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The Know Nothing Party: Three Theories about its Rise and Demise

Sabrina P. Ramet and
Christine M. Hassenstab
The Norwegian University of Science & Technology

Abstract: The 19th century was a time of rapid population growth in the United States, and much of it was due to immigration from Europe. In the 1840s and 1850s, the largest proportion of immigrants came from Ireland and Germany, and most were Catholic. The Germans spread across small communities as far west as Wisconsin and Texas, but the Irish concentrated in the larger cities on the eastern seaboard, especially Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. Local third- and fourth-generation Protestant immigrants from England resented the new arrivals and organized "Nativist" associations. Among these was the anti-Catholic American Party, better known as the Know Nothing Party, which enjoyed spectacular success in Massachusetts and other states during 1854–1855. But, by 1862, the party was dead. This article examines how moral panic theory, the theory of persistent cultural patterns and cycles, and revitalization theory may offer insights into the Know Nothing Party. Each of these theories explains both the emergence of the party and its rapid demise, and suggest that each can make a contribution to understanding anti-Catholicism in nineteenth-century America, and the Know Nothing Party in particular.

INTRODUCTION

In the United States of America (USA) today, anti-Catholicism has lost almost all of the fire it displayed 150 years ago. But Islamophobia, homophobia, and even neo-Nazism are alive and kicking. Islamophobic organizations in the USA include, most prominently, the American Freedom Defense Initiative (also known as Stop Islamization of America),

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Address correspondence and reprint requests to: Sabrina P. Ramet, The Norwegian University of Science & Technology. E-mail: Sabrina.Ramet@svt.ntnu.no; Christine M. Hassenstab, The Norwegian University of Science & Technology. E-mail: Christine.Hassenstab@svt.ntnu.no

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founded in 2010, and the Dove World Outreach Center, founded in 1985 and headquartered in Gainesville, Florida. US-based organizations with homophobic agendas include the Family Research Council, the Concerned Women for America, James Dobson's Focus on the Family, and Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum. Among the several neo-Nazi organizations currently operating in the USA, we may mention the National Socialist White People's Party (an outgrowth of the American Nazi Party) and the White Aryan Resistance, based in Warsaw, Indiana. Hatred/fear/resentment of perceived "out-groups" remains, thus, a factor in American society in the 21st century. It is our hope that something may be learned about the nature, recruitment, and trajectories of the aforementioned movements from a study of the American Party, a mid-19th-century political grouping inspired by anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiments and generally known as the Know Nothing Party (KNP).

The KNP, launched in 1851 or 1852 and dead already by 1862, grew out of the so-called "Nativist" or "Native American" movement of the first half of the 19th century and was characterized by anti-Catholic and xenophobic sentiments directed, in the larger cities of the northeast, chiefly against Irish Catholics. The party, known originally as the Supreme Order of the Star Spangled Banner (Levine 2001, 80) and later calling itself the American Party, saw itself as "a clap of thunder from a brilliant sky…[which] is remarkable for the suddenness of its birth, and marvelous for its unparalleled growth and expansion" (An American 1855, 9–10). The party enjoyed a brief period of political success, peaking in 1854–1855 and scoring spectacular but short-lived success in Massachusetts and elsewhere (Mulkern 1990). At its peak, the party elected its candidates to the governorships in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Kentucky, and dominated the state legislatures in Massachusetts, California, Maryland, Tennessee, and Texas, and even elected 75 of its candidates to the U.S. Congress in 1855.

Nonetheless, by the beginning of the 1860s, the party had completely disappeared. The theoretical questions to be addressed in his article are: First, is the KNP best understood as a reflection of a moral panic directed against religious "outsiders," or as a manifestation of a persistent cultural pattern reemerging in American society in new variations over the centuries, or as a failed revitalization movement? Second, what factors account for the emergence and sudden successes of that party? Third, what factors account for its sudden and very rapid extinction? And fourth, what role did leadership and sectional disputes play in the life and death of the party?

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The KNP, as mentioned at the outset, is of more than an antiquarian interest in the current political context. Quite apart from its relationship to anti-Catholicism in the United States, which can be dated back to pre-Revolutionary times and which remained strong well into the 20th century (with the objections to John F. Kennedy's candidacy for the presidency figuring as possibly the last significant expression of anti-Catholicism in the USA), it may also function as a kind of theoretical template, affording us one way in which to think about currents of Islamophobia in the USA today, for example. And to the extent that we may identify key factors that contributed to the collapse of the KNP (while admitting that some strains of its anti-Catholicism were carried over into the Republican Party in the 19th century), it may be possible to assess which of these factors are operative in the case of Islamophobia today (again, admitting that there is no prominent American political party that bases its program on open hostility toward Muslims).

In taking up these rival, but oftentimes complementary, theories, we shall be interested in identifying how each of these theories may explain the rise of the KNP, describes its historical course and explains its relationship to the dominant culture, explains the role of fear in the growth of the KNP, and accounts for its ultimate collapse.

THE THEORIES

Our main theoretical question is informed by three alternative or complementary approaches, each of which can account for the rise of the KNP, in whole or in part. They are: moral panic, persistent cultural (cyclical) patterns, and revitalization theory. We shall make the argument that all three theories may contribute to an explanation of the KNP, but that each theory has different strengths.

Moral Panic Theory

The term "moral panic" originated in 1964 with a report in *The Daily Telegraph* about a "Day of Terror by Scooter Groups" in Clacton, an English seaside resort (Cohen 1987, 154). A follow-up headline in *The Daily Mirror* — "Wild Ones Invade Seaside" — prompted sociologist Stanley Cohen to employ the term in his seminal work, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. By moral panic is meant a collective response to some

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facet of social change or to the appearance of some new factor in social life, manifesting itself as pervasive fear, sometimes expressing itself as hostility to certain perceived out-groups, and characterized by disproportionality (relative to the change in question) as well as by volatility. Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda (1994, 152) attribute moral panics to phenomena located at three levels: the grassroots level, the elite-engineered level, and the product of an organized interest group.

