 1847 constitutional convention addressed the rights of both non-citizens and naturalized citizens to hold office and to vote.[31] Democratic delegates were quick to label any proposed changes affecting suffrage or elective office as "Native American." They used the term as shorthand for being anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic, associating those delegates who advocated changes in suffrage with a party widely seen as condoning violence and destruction in wake of the Philadelphia riots of 1844.[32] The "Native Americans" first had appeared in New York in 1835, running candidates who were anti-Catholic and opposing the foreign-born holding political offices. That group soon disappeared. In 1843, nativists in New York created the American Republican party, calling for extending the required period of residence for naturalization from five years to twenty-one years and supporting only native-born citizens for public office. Having won elections in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and New York, the American Republicans held a national convention in 1845 in Philadelphia, where they rechristened themselves as the Native American party.[33]

Proponents of the change to the suffrage provision argued that the right to vote was linked inextricably to citizenship. Whig farmer Gilbert Turnbull argued for the "common-sense" principle that "in any society whatever, members alone have a right in a voice in the management of the affairs of that society." Turnbull proclaimed, "Sir, in my opinion, citizen-ship, alone, can entitle a person to vote."[34] Nativism provided an additional argument for the new provision on suffrage. Henry Greene, a Whig farmer from Tazewell County, claimed a majority of foreigners who came to Illinois were either ignorant or "criminals and paupers."[35]

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[27] *Pratt, H.* Lincoln – Trustee of the Town of Springfield. *Bulletin of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, No. 48, June 1937, p. 6.

[28] Ibid.

[29] City of Springfield. *Sangamo Journal*, April 10, 1840, p. 2

[30] An Act to Amend "An Act to Incorporate the City of Springfield," February 27, 1841, Laws of the State of Illinois, Passed by the Twelfth General Assembly, Springfield: Wm. Walters, 1841, pp. 61–62.

[31] *Cicero, Jr., F.* Creating the Land of Lincoln: The History and Constitutions of Illinois, 1778-1870. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018, pp. 115–118, 121–124.

[32] On Native American justifications for the Philadelphia riots, see Important Testimony Connected with Native American Principles, Philadelphia: First District Native American Association, 1845; Hancock Lee, J. The Origin and Progress of the American Party in Politics. Philadelphia: Elliott and Gihon, 1855.

[33] *Anbinder, T.* Nativism and Slavery, pp. 9–14; *Holt, M. F.* The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 190–191.

[34] *Cole, A. Ch.* (ed.). The Constitutional Debates of 1847. Springfield: Illinois State Historical Library, 1919, p. 527.

[35] Ibid., p. 534.

The opponents of the suffrage provision gave two general arguments against it. First, it abandoned the "policy of our fathers to encourage immigration from the east, and from foreign lands."[36] Democratic delegate Thompson Campbell stated that Illinois needed immigrants and should continue to hold out " the greatest inducement for men" to come to the state.[37] Opponents also associated the proposed suffrage provision with nativism and, in particular, the policies of the "Native American" party.[38]

The proposed suffrage provision eventually passed. The "foreign voter" provision in the 1818 Constitution, which allowed "all white male inhabitants above the age of 21" to vote, was supplanted by the 1848 Constitution, which limited suffrage to "every white male citizen above the age of 21" and "every white male inhabitant" who was residing in the state at the time of the adoption of the constitution. The 1848 Constitution also lengthened the residence requirement from six months to one year.[39]

3. Lincoln and the Know Nothing Party

The nativist parties of the 1840s had been short-lived. The nativist Know-Nothing party experienced a more spectacular rise and fall that began after the 1852 presidential election when nativists lost their faith in the Whig Party as a reliable bulwark against immigration and Catholicism. In 1852, the Whig Party actively had sought the support of German and Irish immigrants, with its presidential candidate, Winfield Scott, making clumsy and ineffective overtures to foreign-born voters.[40] Nativists felt betrayed by these Whig overtures to immigrants. The Know-Nothing Party was to be steadfastly anti-slavery, anti-Catholic, and anti-immigrant.

