“Third parties are like bees: once they have stung, they die.”¹ While this accurately encapsulates the fate of most third parties in American history, it was certainly not the case for the Republican Party. The Republican Party proved more akin to a wasp, first “stinging” as a new third party in the 1856 election and then regrouping to capture the presidency in 1860. It has remained a major party ever since. First formed in 1854 in outraged response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Republican Party was able to rise from obscurity to become the major political party in the North in a mere six years.

But how were the young Republican Party and an unknown (until the 1858 Lincoln-Douglas Debates) Abraham Lincoln able to defeat the powerful incumbent Democratic Party? Popular belief states that the sectional divide in the Democratic Party greatly weakened it and reduced the votes for any single Democratic candidate, allowing Lincoln to squeak through. Historians who support this opinion argue that the split in the Democratic Party not only divided its resources and votes but also reduced them as a whole. They claim that the split in the party had a detrimental psychological impact on the voters and, more importantly, on the Party’s supporters in the northern states who were indispensable to any “get out the vote” drive. Historian James L. Huston, for example, argues that Lincoln won New York State because of the Democratic Party’s split. He claims that traditionally Democratic supporters in the North stopped funding the Democratic Party, fearing that with two Democratic presidential candidates, southern nominee John Breckinridge of Kentucky and northern nominee

¹This paper was written for Dr. Charles Hanson’s Advanced Placement U.S. History class in the spring of 2010.
Stephen A. Douglas of Illinois, neither would be able to gain a majority of electoral votes and the election would be decided by the volatile House of Representatives. David Herbert Donald has concurred with this view, flatly stating that “The division in the Democracy virtually assured a Republican victory.”

However, given Lincoln’s clear majority in the Electoral College and the presence of unified anti-Lincoln fusion tickets in numerous northern states, including the key states of Pennsylvania and New York, Lincoln and the Republican Party should properly be awarded the majority of the credit for winning the election. While the split in the Democratic Party certainly improved Lincoln’s chances of election, it was his and the Republican Party’s actions that made victory possible in the first place. Historian William C. Harris stresses the importance of Lincoln’s behavior before the election. In the case of Pennsylvania, a state heavily populated with former Know Nothings, Harris argues that Lincoln won the majority of the Know Nothings’ votes because he never openly criticized their racist intolerance of immigrants. Douglas, on the other hand, had done so and was therefore seen as the less attractive candidate. Although Lincoln personally opposed the Know Nothing stance regarding foreigners, he and his party understood that to win a majority of the country’s electoral votes they would have to carry almost every state north and west of the Mason-Dixon Line, given the extreme unpopularity of Lincoln and the Republican Party in the South. Unpopular is in fact putting it mildly, since in ten southern states Lincoln did not receive a single vote. While the antebellum North may seem small in comparison to the boundaries of our nation today, it encompassed a very diverse population. The North contained both the rapidly industrializing New England states and the agricultural states of the Northwest Territory. It included large numbers of immigrants on the one hand and Nativists, such as the ex-Know Nothings, on the other. Lincoln was able to win the presidential election because of his party’s, and his own, ability to appeal to a large number and wide variety of such interest groups.
Douglas’s Weakness

