Voting Knowing Nothing: A Baltimore Case Study
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[**Slide 1**] Many of us have been dismayed by the depths to which this presidential campaign has sunk. Even now there are concerns about post-election violence.   Let us be reminded in the words of the late Dr. King "the arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice." It is perhaps reassuring for us tonight to revisit the Baltimore elections of 1854 through 1860--the reign of the American Party (aka the Order of the Star Spangled Banner -- popularly as the Know-Nothing Party).

What originally drew me to this topic was a Sun op-ed early in the Republican primary season declaring Trump the present day "Know-Nothing" candidate--with his anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant pronouncements, his focus on women as sexual objects, and his birther challenge to the Obama presidency. By delving into the details of the 1850s elections, I found encouraging differences.

History

The Know-Nothings began as a secret club in the early 1850's in Maryland. (It was present in New York politics as early as 1843.) The Know-Nothing Party grew out of numerous secret mutual assistance organizations in cities in the mid-Atlantic and the Northeast--restricting membership to white, male, native-born Protestants. These predecessor organizations-- the United Sons of America, United American Mechanics, Order of United Americans--were social and benevolent organizations mostly avoiding politics. By 1852 many were becoming political. In Baltimore in August 1853-- 5,000 people attended a rally at the War Memorial Monument Square to support the United Sons of America calling for extending the naturalization process from the then 5 years to 21 years, and restricting office holding to native-born citizens.

The Know-Nothing Party by contrast was avowedly political in purpose. Initially the Know-Nothings worked in secret supporting candidates registered as Democrat, Whig or Republican who had secretly taken the Know-Nothing vows-- nativist, anti-Catholic vows. Know-Nothings would gather before the election and determine for whom to collectively cast their votes. This secrecy is responsible for their name, when "members of the order [were] questioned, [they] professed to 'know nothing' about it."[1]

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[1]Humphrey J. Desmond, The Know-Nothing Party (1905) p. 52 (quoting a Nov. 10, 1853, New York Tribune article reporting on the influence of this secret society on recent elections).

In 1852 the Whig presidential candidate, Winfield Scott, was resoundingly defeated. (He won only 4 states.) The Know-Nothings quickly filled the power vacuum. They created a national sensation in 1854 when following the U.S. Congressional election, 100 "Republican" congressmen from the North were revealed to have pledged to Know-Nothing principles-- as well as 8 governors (including New York, Delaware and Massachusetts), and mayors including Boston, Chicago, Washington DC, Philadelphia (Whig who then aligned with KN). **[Slide 2]** In Baltimore, the openly Know-Nothing candidate Samuel Hinks was elected Mayor that year, and Know-Nothings garnered majorities in both branches of the City Council.   After the national election of 1854, candidates across the country openly aligned with the Know-Nothing Party.

Beliefs

[Slide 3] Having the same restricted membership as their predecessor benevolent societies, white, male, Protestant, native born--new inductees to the Know-Nothings pledged vows upon assuming membership into the "first degree" (the first of three degrees of membership/leadership):

[Slide 4] First Degree "That you will not vote or give your influence for any man for any office in the gift of the people, unless he be an American-born citizen, in favor of Americans ruling America, nor if he be Roman Catholic."[2]

[Slide 5] Second Degree Those elevated into the second degree became eligible to run for political office-- pledged to "remove all foreigners, aliens or Roman Catholics from office or place, and that you will, in no case, appoint such to any office or place in your gift. . . "[3]

[Slide 6] Third Degree Third/union degree members pledged to "support the ties which bind together the states of the union and to oppose all men and measures adverse to the union, and to vote for third or union degree members of the order in preference to all other candidates for political office." [4]

Electoral Successes

In Baltimore the Know-Nothing Party controlled City government from 1854 to 1860: the Mayor, the City Council, Police Commissioner, Sheriff, etc.

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[2] *Id.* at 54.

[3] *Id.* at 54-55.

[4]*Id.* at 56.