The rise of the Know Nothings, as members of the party were called, also was fueled by a dramatic increase in immigration. Three million immigrants came to the United States between 1845 and 1854. By 1850, forty percent of foreign settlers in the United States were Catholics from Ireland.[41]

The Know-Nothing movement reached Illinois in time for the 1854 elections. The party's platform in Illinois called for modifying naturalization laws by extending the residency requirement and repealing any state law that permitted resident aliens to vote, resisting " the corrupting influences and aggressive policy of the Roman Church," and restoring the Missouri Compromise to keep slavery out of the territories.[42] The Know-Nothing Party operated as a secret fraternal organization; its members used "handgrips, signs, and manner of speech" to

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[36] *Cole, A. Ch.* (ed.). The Constitutional Debates of 1847. p. 526 (statement of William C. Kinney).

[37] Ibid., p. 517–518.

[38] See, for example, ibid., p. 541 (statement of William R. Archer), p. 552 (statement of Thompson Campbell).

[39] Illinois Constitution of 1848, Art. VI, sec. 1.

[40] *Holt, M. F.* The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 691–697; *Wilentz, S.* The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005, pp. 679–685; AL, "Speech to the Springfield Scott Club," August 14, 1852, CW 2: 143.

[41] *Maizlish, S. E.* The Meaning of Nativism and the Crisis of the Union: The Know-Nothing Movement in the Antebellum North. In: Essays on Antebellum Politics 1840–1860, *Maizlish, S. E. and Kushma, J. J.* (eds.). College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1982, p. 170.

[42] *Senning, J. P.* The Know Nothing Movement in Illinois, 1854–1856. *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 7, April 1914, pp. 9, 27–29.

guard their identity.[43] The secrets apparently weren't very well kept. David Davis, Lincoln's friend and political ally, wrote Lincoln after the election about one Watson, "the secret nominee of the Know Nothings."[44]

After Lincoln had returned to Illinois in 1849 from serving his one-term in Congress, he "practiced law more assiduously than ever before." He later said he "was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me again."[45] In May 1854, Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise's prohibition of slavery in territories north of latitude 36º 30'. Many Northerners were appalled by the possibility of slavery's extension in the territories.[46] That year, Lincoln re-entered the political arena as a candidate for office, running for a seat in the General Assembly. Lincoln and Stephen T. Logan, who was also running for state representative as a Whig, each met with an American Party committee in Sangamon County. The committee told both Whig politicians that they had been endorsed by the American Party. The committee first met with Logan and after a "pleasant interview," he "cheerfully accepted" the nomination. Logan subsequently became a leader of the American Party in Illinois.[47] The committee then went to Lincoln's law office to discuss his secret nomination. Lincoln told the group that he still "belonged to the Old Whig party" and would continue to do so "until a better one arose to take its place." He said he would not become identified with the American Party. They could vote for him if they wanted, as could the Democrats, but "he was not in sentiment with this new party."[48]

Lincoln needled the delegation about nativists using "Native American" as a label for their beliefs. He rhetorically asked them who the Native Americans were. "Do they not," he said, "wear the breech-clout and carry the tomahawk? We pushed them from their homes and now turn upon others not fortunate enough to come over as early as we or our forefathers. Gentlemen of the committee, your party is wrong on principle." Lincoln was making fun of the use of the term "Native Americans" by a group decidedly not composed of Native Americans. The self-styled "Native Americans" who were critical of European immigrants were themselves descendants of European immigrants. Lincoln then used a story to make his point.

> *When the Know-nothing party first came up, I had an Irishman, Patrick by name, hoeing in my garden. One morning I was there with him, and he said, 'Mr. Lincoln, what about the Know-nothings?' I explained that they would possibly carry a few elections and disappear, and I asked Pat why he was not born in this country. 'Faith, Mr. Lincoln,' he replied, 'I wanted to be, but my mother wouldn't let me.'*

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[43] *Senning, J. P.* The Know Nothing Movement in Illinois, 1854-1856. *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, 7, April 1914, p. 17.

[44] David Davis to AL, December 26, 1854, Abraham Lincoln Papers, Library of Congress.

[45] AL to Jesse W. Fell, December 20, 1859, CW 3:511.

[46] *McPherson, J. M.* The Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, pp. 121–129.