Although not the primary reason for Lincoln’s victory, the split in the Democratic Party did divide its voters and resources, weakening the campaign of Stephen A. Douglas, Lincoln’s only viable opponent in the North. Numerical reflections of the impact of this split can be found in the popular vote totals of California and Oregon. Lincoln won both states with a popular vote percentage of 32 percent and 36 percent respectively. Douglas and Breckinridge, the two Democratic candidates, on the other hand, combined for a popular vote percentage of 59 percent and 62 percent in those two states. The numbers clearly show that if the Democratic votes had gone to a single candidate, that candidate would have won both California and Oregon. While a shift to Douglas of the electoral votes in these two states would not have changed the final result, California and Oregon still serve as proof of the dilution of Democratic votes caused by the split in the party. A political cartoon printed during the months before the election also illustrates Douglas’s weakness. (See Appendix A.) In the cartoon, the Democratic Party is depicted as incapable of movement, appearing as an old-fashioned wagon stuck in the path of a powerful oncoming train driven by Lincoln. Northern Democrats, pulled by Douglas and urged on by New York’s Democratic Tammany Hall organization (represented by the Indian chief Tamanend) tries to pull the wagon, labeled as the Democratic platform, off the tracks in one direction while Breckinridge and his driver President James Buchanan try to haul it the other way. With both a northern and a southern candidate, the Democratic Party split its efforts in two. This division of resources and the impossibility of reconciling their views are reflected in this drawing as both sides strive mightily to pull the Democratic Party their way. The northern Democratic Party machine “driving” Douglas hopes to spur him to victory while President Buchanan hopes that Tammany Hall and the Democratic Party are destroyed rather than allow Douglas to take control. Not only has Douglas lost resources, but he now must compete against Breckinridge to gain any supporters, never mind campaign in order to broaden his overall appeal. This document suggests that, because of the split of the Democrats, Lincoln was able to splinter them, both metaphorically and literally, and win the election quite easily.
Critics of this argument point to the fact that Lincoln won the election with a clear majority of electoral votes, and so even if a single candidate had received all the electoral votes that Lincoln did not, Lincoln still would have won. Proponents counter this by saying that the effects of the Democratic split cannot be seen purely in the vote totals, as the numerical results fail to convey the psychological impact that the split in the party had on the voters and its financial supporters. As already noted, William C. Harris believes that Lincoln won New York because the historically Democratic merchant class stopped funding the Democratic campaign after it became evident that no single Democratic candidate would be able to win an outright majority in the Electoral College. An article printed in *The New York Times* before the election also reveals the vulnerabilities of the fusion movement in New York. The article describes the complete lack of cooperation between the various anti-Republican groups, as the “adopted citizens refuse to vote for the ten American names on the Fusion Electoral ticket; the original Douglas men refuse to vote for the seven Breckinridge electors; while the followers of Breckinridge reciprocate the compliment by announcing that their political consciences will only allow them to cast their ballots for the seven men of their own faith.” As shown in the political cartoon, Douglas is impeded in his efforts to win by fellow Democrats who simply cannot come to any sort of compromise, stalling a potentially effective fusion movement in New York. Overall, Douglas's campaign was severely weakened by the loss of voters, resources, organizational unity and confidence from traditionally Democratic supporters.

**Mobilization of Young Men by the Wide Awakes**

While it is true that the split in the Democratic Party did reduce the likelihood of a Democratic victory, the chief reason for Lincoln's success was his and his party's ability to appeal to a sufficiently large number and variety of interest groups in the North to win virtually every electoral vote outside of the South and the border states. A variety of initiatives accounts for this success. First, the Republican Party aided Lincoln's victory through the formation and support of the Wide Awakes, a quasi-military political marching club that suc-
cessfully encouraged large numbers of young male northerners to vote for Lincoln. The presidential election of 1860 had the highest percentage voter turnout rate to that time. While this is certainly due for the most part to the strong opinions that Americans had regarding fundamental issues such as preservation of the Union and slavery, it is also numerical proof of the success of the “get out the vote” efforts of the Wide Awakes. Young men, who typically had not voted in past elections, were swept up in the energy and commotion generated by the parades and torchlight processions conducted by the Wide Awakes. An article in the New York Herald attested to this fact when it described the Wide Awakes as “the greatest feature of the campaign of 1860: semi-military in character, political in purpose, and...unparalleled in the political annals of our country.” Nor was praise of the Wide Awakes limited to Republican newspapers. George Templeton Strong, a New York merchant who at the time was an undecided voter, gave a firsthand account of the excitement created by the Wide Awakes when he stated in his diary, “I have never seen so beautiful a spectacle on any political turnout...Everyone speaks of the good order and the earnest aspects of the ‘Wide-Awakes,’...Certainly, all the vigor and enthusiasm of this campaign are thus far confined to the Republicans.” As Strong noted, the Wide Awakes were able to generate positive publicity for Lincoln by inspiring the crowds and utilizing the most powerful publicity tool, word of mouth. Also, both the Herald’s columnist and Strong express how exciting and disciplined the Wide Awakes were compared to their predecessors. The Republican Party did not wait idly for the Democrats to hand them the election but instead campaigned actively and imaginatively, introducing new and creative techniques in order to rouse the interest and gain the support of voters. Bruce Catton sums this idea up colorfully when he states, “The Republican campaign was enormously effective. It moved, it had hot life in it, it caught men up and pulled them along, and the Wide Awakes went down the sultry streets with torch light to lead them on...flaunting banners to proclaim the overriding honesty of the chosen man.”