Goode and Ben-Yehuda find that moral panic can be measured or manifested in the following ways, involving

> (1) organized, collective action or campaigns on the part of some of the members of society to do something about, call attention to, protest, or change (or prevent change in) a given condition …(2) the introduction of bills in the legislature to criminalize or otherwise deal with the behavior and the individuals supposedly causing the condition …(3) the ranking of a condition or an issue in the public's hierarchy of the most serious problems facing the country …and (4) public discussion of an issue in the media in the form of magazine and newspaper articles … commentaries …and dramas… (Goode and Ben-Yahuda 1994, 152; See also Victor 1998, 546)

These four manifestations are actualized at the grass-roots and elite levels, as well as within the engaged interest groups. When members of a society experience moral panic, anxiety can be displaced onto deviants or "defectives" of one sort or another "who are perceived through cultural symbols, which reflect the real, underlying social stresses" (Victor 1998, 547). Focusing on the grass-roots level suggests that panic is spontaneous and is propelled by social stresses. Focusing on elite engineering of the panic draws attention to the elite's use of institutions such as the law, medicine, and religion to "generate and sustain moral outrage" against the group branded as deviant (Victor 1998, 547).

Work has also been done on moral panics and the media by Chas Critcher (2008). Drawing upon work by other researchers, Critcher outlines the stages of moral panic in four distinct models. While these four models emphasize slightly different aspects of the phenomenon, we are drawn to Herbert Blumer's (1971, 298–306) five-step model because of its openness to media reports from the KNP-era. These five stages are (1) Emergence, (2) Legitimation, (3) Mobilization, (4) Official Plan Formation, and (5) Plan Implementation (Critcher 2008, 21). Blumer's five-stages are fairly self explanatory. Downs recasts these five stages

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with different names, adding two end phases labelled the decline of public interest phase and the post-problem phase (Downs 1972, 38–50).

Persistent Cultural and Historical Patterns/Cycles

We shall also examine in what ways the KNP may be seen as reflecting persistent cultural patterns in the United States. The notion of such patterns reflects, in the first place, the theoretical work on political culture, performed by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1965) among many others. The concept of a "political culture" allows us to identify patterns across countries, although details differ within each country. Political culture is a "particular incidence of patterns of political orientation in the population of a political system" (Almond and Verba 1965, 32).

A conflictual cultural cycle is characterized recurrent alternations of attention/mobilization/conflict and disengagement/demobilization/inactivity. As Michael Lienesch (1993, 4) has pointed out, in the 20th century the Christian Right displayed a pattern of activism in the 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s, interrupted by periods of inactivity in the 1930s, 1940s, 1960s, and 1970s. In the case of xenophobic cycles — the anti-Catholicism of the 19th century being understood here as one particular manifestation or instance of xenophobia — the sudden visibility of an out-group holding beliefs or practicing behaviors that the dominant group can neither understand nor find even remotely attractive is often the trigger for a phase of xenophobic activism (Jelen 1991, 137–138, 139). Typically, however, it is only a minority within the dominant group that is mobilized in the "activist" phase (Jelen 1991, 136). Minority or not, at the peak of cycles of collective confrontation, there may be "moments of madness," as Sidney Tarrow (1993, 283, 284) has suggested, which may promote change in "the repertoire of contention" in which "new forms of contention combine with old ones."

Disengagement and demobilization can result from a period of privatization of religion, producing an "illusion of religious consensus" (Jelen 1991, 141) or from shifts in public attention. Indeed, as Christian Joppke (1991, 43) has noted, "shifts in public issue-attention can trigger the decline of movements and fuel the rise of other movements." At the beginning of the 1850s, public attention was focused on European immigration to America's larger cities; by the end of the decade, slavery was the dominant issue and eclipsed all other issues. This is, of course, not to say that concerns about immigration and concerns about slavery were

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mutually exclusive — on the contrary, many Know Nothings in the northern states were concerned about both issues (as we shall see below).

Cycles of mobilization and demobilization cannot be understood, however, without taking into account the profile of the people recruited. Here we note that it is primarily disadvantaged groups, whether defined by economic status, race, or gender, that are mobilized into protest activism over sustained periods of time (Joppke 1991, 44) — groups, thus, which feel threatened by change. As what counts as "religious consensus" comes to be redefined — albeit sometimes only provisionally — marginalized groups may feel threats coming from new groups of outsiders. Thus, although anti-Catholicism seems to have become far less potent in 21st century America — witness the presidential campaigns of Catholics John Kerry (D) in 2004 and Rick Santorum (R) in 2012 — the general sequence identified by Jelen (1991, 141) involving "privatization, politicization, particularism, and privatization" may describe the broader pattern of xenophobia in American social life.

Revitalization Theory

Finally, the KNP might be viewed as a revitalization movement. In 1956, Anthony F. C. Wallace published an influential and widely cited article on what he termed "revitalization movements," in which he described how movements of discontented persons might effect (or fail to effect) changes in their cultures. While Wallace's article itself focused on anthropological examples from the Iroquois Ghost Dance (1888–1892) as well as numerous examples from the religious sphere, we are convinced that this theory should not be limited to the sociology of religion or to anthropological studies. At the same time, we agree with Wallace that "[n]o revitalization movements can, by definition, be truly nonsecular, but some can be relatively less religious than others, and movements can change in emphasis depending on changing circumstances" (Wallace 1956, 277). Many social movements often utilize, either openly, or in some more or less covert fashion, the values found in the religious sphere, whether they draw upon more conservative, or alternatively, more progressive branches of those religions. Clergy walked in Civil Rights demonstrations in the USA during the 1960s just as members of some religions now introduce legislation to "protect" heterosexual marriage.