Three main socio-political forces accounted for the Know-Nothing electoral success:

The **first factor** was the Party's anti-immigrant platform which was synonymous with anti-Catholicism. [**Slide 7**] Under the pressures of European immigration--such nativism had been growing in the U.S., sparking major controversies in Maryland and elsewhere in 1852-53 concerning public funding for parochial schools, as well as scandalous and fabricated accusations of sexual slavery of women in convents in Maryland and elsewhere.

[**Slide 8**][5] Emblematic of the times, an 1836 book revealing the travails of a young woman named Maria Monk --whose mother had committed her to an asylum run by nuns in Montreal-- quickly outsold any prior sales of a book in the United States. A party of Protestant ministers were dispatched to Montreal to investigate and soon pronounced it all a fabrication. Mary had escaped the asylum with the help of a boyfriend and then fallen in with an anti-Catholic crusader who published Monk's obscene and sensationalistic tale of her time as a "nun."

The most dramatic move by the Know-Nothing legislature in Massachusetts in 1854 was to appoint an investigating committee designed to prove widespread sexual immorality under way in Catholic convents. The press had a field day following the story, especially when it was discovered that the key reformer was using committee funds to pay for a prostitute. The legislature shut down its committee, ejected the "reformer," and saw its investigation become a laughing stock.

[**Slide 9**] Know-Nothing anti-immigrant sentiment found a receptive audience among white working men in Baltimore who abandoned the Democratic Party --most decisively in 1853 or 1854--after party leaders urged striking iron workers to accede to employer demands. It had become increasingly apparent that the slave-holding planter class had control of the Democratic Party and did not represent the interests of the working class.

[**Slide 10**] The pressures of immigration were real. Between 1840 and 1860 over 2 million Irish and German immigrants came to the U.S. where the total population was just over 20 million. Between 1830 and 1860 Baltimore's population increased from 80,000 to 212,000 with nearly 25% foreign born by 1860. These immigrants became

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[5] Slide 8 is an illustration of the cover from an undated reprint of the book, which had several reprintings. Monk claimed that nuns were forced to have sex with priests whose quarters connected to the convent through a tunnel. Monk alleged that when a nun became pregnant and gave birth, the baby would be baptized and then strangled and dumped in a lime pit in the basement of the convent.

citizens within a few years, able to vote and to hold office. The United States was in the midst of the industrial revolution, and displaced low wage workers could not compete with impoverished Irish fleeing the potato famine, and to a lesser extent the German immigrants fleeing political unrest and famine. The Know-Nothings offered comradery, torch processions, fireworks, and secret handshakes—a sense of belonging and renewed pride for dislocated workers.

Many were appalled by the Know-Nothings. Abraham Lincoln expressed his own disgust with the political party in a private letter to his slave-owning life-long friend, Joshua Speed, written on August 24, 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 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 equals, except negroes and foreigners and Catholics.' When it comes to that I should prefer 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 hypocrisy. [6]

Lincoln, however, never publicly criticized the Know Nothings, whose votes he needed.

The **second factor** in the Know-Nothing electoral success was that the Party avoided taking a side on the slavery question**. I**t sought a middle ground between Democrats firmly supporting slavery and ultimately secession, and the growing abolition movement affiliated with the Republican Party.   Know-Nothings were in favor of the union and against secession, but they were against the abolition of slavery. Southern Whigs

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[6] Abraham Lincoln and Joshua Speed met in Springfield, Illinois, during the 1830s. Although Speed returned to his native Kentucky, they remained friends throughout life. In this letter, Lincoln expressed his thinking about slavery, which contrasted with Speed, who grew up on a plantation and owned slaves. The year before Lincoln wrote this letter, the Kansas-Nebraska Act passed Congress, repealing the Missouri Compromise of 1820, and opened the territories to slavery. The passage of this bill proved a turning point in Lincoln's career. As he observed, "I was losing interest in politics, when the repeal of the Missouri Compromise aroused me *again."* Abraham Lincoln Association, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (Editors Roy P. Basler et al. 1953).

flocked to the Know-Nothing Party after its election sweep of 1854 when they "thought they were getting on a loaded wagon." They had little fear of alienating foreign-born citizens who could vote since not many immigrants settled in the South (outside Baltimore, New Orleans, and Louisville), and being anti-immigrant served their purposes of preventing the swelling of Congressional representation of the North as the population of immigrants becoming naturalized citizens expanded Northern populations.