[47] *Senning, J. P.* The Know-Nothing Movement, p. 19.

[48] *Levering, N.* Recollections of Abraham Lincoln. *Iowa Historical Record*, 12, July 1896, pp. 495–497; *Fehrenbacher, D. E.* and *Fehrenbacher, V.* (eds.). Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, lii–liii, pp. 20–21.

Lincoln's anecdote captured his tolerant attitude toward European immigrants: Lincoln accepted immigrants because their coming to the United States meant they wished they had been born here.[49] Lincoln's skepticism of all organized religion meant he wouldn't have been receptive to attacking Catholics for not being Protestants.[50] Rejecting the intolerance of the nativists, Lincoln refused the nomination. Not being the secret nominee of the nativists didn't hurt Lincoln – both Lincoln and Logan were elected to the legislature.[51]

While Lincoln privately criticized the Know Nothings in letters, he avoided antagonizing them publicly, believing their support was crucial for the anti-Nebraska, anti-Douglas forces. Lincoln also was sometimes disingenuous in public about the Know Nothings. The Democratic *Illinois State Register* reported Lincoln as saying in a Springfield speech that he "knew nothing of the secret institution."[52] In a speech in Bloomington two weeks later, Lincoln continued in this vein, saying that "he *knew nothing* in regard to the Know-Nothings, and that he had serious doubts whether such an organization existed." But, he said "in all seriousness," if such an organization really existed and wanted to interfere "with the rights of foreigners," then he was against it as much as Douglas. Still, Lincoln equivocated: "If there was an order styled the Know-Nothings, and there was any thing bad in it, he was unqualified against it; and if there was any thing good in it, why, he said, God speed it!"[53]

Lincoln may have been too clever by half. After winning his race for the Illinois legislature, Lincoln resigned to run for the Senate because the election results favored an Anti-Nebraska candidate.[54] Lincoln lost his bid for Senate, possibly because he was seen as having Know-Nothing support.[55] One paper announced, "Mr. Lincoln is a Know Nothing and expects the full vote" of the Know Nothings. Lincoln lost support because of this perceived association, and he refused to denounce the Know Nothings for fear of losing even more support.[56] Ironically, some Know Nothings also refused to back Lincoln because he was seen as an old-line Whig.

Lincoln continued to criticize the Know Nothings privately. In a letter to Owen Lovejoy, an abolitionist member of the Illinois legislature, Lincoln discussed the necessity of bringing the Know Nothings into the opponents of slavery extension camp without bringing "Know-nothingism." Lincoln said he was willing to "fuse" with anyone "provided I can fuse on grounds which I think is right," and he was clear that he was only willing to fuse with Know Nothings without the "K.N.ism." He confided to Lovejoy that "of their principles

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49 *Silverman, J. H.* Lincoln and the Immigrant. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2015.

50 *Wilson, D. L.* Honor's Voice: The Transformation of Abraham Lincoln. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, pp. 7, 81–83, 187; *Current, R. N.* The Lincoln Nobody Knows. New York: Hill and Wang, 1958, pp. 51–65.

51 *Pinsker, M.* Not Always Such a Whig: Abraham Lincoln's Partisan Realignment in the 1850s. *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 29, Summer 2008, pp. 34–38.

52 AL, "Speech at Springfield," September 9, 1854, CW 2:229.

53 AL, "Speech at Bloomington," September 26, 1854, CW 2:234.

54 *Cole, A. Ch.* The Era of the Civil War 1848-1870. Centennial History of Illinois, Vol. 3, Springfield: Illinois Centennial Commission, 1919, pp. 133–134.

55 *Pinsker, M.* Senator Abraham Lincoln. *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, 14, Summer 1993, pp. 1–21.

56 *Donald, D.* Lincoln. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995, pp. 181–185; *Holt, M. F.* The Rise and Fall of the American Whig Party: Jacksonian Politics and the Onset of the Civil War. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 870–871.