Wallace wrote that revitalization movements are "evidently not unusual phenomena, but are recurrent features in human history" (Wallace 1956,

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267). He defined a *revitalization movement* as a "deliberate, organized, conscious effect by members of a group to create a new culture," and he described at length the processes by which a revitalization movement takes place (Wallace 1956, 264–281). The structure of the revitalization process, as outlined by Wallace, is very similar to Blumer's five stage model, mentioned above, except that Wallace's model focuses on individual reading or watching the media. Where the revitalization movement succeeds in running a "full course," there are, as he notes, five overlapping stages: (1) Steady State; (2) Period of Individual stress; (3) Period of Cultural Distortion; (4) Period of Revitalization … and finally, (5) New Steady State (Wallace 1956, 268). Wallace gives credit to Hallowell for the idea of a "mazeway," as a way in which a person sees her "nature, society, culture, personality, and body image" (Wallace 1956, 266). Changing this mazeway means changing the "total Gestalt" of the person (Wallace 1956, 267). This might mean changing the "'real'" system in order to bring the "mazeway and 'reality' into congruence" and thereby producing, "effective stress management," i.e., reducing moral "panic" (Wallace 1956, 267). Or, it might mean changing one's self-concept to fit into the current society.

Wallace maintains that terms such as "nativistic, millenarian, messianic, and revivalistic" are not necessarily mutually exclusive (Wallace 1956, 267). It is to one of these nativistic movements that we now turn using the three theories of moral panic, persistent cultural patterns and revitalization movements seriatim for an explanation of the phenomenon of the KNP.

THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY AS A REFLECTION OF A MORAL PANIC

In 1790, there were only 35,000 Catholics in the United States, out of a total population of nearly four million. Most of the immigrants in pre-Revolutionary times were Presbyterians, even among those from Ireland. After 1815, immigration rose steadily until 1847, when, two years into the seven-year long Irish potato famine, the rate of immigration began to accelerate. Already in 1840, there were 663,000 Catholics living in the United States — roughly twice the number in 1830 — and by 1845, the number of Catholics would reach 1,110,000 out of a total population of 19.7 million (Hueston 1976, 34). Some 80,000 immigrants arrived in America that year alone. Many of the new arrivals in the 1840s were Catholics, bringing the Catholic population of the United

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States to 1.5 million by 1850 (Hueston 1976, 131; "Early Irish Immigration" 1901, 99; Haynes 1897, 70). The main ports of entry were New York, New Orleans, and Boston and, among the immigrants, Irish and Germans predominated. Almost all of the Irish arriving in these years were Catholics. After 1851, German immigration exceeded Irish, but, while the Germans spread into small towns and rural communities as far west as Texas and Minnesota, the Irish concentrated in the larger cities in the northeast, especially New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Cincinnati, and Cleveland, although there were also sizeable Irish populations in Galveston, San Antonio, and Houston in the 1850s (Wooster 1962, 210). In 1841, almost all of the Catholic priests serving Philadelphia's 120,000 Catholics were foreign-born, as were many of the laity. Some 90% of Catholic priests in the state of New York (in 1845) were foreign-born; 60% of them had been born in Ireland (Hueston 1976, 48, 50). In 1850, about two-thirds of New York's Catholics were Irish. Along with increases in the number of Catholics came increases in other related institutional and cultural spheres so that, by 1845, the Church in the USA had 26 bishops, 709 priests, 675 churches, and 15 periodicals (Hueston 1976, 34, 35, 37).

Although the KNP was strongest in the northeast, it managed to attract adherents also in the South. One factor was, rather obviously, the presence of immigrants. In 1860, more than 40% of the population of New Orleans was foreign born, as was more than one-third in Louisville alongside more than 25% of the population of Baltimore. Across the South as a whole, there were 93 counties in which foreign-born persons accounted for more than 10% of the local population (Broussard 1966, 16–17). However, as Broussard (1966, 9–11, 16) has noted, there were other factors attracting Southerners to the new party, above all: the tendency of Whigs to prefer the new party rather than to join their old rival, the Democratic Party; the American Party's loyalty to the Union; and the hope of local slave-owners that the Southern branches of the party would maintain their benevolent "neutrality" on the issue of slavery.

The idea that there was an "immigration problem" became widespread relatively quickly. Controversies soon erupted about the Bible, politics, and jobs, and contributed to the moral panic that became fairly widespread in the early 1850s. These controversies were played out in the media, in line with Critcher's Stages one and two, with moral entrepreneurs offering contending solutions to the perceived problem. The solutions offered included the introduction of corrective legislation.

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The role played by the Bible in public schools was one conspicuous controversy. As the Irish Catholic populations of the above-noted cities increased, Catholics started to raise concerns about the exclusive use of the Protestant Bible in public schools and to demand the right to use their own translation, the Douay Bible, in the schools. When they failed to obtain at least equal time for the Douay Bible, Catholic bishops pressed Democratic legislators in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Maryland, in the years 1852–1854, to pass laws to bring an end to Bible reading in public schools. Bishop (later Archbishop) John J. Hughes of New York played a prominent role in registering Catholic opposition to having Catholic children exposed (exclusively) to the Protestant Bible in the public schools. Failing to obtain permission for Catholic pupils to read from the Douay translation, Bishop Hughes then tried but failed to have a portion of the public school funds, controlled by the Public School Society, allocated for the use of Catholic schools (McCadden 1964, 201; Connors 1951, 18–28).

Catholic efforts to shield their children from the Protestant Bible enraged Protestants, many of whom felt threatened; the "gestalt" for individual Protestants and for their institutions was under stress. Bishop Hughes became a lightning rod for Protestant hostility, as reflected in the stoning of the bishop's house in April 1842.[1] An anonymous member of the KNP would claim in his 1855 book, *The Sons of the Sires*, that Catholic

> complaints of an injured conscience because the Protestant Bible was read in schools, had two objects in view — first to withdraw its influence from the minds of the young, for that Church has always regarded the scriptures as hostile to its interests and dangerous to its existence. The priests fear nothing so much as an open Bible … (An American 1855, 33)

But there was a second, more sinister purpose that the author of *Sons of the Sires* suspected behind Catholic objections to having their children read the Protestant Bible. That purpose — according to the author — was to "overturn and cover with disastrous ruin our institutions," and to bring about "the destruction of republicanism, and the establishment of a spiritual despotism" (An American 1855, 36).

