

1856

The demise of the national Whig party and the corresponding rise of the Republican party and American party (also called Know-Nothings) made 1856 an interesting presidential election year. In Maryland the Republicans were identified as extremists, abolitionists and radicals and had found little statewide following. The party's state organizational meeting in Baltimore on September 11, 1856 ended with the participants fleeing from a mob and requiring police protection.²⁴ The Democrats had won Maryland in 1852 but were reeling from the unbridled rush to power of the Know-Nothings.

At the only national convention held by the American or Know-Nothing party in Philadelphia during February 1856, the delegates focused on their nativism themes while sidestepping the slavery issue under the umbrella of states' rights. A platform which called for non-interference by Congress on the slavery question and respect for each state's right to frame its own laws led to a split in the convention. The Know-Nothings, perhaps as a reflection of their infancy as a national party, turned to former Whig President, Millard Fillmore, as their nominee.

The Democratic Convention was not held in Baltimore for the first time since national parties began meeting to nominate candidates for President. Convened in Cincinnati, the Democrats failed to renominate incumbent Franklin Pierce. Chosen instead was James Buchanan of Pennsylvania who had been able to avoid the controversy over domestic issues by serving as Ambassador to Great Britain in the three preceding years. The Maryland delegation favored Buchanan with six of its eight convention votes on the first ballot and eventually gave all of its votes to the nominee.

Maryland did send a delegation to the Republican Convention held in Pittsburg during February 1856 but the party and its presidential candidate, John C. Fremont of California, were not significant factors in the state. Remnants of the Whig party did attend a convention in Baltimore in September 1856 but gave its endorsement to the Know-Nothing candidacy of Fillmore, who ironically had been rejected by the Whigs in 1852 when he was an incumbent President.

The presidential campaign in Maryland was hard fought and bitter between the Democrats and the Know-Nothings. The Democrats emphasized their open party structure and made claims of being the only viable alternative to "Black Republicanism."²⁵ The Know-Nothings continued their emphasis on nativism and could point to success and improvements within the state.²⁶ The November fourth election set Maryland apart from the rest of the country as it was the only state to be carried by the American Know-Nothings and the only slave state not to cast its electoral votes for the Democratic candidate, James Buchanan.

The Democrats carried six counties (Allegany, Calvert, Charles, Prince George's, St. Mary's and Worcester) while the Know-Nothings swept the rest and mounted an 8,347 victory margin (47,462 to 39,115.) The Know-Nothing victory in Baltimore City by 7,018 votes was again marked by violence with up to 14 deaths and 300 injuries reported in election related conflicts.²⁷ The Republican electors gathered a mere 285 votes from but 11 of the state's 22 subdivisions as their party's campaign role in Maryland was to serve as a target for opposition attack.