I think little better than I do of those of the slavery extensionists. Indeed I do not perceive how any one professing to be sensitive to the wrongs of the negroes, can join in a league to degrade a class of white men." In Illinois, Lincoln had wanted the Know Nothings to "die out" without him having to take an open stand against individuals who were "mostly my old political and personal friends."[57]

Lincoln's most famous denunciation of nativism is found in his 1855 letter to his friend Joshua Speed, which was written in the same month as the letter to Lovejoy. Lincoln was responding to Speed's question of where Lincoln now stood politically. Lincoln said he thought he was a Whig "but others say there are no whigs, and that I am an abolitionist." Lincoln did not accept the abolitionist designation because he did "no more than oppose the *extension* of slavery." But Lincoln was sure about one thing: "I am not a Know-Nothing." He explained:

> *How could I be? How can anyone who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people? Our progress in degeneracy appears to me to be pretty rapid. As a nation, we began by declaring that "all men are created equal." We now practically read it "all men are created equal, except negroes." When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read "all men are created equal, except negroes, and foreigners, and catholics." When it comes to this I should emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty – to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocracy.*[58]

Lincoln was not yet ready to publicly criticize nativists because he wanted them to join the anti-Nebraska forces.

4. The Election of 1856

Other Republicans in Illinois began publicly criticizing Know Nothings before Lincoln did. The Republicans in Chicago adopted a platform of principles in November 1855 that held the "only true rule" for office was "merit, not birth place" and that naturalization laws should not be changed because "we should welcome the exiles and emigrants from the Old World, to homes of enterprise and of freedom in the new."[59]

In the early months of 1856, Lincoln was ready both to join the Republican Party and to criticize the nativists. Lincoln helped draft an anti-nativist plank at an 1856 meeting of antislavery newspaper editors in Decatur, which he attended as an informal guest. When the anti-nativist plank introduced by German immigrant George Schneider met with opposition, Theodore Canisius recalled Lincoln saying that "we must state our position honestly and openly, and only through an unqualified proclamation can we count on support. The citizens who have adopted this country as their own have a right to demand this from us."[60] Lincoln said the anti-nativist plank was "nothing new. It is already contained in the Declaration of Independence." The plank borrowed

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[57] AL to Owen Lovejoy, August 11, 1855, CW 2:316–317.

[58] AL to Joshua F. Speed, August 24, 1855, CW 2:323.

[59] "Platform of Principles," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 9, 1856, p. 1.

[60] *Canisius, T.* Abraham Lincoln: Historisches Charakterbild. Vienna: Reisser, 1867, quoted and translated in *Baron, F.* Abraham Lincoln and the German Immigrants: Turners and Forty-Eighters. *Yearbook of German-American Studies, Supplemental Issue*, 4, 2012, p. 85.

the pro-immigrant language from the Chicago Republicans' platform of principles.[61] At the Republican Convention in Bloomington in May, the newly formed party adopted a platform that held " the spirit of our institutions as well as the Constitution of our country, guarantees the liberty of conscience as well as political freedom, and that we will proscribe no one by legislation or otherwise on account of religious opinions, or in consequence of place of birth."[62] The Republicans, like Lincoln, were ready to fuse with former members of the Know Nothing Party so long as they didn't bring "Know-Nothing-ism."

The 1856 presidential election pitted James Buchanan, the Democratic Party nominee, against John C. Frémont, the Republican Party candidate, and Millard Fillmore, the Know-Nothing nominee. Lincoln accurately foresaw that the anti-Nebraska vote in Illinois would be split by Frémont and Fillmore, which would assure Buchanan winning the state's electoral votes. Lincoln sent a lithographed form letter to "good, steady Fillmore men" that tried to convince Fillmore supporters that they should tactically support Frémont in Illinois if they wanted to help their candidate nationally. Lincoln cautioned them if Buchanan won Illinois, he would win the election and "*he will get Illinois*, if men persist in throwing away votes upon Mr. Fillmore." Lincoln's plea fell on deaf ears. Buchanan won Illinois with 44% of the vote, Frémont received 40%, and Fillmore, 16%.[63]