The role of the Wide Awakes, however, was not limited to inspiration. They were also charged with the task of rounding men up on Election Day and “encouraging” them to vote for Lincoln. The high voter
turnout rate is evidence of the Wide Awakes’ success in this effort. On Election Day in New York, Republican Party boss Thurlow Weed commanded his workers to “Consider every man a ‘delinquent’ who doesn’t vote before 10 o’clock.” With this morning deadline, he left his organization plenty of time to ensure that anyone who had not yet voted had done so and, given the public nature of voting at that time, had voted for Lincoln. New York’s Wide Awakes carried out Weed’s instructions to a tee, securing through both inspiration and enforcement enough votes for Lincoln to win the extremely important and traditionally Democratic state of New York.

Lincoln: The Former Whig and Born Diplomat

It is also crucial to note that Lincoln won the important swing states of Pennsylvania and Indiana because he secured the votes of many who had supported former President Millard Fillmore, the Know Nothing candidate, in the 1856 election. That year Fillmore won 18 percent of the popular vote in Pennsylvania and 10 percent in Indiana. Both these states went by a slim margin to the Democratic candidate, James Buchanan, and led to his election as the fifteenth President. In order for Lincoln to win these states, both critical for his victory, he would have to acquire a majority of the Know Nothing votes from the previous presidential election in order to surpass the Democratic popular vote total. Fortunately for Lincoln, the Know Nothing Party fractured between 1856 and 1860. While one contingent reorganized and formed the Constitutional Union Party, Lincoln and the Republicans were able to exert a much stronger pull on the ex-Know Nothings and reduced the Constitutional Union Party to an ineffective “stinging bee” in the election. Proof of this can be found in the popular vote totals for the Constitutional Union Party in Indiana and Pennsylvania, where it garnered a paltry 4 percent and 2 percent respectively. Lincoln, on the other hand, won both states with popular vote totals roughly equal to the combined Republican and Know Nothing popular vote totals from the 1856 election.

The most likely reason for this result is that ex-Know Nothings in both of these states realized that John Bell, the Constitutional Union candidate, simply had no chance of winning the national election. Of the
remaining choices, Lincoln was the best choice for ex-Know Nothings since he had never cast himself as an open opponent of their Nativist beliefs. Stephen A. Douglas, on the other hand, had done so. In a speech in Philadelphia in 1854, for example, Douglas denounced the Know Nothings and criticized them for their racist attitude toward immigrants. More circumspect, Lincoln never publicly attacked the views of the Know Nothing Party on immigration.

Lincoln was also a more attractive option for the ex-Know Nothings because he was an ex-Whig, just as many Know Nothings were. This meant that his record of supporting government funding for internal improvements and other Whig policies, such as higher tariffs, counted in his favor among ex-Know Nothings who shared many of the same beliefs. More importantly, Lincoln was able to use his position as a former Whig to garner the public support of prominent ex-Know Nothings who were themselves ex-Whigs. Their endorsements were vital in making the argument to those who had voted for the Know Nothings in 1856 that Lincoln's views were more closely in accord with their own than those of the other candidates. Lincoln, for instance, was able to gain the endorsement of Edward Bates, a former Whig who had become a Know Nothing. Bates's open letter complimented Lincoln and positioned him as a conservative and non-sectional politician. He praised Lincoln as “a sound, safe, national, man. He could not be sectional if he tried.” Bates continued on in his letter to say that Lincoln had “earned a high reputation for truth, courage, candor, morals, and abilities so that as a man he is most trustworthy. And in this particular, he is more entitled to our esteem than some other man.” This glowing description of Lincoln from an ex-Know Nothing, along with Lincoln's own political record, gave him credibility with the ex-Know Nothings and made him a safe and attractive candidate to them. These factors secured the majority of 1856 Know Nothing votes for Lincoln, giving him victories in the important swing states of Pennsylvania and Indiana.