The Catholic periodical *The Pilot* did not do Catholics any favor, however, when it mused in 1843 that in time "Catholicism will obtain an ascendancy over all minds in the land" (*The Pilot*, September 16, 1843, as quoted in Hueston 1976, 38). Or again, there was the example

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of the *Catholic Telegraph* which, in the same year, predicted that, given continued growth in the number of Catholics, by 1855 Cincinnati could be "a little Rome in the West" (*Catholic Telegraph*, December 30, 1843, as quoted in Hueston 1976, 39).

A second controversy had to do with the increase in the number of naturalized citizens casting their votes. This increase became noticeable by 1851 and has been credited as a major incentive for the establishment of the secret order that became the KNP. The author of *Sons of the Sires* expressed his fear that Catholics, and through them the pope in Rome, would come to dominate America. In his words, it had become

> manifest to Americans that the Bishops and Archbishops held absolute control over the minds of their spiritual subjects … [who were] ready to cast their votes in that direction which would most effectually tend to the advancement of their Church; it was this which created the emergency that demanded a rising of the people against these encroachments upon our peace and safety (An American 1855, 30).

In fact, Catholic immigrants tended overwhelmingly to support the Democratic Party, although years later *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* would complain that that party had let down Catholics, among other ways by generally opposing the nomination of Catholics to public office of any significance ("The Anti-Catholic Issue in the Late Election" 1881, 45).

Sons of the Sires further alleged that the pope had dreamt of moving his seat of power from Rome to the Mississippi Valley and would have done so — but for the resolute action of the KNP (An American 1855, 57–58). The standard remedy that the KNP advocated was to lengthen the residential requirement for naturalization from five years to 21 years. But in 1855, in New York, there was even a challenge in court to the right of naturalized citizens to vote in that city's municipal elections (*New York Daily Times* 1855).

But there was a third factor that could not be addressed either by prolonging the residential requirement for naturalization or by converting immigrant Catholics to Protestantism, under the rubric of assimilation: that was the intensified competition for working-class jobs associated with rising immigration (Mulkern 1990; Beals 1960). If the KNP — so-called because its members typically replied "I don't know" to all questions from outsiders — owed its rise to a "moral panic," then that panic had, thus, religious, political, and economic facets.

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As early as 1837, a large meeting of "native Americans" — meaning white Protestants — took place in Germantown, Philadelphia County, registering alarm about both rising immigration and the naturalization law (Lee 1970, 14–17). Those assembled in Germantown adopted a "Preamble and Constitution" demanding the repeal of the law allowing naturalization after just five years of residence. Five years later, on November 8, 1842, came the formation of the American Protestant Association, with 98 Philadelphia Protestant clergymen signing its constitution; the association was openly anti-Catholic. Only six days later, in an ill-timed initiative, the Irish-born Bishop Francis P. Kenrick of Philadelphia wrote to the Board of Controllers of Philadelphia's public schools to ask for permission for Catholic children enrolled in public schools to use their own Bible, rather than the Protestant version. This request met with incomprehension among local Protestants and the subsequent wave of anti-Catholicism in Philadelphia "assumed the character of a holy war in defense of Sacred Writ" (Geffen 1969, 400).

In the meantime, on August 26, 1842, unknown arsonists had set fire to a wooden bridge of the Philadelphia & Reading Railroad Company. The crime was immediately blamed on local Irish Catholics (Geffen 1969, 397). As distrust between Protestants and Catholics escalated, local Protestants established a Protestant Institute expressly for the purpose of disseminating anti-Catholic literature (Geffen 1969, 399). Then, in December 1843, Nativists set up the American Republican Association, establishing branches in most of Philadelphia's wards. As mutual recriminations continued, the scene was set for the violence which broke out in May 1844.

On May 3, 1844, a group of immigrants, mostly Irish, broke into one of the meetings of the American Republican Association (ARA) meetings, armed with clubs, and broke it up. There were further disturbances at the same location three days later, leaving 11 Nativists wounded and one dead. Protestants countered by attacking a school of the Sisters of Charity. Then, in what Tarrow might consider a "moment of madness," Protestants brought three cannon together with loaded muskets to bear, setting fire on May 8 to St. Michael's Church and rectory, the seminary of the Sisters of Charity, and St. Augustine's Church, and the adjoining school (*Pennsylvania Freeman* 1844; Geffen 1969, 400–401). Troops finally arrived but experienced difficulty in restoring calm. A grand jury subsequently convened and blamed the disturbances squarely on Bishop Kenrick's plea that Catholic children be allowed to read from the

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Catholic Bible. Stoning the bishop's house and brawls represented violence at a relatively low level of intensity, but arson and cannon and muskets brought the two sets of actors to yet another level, adding even more stress and accelerating the cycle of protest.

In the wake of these riots, local membership in Nativist organizations swelled from 500 to many thousands. The Nativists' indignation of these moral entrepreneurs was at its height. Then, on July 4, 1844, Native Americans staged an ostentatious parade in downtown Philadelphia, carrying banners with anti-foreigner and pro-Bible slogans (Schafer 1924, 3–4). In what may be interpreted as a quintessential expression of moral panic, Governor Henry J. Gardner of Massachusetts alleged that the nation was facing "a crisis of unprecedented magnitude" with "the potential for an undigested mass of ignorant aliens to mongrelize American institutions" (as paraphrased by Mulkern 1990, 95).

Already in 1835, a group of New Yorkers had formed a political party at the state level, called the Native American Democratic Association, and had contested state elections later that year, winning about 40% of the vote. But in the 1840s, especially in the wake of the widely publicized disturbances in Philadelphia, more Nativist groups were set-up in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and elsewhere. Among these was the Order of United Americans (OUA) — also known as the Order of the Star Spangled Banner — that favored clandestine meetings, passwords, and secret rituals (Schafer 1924, 6). By 1852, these sundry currents had come together in the American Party,[2] with branches in 35 states and territories. By then, this new party was being increasingly noticed and in 1854 swept elections in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere, even reaching the west coast in California and Oregon (Hewitt 1935, 69–70, 74; Mulkern 1990; Knuth 1953, 40–53; Beals 1960). With this, the Know Nothing movement reached the peak of its success, and then began to decline rapidly in influence.

THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY AS AN EXPRESSION OF A PERSISTENT CULTURAL PATTERN OR CYCLE OF POLITICAL CULTURE

An alternative way of looking at the KNP is to stress its continuity with persistent cultural patterns of xenophobia and anti-Catholicism in American history. The advantage of this approach is that it downplays the importance of the various contextually specific triggers that provoked

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the emergence of this party and stress, rather, the recurrent phobias to which (some) Americans have been susceptible from the colonial-era Salem witch trials to Islamophobic (and, for that matter, homophobic) tendencies today. For John Higham, an advocate of this line of approach,

> [h]ardly any aspect of American xenophobia over its course from the eighteenth to the twentieth century is more striking than the monotony of its ideological refrain. Year after year, decade after decade, the same charges and complaints have sounded in endless reiteration. Variously combined, formulated, and documented, adapted to different and changing adversaries, rising and falling in intensity and acceptance, nearly all of the key ideas persisted without basic modification (Higham 1955, 131).

Anti-Catholicism preceded and survived the Revolution and no less a figure than John Adams, the second president of the United States, called Catholicism "Cabalistic Christianity" and asked, apparently rhetorically, "Can a free Government possibly [co]exist with the Roman Catholic Religion?" (as quoted in "The Anti-Catholic Spirit of the Revolution" 1889, 170). With such dispositions being expressed by the highest dignitaries of the land, it is no wonder that hostility toward Catholicism was openly featured in the pages of the press. Thus, in 1795, "Catholicus" — presumed to be the pen name of Archbishop John Carroll of Baltimore — wrote to the editor of *The Carlisle Weekly* to complain that that publication had "disseminated seeds of violent hatred against Roman Catholics, as forming the very kingdom of [the] antichrist" ("Archbishop Carroll" 1894, 133). Some 86 years later, the *New York Herald* echoed this sentiment, calling the United States a "Protestant country" and Americans a "Protestant people" ("The Anti-Catholic Issue in the Late Election" 1881, 40). Demands were also heard throughout the nineteenth century for the "Americanization" (i.e., conversion to Protestantism) of the foreign-born.

19th-century schoolbooks also fit this pattern, promoting the image of a chosen people sharing a common Protestant religion, favored by God, and entrusted with "a world mission to spread democratic government and pure religion" (England 1963, 191; Anbinder 1992, 10). Pure religion meant *Protestant* Christianity since, in the schoolbooks, Catholicism was consistently tied to "bigotry, ignorance, servility, and persecution" ("The Public Press" 1883, 123), as well as problematic, if not treasonous, subservience to the pope in Rome — an allegation often captured in the

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smear-word "popery." The public press in 19th-century America also served as the vehicle for anti-Catholic prejudices, both before and after the turbulent 1850s, and an unsigned article in *The American Catholic Quarterly Review* in 1883 gave the press part of the blame for "…the sudden anti-Catholic eruptions that take place from time to time…" ("The Public Press 1883, 124).

In 1834, 20 years before the KNP scored its dramatic victories across the northeastern states, even gaining a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, there was the case of the notorious riots against the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown, just outside Boston.[3] Provoked by calumnious rumors concerning the behavior of the Ursuline nuns, the riots resulted in the destruction of the convent. A committee subsequently appointed to investigate the nuns found the nuns innocent of any wrong-doing and declared the rumors "without any foundation in truth" (*Daily National Intelligencer* 1834). It was symptomatic of the political culture of that age, however, and of the persistent pattern of anti-Catholicism, that the defense team for those brought to trial for the violence argued "that the Roman Catholic religion places all who profess it in the relation of foreigners to our government" (*The Atlas* 1835).

Two years later came the publication of Maria Monk's (1836) *Awful Disclosures*, which purported to be a record of sexual orgies among Catholic nuns in Montreal, Canada. Claiming to have been a nun at the Hôtel Dieu convent, Maria Monk alleged that "…she and other nuns were obliged to submit to carnal intercourse with priests … Nuns who resisted were killed. Illegitimate babies were baptized, strangled, and thrown into a basement hole" (Beals 1960, 44). In fact, Monk had never been in the Hôtel Dieu convent and had been raised a Protestant. The book was later shown and admitted to have been a fabrication by Rev. J. J. Slocum (Frink 2009, 237–238),[4] but sales of the book continued to climb even after this admission, reaching 300,000 copies sold by 1860; this made the *Awful Disclosures* the second best-selling book in 19th-century America, second only to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* In fact, the book signed by Maria Monk was only the most infamous in a huge cottage industry of anti-Catholic texts that "titillated" Protestant readers in that century and which have been described by Thomas Archdeacon as the "pornography of the Puritans" (as quoted in Frink 2009, 249), allowing their readers to sanctify their vicarious enjoyment by indulging in self-righteous outrage.

Nativism, the seedbed of the KNP, emerged in various parts of the country already in the 1830s, i.e., prior to the big wave of Irish

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Catholic immigration, while Rev. Lyman Beecher's (1835) *A Plea for the West* called for Protestants to extend their religious domain westward, aspiring thus to prevent Catholics from becoming a majority in the Mississippi Valley (Hinckley 1962, 126; Billington 1938). Thus, the rise of Know-Nothingism in the 1850s, as Stickney (1894, 4) has noted, merely revived and continued the anti-Catholic tradition in a new form. It was in this spirit that James Brooks commented in 1855, at the height of this movement's popularity: "I can see nothing new in Know-Nothingism. There is not an idea there that has not had half a century's growth among observing men" (as quoted in Levine 2001, 471).

Nor did anti-Catholicism expire with the disappearance of the KNP at the beginning of the 1860s. On the contrary, anti-Catholicism lived on in the American Protective Association, established by Henry F. Bowers in 1887 and supported by the Republican Party (Higham 1952; Nugent 1963), and in the Ku Klux Klan, which, like the KNP, was secretive and anti-intellectual, and claimed to be patriotic (Myers 1924, 5; Scott 1926, 268). Among other things, the Ku Klux Klan recycled the Know-Nothing canard that Catholics supposedly could not be integrated into American society and bore a *political* allegiance to the pope. Anti-Catholicism was also sustained by publications such as Richard W. Thompson's (1894) *Footprints of the Jesuits*, which claimed that the Jesuits' motivation for being involved in education was to turn the young into passive agents accustomed to "uninquiring obedience" and, thereby, to "fit them to become subservient slaves of monarchical and papal power" (as quoted in Neely 1976, 121).