Illinois had ended alien voting for immigrants who arrived in Illinois after the adoption of the new constitution; however, the suffrage provision retained the previous "inhabitant" language for residents who were living in Illinois at the time of the adoption of the constitution. Lincoln, in an unsigned 1856 editorial published in a Galena newspaper, took the time to explain this unusual compromise after a Democratic newspaper had asserted that non-citizens couldn't legally vote. "This is a grave error," Lincoln wrote. "Our Legislature has directed, that unnaturalized foreigners, who were here before the adoption of our late State Constitution, shall in common with others, vote for and appoint Presidential Electors." Lincoln was on the side of these "unnaturalized foreigners," correctly stating "[l]et not this class of foreigners be alarmed. Our Legislature has directed that they may vote for Electors; and the U.S. Constitution has expressly authorized the Legislature to make that direction."[64]

5. Nativism and the Senate Race of 1858

The Republicans in Illinois succeeded in absorbing former members of the Know-Nothing movement without absorbing what Lincoln called "Know-Nothingism."[65] Democrats rarely attacked Lincoln, the Republican standard-bearer for Senate in 1858, or the Republicans for supporting nativism. Stephen Douglas never tried to paint Lincoln as a nativist in their debates, probably

[61] *Burlingame, M.* Abraham Lincoln: A Life. 2 vols., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008, 1: 412–413.

[62] *Raum, G. B.* History of Illinois Republicanism. Chicago: Rollins Publishing, 1900, p. 28.

[63] Schwartz, T.s F. Lincoln, Form Letters, and Fillmore Men. *Illinois Historical Journal*, 78, Spring 1985, pp. 65–70.

[64] AL, "Editorial on the Right of Foreigners to Vote," July 23, 1856, CW 2:335–336.

[65] *Foner, E.* Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party before the Civil War. 1970; repr., New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 250–260; *Levine, B.* 'The Vital Element of the Republican Party': Antislavery, Nativism, and Abraham Lincoln. *Journal of the Civil War Era*, 1, December 2011, pp. 481–505.

because Douglas had decided to win over nativists by portraying a battle between "Fremont abolitionism on the one side and constitutional-law-abiding-Union-loving men under the Democratic banner on the other side."[66]

Lincoln gave his fullest expression of his vision of a white republic that included both native-born and naturalized citizens during the Senate campaign. Unlike those white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who believed that the foundation of American greatness was white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, Lincoln believed American greatness grew from the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Any European immigrant who came to the United States because of the promise of the Declaration already was sufficiently "Americanized." Lincoln never worried about immigrants assimilating because believing in the principles of the Declaration would unify all Americans, native and foreign-born. The Declaration was the "electric cord" that links "the hearts of all patriotic and liberty-loving men together." Lincoln explained in a campaign speech in July that it did not matter if these men "descended by blood from our ancestors" or were recent arrivals from Europe. As long as the Declaration of Independence was "the father of moral principle in them," then they had a right to claim it "as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote it."[67]

Lincoln believed that Europeans would be attracted to America's promise of an "equal chance" given to all. He welcomed all immigrants from Europe, making no distinctions between those who were of Anglo-Saxon stock and those who weren't. In this respect, he differed from many in the Whig Party, some in the Republican Party, and everyone in the Know-Nothing Party. Lincoln presented his vision of "free soil, free labor, free men" in the territories in his last debate with Douglas. The territories would be "an outlet for free white people everywhere," not just those "born amongst us." Lincoln welcomed "Hans and Baptiste and Patrick and all other men from all the world" to "find new homes and better their conditions in life."[68]

The Declaration of Independence had different meanings for blacks and whites. For blacks, the Declaration posited that all men were created equal and had the same natural rights. For whites, the Declaration became an "electric cord" that linked " the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together" whether they were descendants of the "iron men" who fought for Independence or whether they men who had come from Europe after the revolutionary war had been won. Celebrating the Fourth of July allowed all these men to feel more attached to one another "more firmly bound to the country we inhabit." Adhering to the principles allowed all white men – native born or not – to be part of this "mighty nation." Even though members in Lincoln's imagined community were linked together only by belief in the principles of the Declaration, Lincoln was talking only about immigrants from Europe ("they are men who have come from Europe – German, Irish, French and Scandinavian – men that have come from Europe themselves"). Lincoln didn't recognize black men as "patriotic and liberty-loving" until the Civil War. It was only then Lincoln would consider at least some

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[66] Stephen A. Douglas to John A. McClernand, December 23, 1856, quoted in *Hansen, S. and Nygard, P.* Stephen A. Douglas, the Know-Nothings, and the Democratic Party in Illinois, 1854-1858. *Illinois Historical Journal*, 87, Summer 1994, pp. 121–122.