Republican Platform Beyond “Free Soil”

Third, and most importantly, the Republican Party was able to extend its platform beyond the issue of slavery and appeal to a diverse group of northerners with more pressing and geographically proximate
problems. While the election of 1860 is often seen as narrowly focused on slavery, the truth is more complicated. For a northern voter in 1860, the threat of the expansion of slavery was years and miles away, but state and local issues were part of the voter’s everyday life. Slavery was only one concern among many. The Republican Party had to appeal to these voters on other issues in order to gain their votes.

One group of people the Republican Party actively and successfully courted was the foreign-born. In 1860, roughly 15 percent of the United States population had not been born in the United States. Of that 15 percent, over 70 percent of the immigrants were either Irish or German.\textsuperscript{18} Due to the Nativist leanings of both the Whigs and Know Nothings, Irish and German voters had tended to vote Democratic. Republicans understood that to increase their chances of success in the 1860 election they would need to win more votes from the foreign-born. To accomplish this, the Republican Party actively worked to distance themselves from the sort of Nativist views that immigrants commonly associated with anyone other than the Democrats. The Republicans achieved this by including two planks in their platform directly supporting two central political goals desired by many immigrants. One of these, the 13\textsuperscript{th} plank, pledged support for the Homestead Act, a law that would benefit immigrants as it would make the purchase of land in the Northwest cheaper and simpler. Another, the 14\textsuperscript{th} plank, pledged unequivocal opposition to any change in naturalization laws or discrimination against the foreign-born in regard to legal rights and protections.\textsuperscript{19} By including these two statements in their platform, the Republicans assured immigrants that their political concerns were important to them.

Republicans also actively sought to portray Lincoln in a way that would appeal to immigrant voters, especially farmers. The majority of immigrants arrived with little money, started at the bottom of the working class, and performed labor-intensive tasks. To attempt to appeal to these voters, the Republican Party reminded the populace of Lincoln’s own background as a laborer and his humble beginnings. A campaign poster printed during the months before the election depicts the “laborer” Lincoln. (See Appendix B.) The picture shows a muscular
Lincoln, axe in hand, splitting fence rails in Illinois. His face expresses seriousness and determination. His rolled-up sleeves and unbuttoned shirt convey the strenuousness of his task and the diligence of his effort. Lincoln’s attire is plain and homespun. He wears a simple white shirt and worn brown slacks that are not quite long enough. This depiction was clearly intended to show that Lincoln was not a wealthy career politician but a man who had earned his success through his own hard work and determination. The poster itself has no text, not even Lincoln’s name, allowing Lincoln’s strong figure to “speak” for itself. To those in its intended audience who could not read English, its force would not be weakened through the intrusion of unfamiliar words. For immigrants starting anew in America, Lincoln was the perfect example of the “American Dream.” He was the embodiment of the immigrants’ belief that through honest and diligent labor they could improve their quality of life.

These efforts of the Republican Party appear to have been successful in acquiring the support and votes of many immigrants, particularly Germans. Their influence can be seen in the written words of German newspaper editors and political leaders. As for the Irish, the Republican Party’s success in gaining votes was minimal. In part this was due to the greater concentration of Irish immigrants in more urban areas, where they were more dependent on Democratic machines for financial aid, more exposed to demeaning racist views and less swayed by the image of Lincoln presented by the Republicans. Also, the 13th plank of the Republicans’ platform, pledging support for the Homestead Act, held less appeal for the Irish as they tended to remain on the East Coast and pursue non-agricultural jobs, and so had little need for cheap land out west. From the Republican Party’s standpoint, however, the acquisition of German support was extremely beneficial. For every year beginning in 1854, Germans had been the single largest immigrant group entering America. Winning the support of newspaper editors and writers as well as public figures of German heritage was particularly important due to the language barrier that existed between recent German immigrants and the prominent English-language political newspapers of the time. This language barrier forced many of these immigrants to rely heavily on their local foreign-language newspaper for information.
about candidates. Through the adoption of the two pro-immigrant planks, the Republican Party was able to gain the support of many of these leaders. One of the most prominent of these was Wisconsin politician Carl Schurz. German by birth, Schurz campaigned actively for Lincoln, going on speaking tours throughout the Northwest where he was able to communicate directly to his fellow immigrants in their native tongue. In the run-up to the Republican Convention, Schurz gave a speech in Springfield criticizing Douglas and the Democratic Party for the racist basis of their pro-slavery ideology. He mocked them by sarcastically commenting on Douglas’s belief that the framers did not actually mean all men but instead “meant but the white race. Oh, no, by no means the whole white race; not the Germans, not the French, not the Scandinavians; they meant but British subjects.”21 Not only did this speech remind its listeners of the bigotry underlying the Democratic Party’s ideology, but it also warned immigrants of the threat posed by a party that believed it was acceptable to limit one’s legal rights on the basis of race.