Mistrust of and hostility toward Catholics continued to be visible also in the highest political echelons. Thus, for instance, in December 1875, President Ulysses S. Grant, in his Seventh Annual Message to Congress, called for a constitutional amendment to bar the allocation of any public school funds to any school operated by a religious denomination — a call pointedly aimed at the Catholic Church. Less than a year later, Rutherford B. Hayes, who would assume the office of the president in March 1877, admitted in a letter to William Henry Smith that he "oppose[d] Catholic interference and all sectarian interference with political affairs, and especially with the schools" (Hayes letter, October 5, 1876, as quoted in Neely 1976, 109, emphasis removed). Anti-Catholicism survived the KNP nativism to resurface again and again, even into the Kennedy campaign for the White House.

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REVITALIZATION

Interpreting the intense anti-Catholicism of the 1850s as a moral panic makes sense of the impact of Irish Catholic immigration on anti-Catholic prejudices of the time, as well as of the suddenness of the rise of nativist organizations. Emphasizing the persistent patterns of anti-Catholicism and xenophobia places the KNP in a broader historical context and contributes to understanding the susceptibility of American Protestants to anti-Catholic prejudice. What neither approach offers, however, is either an accounting of the role of leadership (although Goode and Ben-Yehuda do discuss the role of the elite) or an interpretation of why anti-Catholicism in the 1850s took specifically the form of a political party. Nor does either of the foregoing theories suggest the need to highlight the objectives of the KNP, as opposed to its responses to processes emerging from other sources. Moral panic theory can certainly explain why this happened *when* it did, but not why it took the form it took.

This is precisely where recourse to Anthony Wallace's theory of revitalization movements in combination with Tarrow's cycles of protest may make a contribution as noted above. As we have seen, for Wallace, a revitalization movement is an organized movement or grouping under clear leadership, which seeks to change certain features of the social or religious or political landscape in which it arises. For what we shall call revitalization theory, the operative collective emotion is not so much panic or fear, as discontent, indeed seething discontent, and it is the movement that promises to change those features which have given rise to this discontent in the first place.

There were important figures in the KNP in every state in which it operated. Among those prominent in the party were: James W. Barker, elected president of the KNP in May 1854; Thomas Spooner, president of the influential Ohio organization; Richard W. Thompson, a major figure in the Indiana organization; James Macpherson Berrien, elected president of the Georgian organization in December 1855; and Thomas Whitney (1856), author of the influential book, *A defence of the American policy*. Whitney, whose historical role has been highlighted by Maizlish (1982), was an eloquent speaker, became Grand Sachem (chief officer) of the OUA in spring of 1846, when he was 39 years old, and was reelected to a second term as Grand Sachem in 1853. During his first term in that office, membership in the OUA grew from 2,000 members in 1846 to 30,000 nationally by 1851 (Levine 2001, 460–461). In 1856,

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Whitney brought out his book, *A Defence of the American Party*, described by Levine as a "Know-Nothing Bible" (Levine 2001, 463). Whitney served in the U.S. House of Representatives for the American (Know Nothing) Party from March 1855 to March 1857 but died of tuberculosis the year following the end of his term in the House.

While the other approaches that we have already described might incline one to interpret the KNP as a one-issue party utilizing a more general master frame, revitalization theory lends itself to a more nuanced approach. Although anti-Catholicism gave the party its driving force, the KNP also presented itself as a party committed to ending the widespread corruption in American politics (*Plain Dealer* 1855; Holt 1973, 318), to defending the economic interests of the working classes, and to championing conservative values in general and in gender relations and sexuality particularly (Roll 1948, as quoted in Neely 1976, 100; Frink 2009, 243–244). Indeed, the OUA believed that the subordination of wives to their husbands was essential to the stability of family life and, as a consequence of that, also to the stability of society at large. As Levine argues, the KNP, as the successor to the OUA,

> …arose at the behest, not of some anonymous voters' revolt, but of an identifiable cadre of Whiggish bourgeois conservatives…whose views about immigration and slavery sprang from the same coherent approach to governing a socially, economically, and culturally diverse republic (Levine 2001, 486).

At first the KNP seemed to have clear objectives, at least judging from its programmatic statements and from the rhetoric of its leaders. These included limiting immigration, extending the residence requirement for naturalization from five to 21 years, resisting efforts by the Catholic bishops to see Catholic pupils in public schools read from the Catholic Bible, and promoting temperance (an objective that clashed with the traditions of the newer European immigrants) (Maizlich 1982, 167, 174–175, 183; Gudelunas 1978, 229). But the KNP was, in many ways, more of a *movement* than a party, with variations in the given party's program from state to state (Maizlish 1982, 167; confirmed in Rice 1947, 61). Even anti-Catholicism played out differently from state to state. In Virginia, the local party worked to moderate its anti-Catholic rhetoric (Rice 1947, 70), while in Louisiana, the local branch of the party, meeting for its state convention in July 1855, rejected the idea of incorporating anti-Catholicism into its platform and the Louisiana party

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entered the subsequent election campaign declaring openly its rejection of the national party's anti-Catholic stance (Carriere 1994, 464).

We agree with Michael Holt (1993, 1684) that "nativism, anti-Catholicism, and prohibitionism, and not simply antislavery sentiment, fueled the voter realignment of the 1850s." Many of those who joined the KNP were Whigs, whose erstwhile party was clearly in its death throes and who were looking for a more vigorous party machine. The self-described *American* Party looked attractive to many, at least those who shared the anti-Catholic and nativist spirit of the new party.

The KNP did not have a unified stance on slavery, which by 1856 was increasingly recognized as the "paramount" question confronting the nation (*Cincinnati Gazette,* as quoted in Maizlish 1982, 195), and the party split along sectional lines on this issue. On the other hand, there were strong Unionist sentiments in the American Party; in fact, at its 1854 national convention attended by delegates from 13 states, the party adopted a set of principles that included preservation of the Union (Rice 1947, 63–64).