[67] AL, "Speech at Chicago," July 10, 1858, CW 2:499–500.

[68] *Davis, R. O. and Wilson, D. L.* (eds.). The Lincoln-Douglas Debates. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008, p. 282.

blacks should be part of this "mighty nation" and hold full rights of citizenship, including suffrage.[69]

Lincoln was particularly solicitous toward German immigrants.[70] After 1851, Germans had replaced the Irish as the largest incoming group. The German-born population in the United States grew from 584,720 to 1,301,136 in 1860. By 1850, there were 38,451 German immigrants in Illinois, a sizable number in a state with a total population of 851,470 (4.5%). The German-born population in Illinois reached 130,804 in 1860 when Illinois had a total population of 1,711,951 (7.6%).[71] Germans were the largest immigrant group in the Republican Party. Gustave Koerner, a German immigrant and Illinois politician, recalled Lincoln speaking in Belleville during the 1856 campaign. Lincoln told the Belleville crowd that everywhere he had spoken "he had found the Germans more enthusiastic for the cause of freedom than all other nationalities." Nearly in tears, Lincoln exclaimed, "God bless the Dutch!"[72]

One of the reasons Republican politicians in the Midwest disavowed anti-immigrant policies was to garner votes from Germans.[73] During the 1858 senate campaign, Lincoln called for German speakers to be sent across the state and helped arrange the publication of his speeches in German. He warned Gustave Koerner that the party was "in great danger" in Madison County and asked if Koerner, the newspaper editor Theodore Canisius, "and some other influential Germans set a plan on foot that shall gain us accession from the Germans, and see that, at the election, none are cheated in their ballots."[74]

While Lincoln publicly welcomed "Hans and Baptiste and Patrick," he harbored some suspicion about "Patrick." Irish voters generally supported the Democratic Party; Lincoln once alluded to Irish immigrants as "those adopted citizens, whose votes have given Judge Douglas all his consequence."[75] While Lincoln worked hard to get votes from German immigrants, he expressed concern over fraudulent voting by Irish laborers, echoing Whig concerns about illegal voting by Irish canal workers in 1838. In September, Lincoln wrote Norman B. Judd that he was cautiously optimistic about his race with Douglas "unless they overcome us by fraudulent voting." Lincoln said that the Republicans had to be "especially prepared for this," the prospect of fraudulent voting "must be taken into anxious consideration at once." Lincoln thought they could defeat voting fraud if it was "men imported from other states and men not naturalized."

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69 AL, "Speech at Chicago," July 10, 1858, CW 2: 499–500.

70 *Silverman, J. H.* Lincoln and the Immigrant, pp. 36–40.

71 *Bergquist, J. M.* People and Politics in Transition: The Illinois Germans, 1850-1860. In: Ethnic Voters and the Election of Lincoln, *Luebke, F. C.* (ed.). Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971, pp. 196–197; *Pease, T. C.* The Frontier State 1818-1848. The Sesquicentennial History of Illinois, Vol. 2, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987, p. 393.

72 *McCormack, T. J.* (ed.). Memoirs of Gustave Koerner 1809-1896. 2 vols., Cedar Rapids: Torch Press, 1909, 2: 32–33. Americans had referred to Germans as Dutch, from *Deutsch*, since the 1740s. *Flexner, S. B.* I Hear America Talking: An Illustrated History of American Words and Phrases. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979, pp. 130–131.

73 *Efford, A. C.* German Immigrants, Race, and Citizenship in the Civil War Era. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 2, 69.

74 AL to Gustave P. Koerner, July 15, 1858, CW 2:502; AL to Gustave P. Koerner, August 6, 1858, CW 2:537–538; AL to Norman P. Judd, Sept. 23, 1858; AL to Gustave P. Koerner, July 25 6, 1858, CW 2:524.