[Slide 11] With the sound defeat in 1856 of (former president) Millard Fillmore, the Know-Nothing presidential candidate, Northerners abandoned the Know-Nothings for the anti-slavery Republican Party and Southerners flocked to the pro-slavery Democratic Party. Thereafter the Know-Nothing Party persisted only as a border state party-- and longest in Baltimore and Maryland above all others, in large part because of the **third factor** of the Party's success—its reliance on patronage power and gang violence to control elections.

While election violence was a common tactic employed by the Know-Nothing Party and others across the country, what distinguished Baltimore Know-Nothings was the systemic and extreme nature of their violence. As Hopkins Professor Desmond recounted in 1905, "Disorders at local elections were frequent in New York and Philadelphia, as well as in Baltimore in the years 1840 to 1860.[7] Baltimore and its Know-Nothings, however, carried such excesses to the limit."[8]

[Slide 12] The Know-Nothing Party relied on local gangs as election day shock troops in exchange for patronage jobs and the joy of a good fight. The largest and most powerful by far was the Plug Uglies gang. **[Slide 13]** These were top hat fighters who kept felt padding inside their hats for protection from blows, and who pulled their hats down over their ears so they wouldn't get cut off during fights.

[**Slide 14**] The Plug Uglies' signature was the shoe maker's awl which they used to stab opponents and hapless voters appearing at the polls with a ballot other than the red striped Know-Nothing Party ballot. Voting was far from secret at this time. Baltimore was divided in to 20 wards, each one with one polling place, a dominant political club,

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[7] Democrats employed their thugs as well to discourage voters in wards where they predominated, but by 1856 they were overpowered by the Know Nothings.

[8] Desmond, p. 128. Volunteer fire companies were accustomed to battling it out, sometimes setting fires just to provoke a brawl when competing companies responded. A truce between warring Baltimore fire companies in 1852 left them wanting for opportunities to fight and they quickly found outlets with the Know-Nothings.

ward boss, and favorite sons. Casting one's ballot meant having to wait in line before passing through a gauntlet of partisans to drop a distinctly marked ticket into a ballot box overseen by judges. There was no voter registration at this time, so one had to convince the partisan election judges of one's eligibility to vote. This required immigrants to present naturalization papers. A Know-Nothing slogan was "Come up and vote there is room for AWL." If you had the wrong ballot you were stabbed, beaten, drenched in a tub of pig's blood by another Know-Nothing affiliated gang --the Blood Tubbers-- or worse.

A practice called "cooping" was employed to increase the number of Know-Nothing Party ballots cast. Vulnerable immigrants, drunks, the homeless, travelers, and the feeble minded were taken prisoner in basements and homes, where they were beaten and force fed whiskey and then driven around the city to vote repeatedly in different wards throughout the day. In 1858 a man named John Justus Ritzius testified at hearings concerning election fraud that he was forced to vote 16 times in several wards.

[Slide 15]Edgar Allen Poe's sister believes this is what happened to him in 1849 when he was traveling through Baltimore from Richmond on his way to NYC to be married. [Slide 16] Poe was found the day after an election face down in the streets of Baltimore suffering from alcohol poisoning from which he never recovered.

[Slide 17] Know-Nothing Thomas Swann was elected Mayor of Baltimore in October 1856 in a campaign characterized by more violence than ever before seen.