In the South, as already suggested, the KNP supported slavery and thus endorsed the Kansas-Nebraska Act which had the effect of repealing the Missouri Compromise, while KNP branches in the North opposed the extension of slavery and therefore objected to the Kansas-Nebraska Act (Anbinder 1992, 47). Many northerners favored abolition outright. For northern branches of the KNP, opposition to slavery and anti-Catholicism became linked, on the argument that "Catholicism was itself a form of slavery, binding men's consciences to a despotic ruler in Rome" (Maizlish 1982, 178).

Thus, in spite of some local tendencies toward moderating its anti-Catholicism, the diverse strands in Know Nothing discontent were, nonetheless, all tied back to the growing Catholic presence in the United States. It was Catholics in the first place, the nativists charged, who were corrupting American politics, Catholics who were taking jobs away from Protestants, and Catholics again who were corrupting the sexual morality of the nation and threatening the delicate balance of gender inequality. And of course, it was Catholics who were objecting to the exclusive use of the Protestant Bible in public schools. Thus, John Hancock Lee's *The Origins and Progress of the American Party in Politics* (1855) emphasized the threat posed by naturalized Catholics to Protestant domination in politics (Lee 1970, 32), demanded a residence requirement of 21 years for naturalization, insisted that the Protestant Bible was "not sectarian," and held that "native Americans only (in practice, Protestants) should

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be appointed to office, to legislate, administer, or execute the laws of their own country" (Lee 1970, 21, quoting from a Declaration of Principles).

Or again, Anna Ella Carroll's (1859) *The Great American Battle* alleged that the Catholic Church advocated "principles and aims antagonistic to American liberty," characterized Catholicism as "a religion without God," and called the educational work of the Jesuits among Catholic children a "growing evil" (Carroll 1859, 32, 72, 60). In a curious twist, the same author claimed that the vows (of poverty, chastity, and obedience) taken by priests — and especially the vow of obedience to hierarchical authority — were "antagonistic to liberty and our free government, and whoever is faithful to them cannot be [loyal] to America!" (Carroll 1859, 105). As for Catholic protestations of loyalty and respect for American democracy, the author dismissed such representations, alleging, on the contrary, that "Popery … has talked of its spiritual allegiance to us, as to a nation of fools!" (Carroll 1859, 317). And then there is Whitney's own *Defence of the American Policy*, with its strident arguments against Catholicism. For Whitney, "the perfect homogeneousness of the people" is among the best guarantees of "permanent nationality" and stable political life (Whitney 1856, 69), while the Catholic Church injected a foreign element into the nation. Noting that the pope is elected by a college of cardinals, rather than by a broad popular vote, Whitney declared that Catholicism was "diametrically opposed to Republicanism" (Whitney 1856, 95. The complaint about the College of Cardinals appears on page 96). In his view, the Catholic Church was "the open foe of progress" and wherever Catholicism established itself, "there is stagnation and public lethargy" (Whitney 1856, 100, 101). Whitney's book reads as a lengthy jeremiad against the Catholic Church, in which contempt is mixed with hostility.

Revitalization theory highlights the role of organization — the revitalization movement — and is better suited to explaining the various programmatic statements which were issued by the KNP. For example, in April 1853, Nativists of Maryland met in Baltimore and adopted a set of resolutions in which Catholic efforts to see their children use the Catholic Bible in public schools were characterized as a "conspiracy against the diffusion of knowledge," while calling for "our Senators and Representatives … to crush forever this confederacy" (from the full text of the resolution, as cited in McConville 1928, 26). Such programmatic statements and resolutions served to guide their readers to pre-conceived conclusions and to identify those problems in Wallace's "mazeway" that needed to be addressed.

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As with many such movements, the KNP simultaneously looked to a more pristine past that should be restored — the era of uncontested Protestant hegemony — and sought "to construct a more satisfying culture" (Wallace 1956, 265). Already in OUA days, the Nativists set up a women's auxiliary, the United Daughters of America, dedicated to preserving the 'natural' hierarchy

WHY THE KNOW NOTHING PARTY DISINTEGRATED

As already noted, the KNP had a very short life-span — just about 10 years in all. Although all three theories can offer some accounting of why the party disintegrated, revitalization theory's emphasis on leadership points us directly to the internal divisions over slavery that caused the party leadership to split and the party itself to fragment and collapse. Although slavery had been a divisive issue already in the 1780s, matters came to a head for the KNP in June 1855, when party councils meeting in New York and Philadelphia saw rancorous arguments about slavery. The delegates to the Philadelphia convention proved unable to reach a consensus and, after a majority of the delegates adopted a platform that accommodated the slaveholding states, northern delegates seceded, repudiated the party platform, and adopted an "Address" to the American people urging an end to the domestic slave trade (*Bangor Daily Whig and Courier* 1855).

Party members in Massachusetts decided to set-up an independent party at the state level and, at a meeting in late June, declared that their organization, henceforth known as "the American Party in Massachusetts", was severing its connections with the national organization (*Boston Daily Advertiser* 1855b).[5] The Massachusetts party thus denounced slavery, but the platform it adopted in August reiterated the various anti-Catholic and Nativist principles around which the Know Nothings had united in the first place (*Boston Daily Advertiser* 1855c). Already in mid-June, the *Boston Daily Advertiser* (1855a) referred to "…the impossibility of forming a national party upon sectional issues," thereby forecasting the ultimate demise of the KNP. The anti-slavery wing of the KNP would adopt the name "Know-Somethings" (*The American Citizen* 1855).

There is a debate among historians concerning the relative prominence of the diverse issues in contention in the 1850s. William Brock (1979) and Tyler Anbinder (1992) emphasize antislavery sentiment as the decisive issue leading to the reshaping of the political party system in the 1850s.