75 AL, "Speech to the Springfield Scott Club," August 14, 1852, CW 2: 143.

He was more worried about another type of fraud: otherwise "qualified Irish voters of Chicago" being deployed into a "doubtful district, having them to swear to an actual residence when they offer to vote." Lincoln warned that voter fraud was "a great danger, and we must all attend to it."[76]

Lincoln sometimes stated his concerns about illegal voting by Irish workers out loud. A Democratic paper reported that Lincoln grumbled in a speech about seeing "a dozen Irishmen at the levee, and it occurred to him that those Irishmen had been imported expressly to vote him down." The paper was outraged by Lincoln's suggestion: "Doubtless Mr. Lincoln entertains a holy horror of all Irishmen and other adopted citizens who have sufficient self-respect to believe themselves superior to the negro." The paper charged that Lincoln's expressed fear was a cue to his followers to keep "adopted citizens" from the polls.[77]

6. Nativism and Massachusetts, 1859

The state of Massachusetts was a stronghold of the Know-Nothing Party, which swept state elections in 1854. The Know-Nothing governor, Henry J. Gardner, proposed a 21-year waiting period *after naturalization* before immigrants could vote. This proposal, along with a literacy test for voting, passed the legislature in 1855. Under the Massachusetts constitution, it had to pass two successive legislatures before it would be put before the electorate. In 1856, the legislature instead substituted a fourteen-year period. In the 1857 legislature, now dominated by Republicans, the fourteen-year period was defeated and a two-year period substituted. The two-year period passed again in 1858. The measure was then placed before the voters for approval. Lincoln was one of many western Republicans who opposed the two-year period, worried that the provision would hinder their ability to appeal to immigrant voters, particularly Germans.[78]

Lincoln prepared a resolution for the Illinois Republican Party condemning the Massachusetts legislature for approving the two-year period. Lyman Trumbull, the Republican senator from Illinois, instead suggested that "it would be better to select some act of our adversaries, rather than of our own friends, upon which to base a protest against any distinction between native and naturalized citizens, as to the right of suffrage."[79] After the provision in Massachusetts passed, Theodore Canisius asked Lincoln if he supported it. Lincoln conceded that Massachusetts had the perfect right to pass such a provision: "Massachusetts is a sovereign and independent state; and it is no privilege of mine to scold her for what she does." But Lincoln was more than willing to state his opposition to such a provision in Illinois "or in any other place, where I have a right to oppose it." Lincoln explained: "Understanding the spirit of our institutions to aim at the elevation of men, I am opposed to whatever tends to degrade them. I have some little notoriety for commiserating the oppressed condition of the negro; and I should be strangely inconsistent if I could favor any project for curtailing the existing rights of white men, even

[76] AL to Norman B. Judd, September 23, 1858, CW 3:202; see also AL to Norman B. Judd, October 24, 1858, CW 3:332.

[77] "Speech at Meredosia, Illinois," October 18, 1858, CW 3:328–329.

[78] *Anbinder, T.* Nativism and Slavery, pp. 247–253; *Foner, E.* Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, pp. 250–252.

[79] AL to Gustave P. Koerner, April 11, 1859, CW 3:376.

though born in different lands, and speaking different languages from myself."[80] Canisius published the letter in the German-language *Illinois Staats-Anzeiger* and in the *Illinois State Journal*.[81]

Lincoln understood that such nativist appeals were politically damaging in the Midwest. In an 1859 letter, he decried Republicans' tendency to include issues that were popular in that state but a "firebrand" elsewhere. He included the "movement against foreigners" in Massachusetts as an example. He lamented that "Massachusetts republicans should have looked beyond their noses; and then they could not have failed to see that tilting against foreigners would ruin us in the whole North-West."[82]

7. The Campaign of 1860

Before the 1860 presidential campaign, Lincoln bought a printing press for Canisius to start a German paper in Springfield that "in political sentiment" was to adhere to the "Philadelphia and Illinois Republican platforms."[83]

The Republican Party platform in 1860 included a pro-immigration plank that repudiated the Massachusetts residency provision. Koerner and Carl Schurz were on the platform committee and fought hard for the language.[84] It stated that the Republican Party was "opposed to any change in our naturalization laws, or any state legislation by which the rights of citizenship hitherto accorded by emigrants from foreign lands shall be abridged or impaired; and in favor of giving a full and efficient protection to the rights of all classes of citizens, whether native or naturalized, both at home and abroad."[85]