[Slide 18][9] As Professor Desmond recounted, "In the municipal election of October 1856, the Plug Uglies flocked down to the 8th Ward to attack the Democratic partisans, and in a riot lasting several hours, four men were killed and over fifty wounded.[10] In the following month, at the presidential election this rioting was renewed, with the Know-Nothing clubs wheeling a cannon through the streets; ten men were killed and over 250 wounded. In [Baltimore] elections of succeeding years, the only ward in which the Democrats could vote without danger was the Eighth Ward where the Irish element was strong. [Slide 19] In most other wards only Know-Nothings, who gave proper signal, could get to the polls, all other citizens being pushed aside or intimidated. In some instances, bodies of voters to the number of 100 or more were cooped up in cellars until the election was over."[11]

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[9] This is a drawing of an election riot in Louisville.
[10] This riot began at the corner of Calvert and Monument Streets and soon spread up Monument to the Washington Monument. Injuries were also reported at a riot near Lexington Market.
[11] Desmond, p. 129-130.

Demise

[Slide 20] Those November 1856 presidential elections saw the Know-Nothing Party candidate, former president Millard Fillmore, resoundingly defeated. He carried only Maryland, in large part because of the overwhelming numbers cast for him in Baltimore. This defeat marked the demise of the Know-Nothings nationally, but not so in Baltimore where government power was firmly within the grip of the Know-Nothing Party-- and where they were dedicated to maintaining that power by force. Once elected Mayor Swann promptly hired 300 police officers—to swell the force to 398— and the Know-Nothing BPD thereafter dedicated itself to keeping the Party in power.[12]

[Slide 21] Several Democratic candidates for City Council in October 1857 "withdrew from the race and notified their supporters to steer clear of the polls for their own safety."[13]

Swann was re-elected Mayor in 1858. Swann's Democratic rival Colonel Schutt conceded defeat at noon on election day, noting that attempts to vote for him promised "loss of life and the general disorder of the City,"[14] and urging his supporters to stay home to preserve their safety.

This violence proved too much even for Baltimoreans and Marylanders and the Know-Nothing majorities in the General Assembly, which had prevailed since 1855, yielded in the 1859 election. The new majority almost immediately enacted the Police Act of January 1860.   This Act removed control of the Baltimore Police Department from the City and gave it to a panel of four police commissioners appointed by the General Assembly.

[Slide 22] The Mayor and City Council of Baltimore swiftly challenged the validity of this Act --dominated as it was by Know-Nothing Party officials. The Court of Appeals affirmed the Circuit Court and declared in its opinion dated April 1860, that because the City was a creature of state government, and its police powers derived from state powers, the General Assembly possessed the constitutional authority to enact the Police Act and reconfigure control of the BPD.

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[12] Frank Towers, Violence as a Tool of Party Dominance: Election Riots and the Baltimore Know-Nothings, 1854-1860, *Maryland Historical Magazine* (Spring 1998) p. 9.

[13] Brendan Costigan, The Mayor and City Council of Baltimore v. the County Commissioners of Baltimore County: Tracking Maryland's Rule of Law in an Unruly Time , *Maryland Historical Magazine* (Summer 2013) p. 147.

[14] *Id.*

With the new state police commissioners installed and empowered, Know-Nothing Party members of the BPD were swiftly stripped from the ranks of the BPD. Beginning in the fall of 1860, Baltimore elections experienced only spot violence and voter intimidation as the BPD became the guardians of the right to vote and not passive and active participants in the Plug Ugly mayhem. As a result, the Know-Nothing Party candidates were soundly defeated in the elections of 1860 and thereafter.

While the number of police commissioners was reduced to one in 1966, and the power to appoint and fire that sole police commissioner was returned to the Baltimore Mayor in 1976, the BPD remains a statutory state agency, and its governmental immunities are structured around that reality.

Conclusion

It remains to be seen, hopefully later tonight, which of our candidates wins the presidency. Perhaps more to our topic, it remains to be seen whether Trump supporters peacefully accept the results, if, as widely predicted, they are on the losing end. But we do know that cannons have not been rolled out to kill those trying to vote and forced repeat voting (cooping) no longer occurs. We should take some pride in our progress—as imperfect as our democracy remains.