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By contrast, William Giennap (1985) and Joel Silbey (1982) have challenged this view, drawing attention to ethnic and religious antagonisms as independent variables. Silbey (1982, 201–202), for example, writes that

> Far from being … directly related to slavery and the sectional crisis, mass political conflicts in the 1840s and 1850s were primarily rooted in a complex interaction of social and political perceptions and religious, national, and racial prejudices and divisions, all brought together under the heading of ethnocultural conflict.

Along the same lines, Michael Holt has argued that slavery alone cannot account for the reshuffling of the political deck in the 1850s (Holt 1973, 309), and, by extension, internal divisions over slavery — as important as they were in fracturing the party — are not the whole story. We believe that the evidence supports the analysis of Giennap, Silbey, and Holt. There were problems associated with *some* of the politicians who had joined the party. Although some of its leading figures were respected members of their communities, others, newly recruited into politics, were inexperienced, and this gave rise to complaints about their incompetence in office. Moreover, as the party scored successes at the polls, second-rank politicians from other parties joined its ranks (Holt 1973, 319–320). Opportunism accounted for some of these cross-overs. Again, the continued secrecy associated with some aspects of the party's work aroused suspicions in some quarters (Tuska nd, 10). And finally, the persistent rowdyism and sporadic violence associated with the party (Tuska nd, 13–14, 21–29; *Ohio Statesman* 1855) (especially at election time), such as the "bloody riot" in Baltimore in 1856 (*New York Herald* 1856a; 1856b), increasingly alienated both the more respectable figures in the party and ordinary voters, who drifted to other parties, especially, in the northern states, to the relatively young Republican Party. The southern members of the KNP secured their party's selection of Millard Fillmore as its standard-bearer in the 1856 presidential elections, but his nomination impelled some members in the North to bolt (Anbinder 1992, 210–212). After its poor showing in the 1856 presidential elections, when its candidate, ex-president Millard Fillmore, garnered only eight of the 296 votes in the electoral college (21% of the popular vote in the three-way contest) (Scarry 2001, 285), the party rapidly withered. In the 1860 presidential election, there was no American Party nominee in the race.

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CONCLUSION

It is undeniable that there have been persistent patterns of anti-Catholicism and xenophobia in the United States, and that these patterns were both reflected in the rise of the KNP. But, quite apart from the fact that many Americans were taken aback by the violence spawned by Nativism (Hinckley 1962, 131), an emphasis on persistent patterns cannot account for the disastrous setbacks which the party experienced in 1856 and 1857.[6]

Each of the three theories we have examined tells the story of the KNP a bit differently, and each of them tells us something about such movements. Moral panic theory alerts us to the importance of the demographic changes underway in the first half of the 19th century, as immigration brought large numbers of Catholics, especially Irish and Germans, to American shores. The greater their presence, the more visible they were. But there was more involved than mere visibility. In line with moral panic theory, we find specific issues that inflamed Protestant fears — above all concerning the Bible, the voting preferences of immigrants (who tended to favor the Democratic Party), and competition for working-class jobs. Moral panic theory explains why the KNP emerged when it did and why there was violence on the streets. The notion of a "panic" presumes that it will pass but, beyond that, moral panic theory does not offer much by way of explaining the party's demise. It also does not explain why anti-Catholicism took the form it did in the 1850s.

Looking at the party's rise and disappearance as a feature of a larger cycle of hostility toward "outsiders" downplays the triggers highlighted by moral panic theory, focusing rather on persistent cultural patterns which provided a kind of template for an intensification of anti-Catholicism. The strength of cyclical theory, thus, is to point out that what makes some threats and some "triggers" stand out among a backdrop of other potential triggers is precisely the template. At the same time, researchers in cyclical theory emphasize, as we have seen, that public attention may shift when other issues displace those which had occupied its attention previously. Moreover, there can be more than one "template" available. In this regard, cyclical theory does better than moral panic theory in explaining the demise of the KNP, which proved incapable of finding a unified response to the increasingly prominent issue of slavery.

Finally, viewing the KNP as a revitalization movement works better than either of the preceding theories to explain why anti-Catholicism

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gave birth precisely to a political party at that time. By stressing the role of leadership and organization, revitalization opens the door to a more nuanced approach to the programmatic statements issued by the party leaders. Understanding the KNP as a revitalization movement also reminds us that the party had a vision of the kind of culture it wanted to see — specifically, a Protestant America, which presumably could be achieved by compelling Catholic children to read from the Protestant Bible and, over time, converting immigrant Catholics to Protestantism.

Revitalization movements have fixed life-spans and expire either when their adherents realize some or all of their objectives, or when those involved in the movement reach the conclusion that it is not possible to achieve those objectives. Either way, the stress experienced by movement adherents subsides and they reconcile themselves to whatever steady state ensues. But this is where revitalization theory runs aground, because we know that, in late nineteenth-century America, anti-Catholicism found new organizational vehicles, including the American Protective Association and the Ku Klux Klan. In fact, of the three theories, only cyclical theory has something to offer by way of explaining the recurrence of organized anti-Catholicism in nineteenth-century America.

Nonetheless, each of the three theories we have examined has something to offer. Insofar as they are not mutually exclusive, there is no need to choose one over the other two. That said, when it comes to the persistent fires of hatred, whether directed at Muslims or gays and lesbians or Jews or racial and religious minorities, we believe that cyclical theory offers the clearest warning, together with the reassurance that, with time, new issues will displace those currently in view and a new, potentially more inclusive moral consensus may establish its hegemony.

NOTES

1. This incident occurred after the passage of the Maclay Act, which specified that public monies could not be allocated to any school" in which any sectarian doctrine or tenet shall be taught, inculcated, or practised." — As quoted in McCadden (1964, 207). Although the provision was aimed at Catholic claims on public funds, Protestants correctly anticipated that the provision could be used to secularize the public schools.
2. Sources vary about exactly when the party was founded. Some say this happened in 1849, while other sources give the founding date as either 1851 or 1852.
3. Today Charlestown is a suburb of Boston.
4. George Bourne, another Protestant minister, also contributed some ideas for the book.
5. Regarding the party's electoral disaster in Lousiana's 1857 elections, see Carriere (1994, 456).
6. Regarding the party's electoral disaster in Louisiana's 1857 elections, see Carriere (1994, 456).

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