When the Pennsylvania and Indiana delegations met at the Republican national convention to discuss which candidate to support, supporters of Edward Bates showed up in force. Bates, a former Whig and Know Nothing from Missouri, was one of the main contenders for the Republican nomination (Bates would later serve as Lincoln's Attorney General). The Lincoln-supporting Illinois delegation sent Koerner, a former Democrat, and Orville H. Browning, a former Whig, to counteract the Bates movement. Koerner told the delegations that Bates had supported Know Nothings in municipal elections in Missouri and that German Republicans would never vote for Bates. Browning observed that "on the other hand Lincoln had always opposed Native Americanism. This would secure him the foreign Republican vote all over the country."[86]

After Lincoln secured the nomination, campaign literature highlighted Lincoln's pro-immigration views. The Chicago *Rail Splitter* reprinted Lincoln's letter to Canisius in its first edition with the headline "Mr. Lincoln on Naturalization."[87] The Freeport *Wide Awake* on the eve of the election proclaimed that Lincoln was gaining thousands of votes from Germans in New York because

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80 AL to Theodore Canisius, May 17, 1859, CW 3:380.

81 Ibid.; Mr. Lincoln on the Massachusetts Amendment. *Illinois State Journal*, May 25, 1859, p. 1.

82 AL to Schuyler Colfax, July 6, 1859, CW 3:390–391.

83 Contract with Theodore Canisius, May 30, 1859, CW 3: 383. Philadelphia was the site of the Republican national convention in 1856.

84 Memoirs of Gustave Koerner 1809-1896, 2: 32–33.

85 A Political Text-Book for 1860. New York: Tribune Association 1860, pp. 26–27.

86 *McCormack, T. J.* (ed.). Memoirs of Gustave Koerner 1809-1896. 2 vols., Cedar Rapids: Torch Press, 1909, 2: 89–90.

87 The Rail Splitter (Chicago), June 23, 1860, p. 1.

"they can't stand the Douglas fusion with the Know Nothings" and that the Irish in Illinois would also be voting for Lincoln.[88] Republican newspapers throughout the North also published the Canisius letter.[89]

Lincoln associated America with freedom and Europe with despotism. European immigrants were fleeing from "tyranny" and to "freedom." In an 1861 address to Germans in Cincinnati, Lincoln said,

> *In regard to the Germans and foreigners, I esteem them no better than other people, nor any worse. It is not my nature, when I see a people borne down by the weight of their shackles – the oppression of tyranny – to make their life more bitter by heaping upon them greater burdens; but rather would I do all in my power to raise the yoke, than to add anything that would tend to crush them.*
> *Inasmuch as our country is extensive and new, and the countries of Europe are densely populated, if there are any abroad who desire to make this the land of their adoption, it is not in my heart to throw aught in their way, to prevent them from coming to the United States.*[90]

Summary

Lincoln consistently rejected nativist proposals to make it more difficult for immigrants to naturalize or to vote. Lincoln was outspoken in 1844 after anti-Catholic riots in Philadelphia. Lincoln was more circumspect in criticizing nativists in Illinois because he wanted them to join the Republican Party. Lincoln wanted this "fusion" on his terms: he wanted nativists without nativism.

He initially waited for Know-Nothings to join the Republican ranks based upon a common opposition to slavery extension in the territories. By 1856, Lincoln was ready to publicly criticize nativism. Lincoln again attacked nativism in 1859 when Massachusetts nativists proposed lengthening the time to vote after an alien was naturalized.

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[88] Coming by Thousands," "The Irish Vote," *Freeport Wide Awake*, November 3, 1860, p. 1.
[89] See, e.g., "Mr. Lincoln on Naturalization and Fusion," *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1860, p. 1; "Mr. Lincoln on Naturalization and Fusion," (Madison) *Wisconsin State Journal*, May 28, 1860, p. 2.
[90] AL, "Speech to Germans at Cincinnati, Ohio," February 12, 1861, CW 4:202.

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