The efforts of Carl Schurz and other German Republicans bore considerable fruit. In June of 1859, the New Ulm Pioneer in Minnesota listed seventy-three German newspapers that supported the Republican Party.22 The effect of this support is suggested by the fact that in the presidential election Lincoln won every state with a high percentage of German citizens by a substantial popular vote margin.23 While this does not amount to direct proof of the Republican Party’s success at gaining immigrant votes, it is nevertheless worth noting that while the national popular vote increased by roughly 630,000 votes, the number of votes for a non-Republican candidate only increased by approximately 100,000.24 Whether these supporters were young men or recently arrived German immigrants, the initiatives of the Republicans proved quite effective at winning the votes of first-time voters.

The Republican Party also increased its popularity in the North by its support of internal improvements and a higher tariff. While the American economy as a whole was still predominantly agricultural, industry was gaining increased importance in some states, such as Pennsylvania and New Jersey.25 To appeal to voters connected to industry, the
Republican platform included a plank calling for measures intended to protect established industries and promote new ones. This plank was the 12th, which endorsed higher tariffs for the fledgling New England textile industry in order to protect it from cheaper foreign goods produced by well-established European manufacturers. The plank went on to promise that the Republican Party would use the revenue generated from these tariffs to improve the nation’s infrastructure, providing cheaper and faster transportation for raw materials and manufactured goods. The 12th plank, specifically its pledge to raise protective tariffs, gained particular support for the Republican Party in Pennsylvania. The day after Lincoln’s nomination, The New York Times described his surprise nomination as “the work of the Pennsylvania delegates.” Representatives from Pennsylvania saw Lincoln as the most favorable candidate; but why? The columnist goes on to say, “The leader in the North American [a Philadelphia newspaper] speaks very highly of the candidates, alluding particularly to the devotion of Lincoln… on the question of the protective tariff, of which he has been for years a consistent advocate.” This unnamed editorialist’s appreciation of Lincoln’s support of a protective tariff provides us with an answer. The man does not justify his support for Lincoln with a statement about slavery or the South, but rather with a statement regarding the proximate financial needs of his state. For many men, economic issues held much more importance than slavery. Indeed, in the words of historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, “had the election been fought on the single issue of slavery, it is likely that Lincoln would have lost.”

Lincoln’s Legacy

To win the election of 1860, Lincoln had to win essentially the entire North, a large geographic area populated with a plethora of interest groups with varying desires and agendas. To secure the votes of enough of these diverse groups to forge a majority coalition, Lincoln and the Republican Party had to actively campaign and present themselves as worthy recipients of these votes, not simply depend on the Democratic Party’s own self-destructive course. The election of Lincoln is proof of his and his party’s success in this endeavor. It is simplistic to say, however, that Lincoln actively changed his views in order to have broad
appeal and acquire the most votes possible. Instead, it is more accurate to state that Lincoln was the right man for his time. He possessed a fairly subdued personal nature and his backcountry roots and “self-made” life were seen as positive attributes by most. To many immigrants, especially Germans, and to many young men, he was a perfect example of the opportunities for self-improvement that America presented. To the Know Nothings, he was a “homegrown” Protestant with good solid morals, worthy of the nickname “Honest Abe.” Through the exploitation of these characteristics of Lincoln’s life, he and the Republican Party were able to present a candidate with broad appeal. Whether or not these portrayals were entirely accurate, the success of Lincoln is undeniable.

The polarizing impact of the Civil War that followed the 1860 election, and Lincoln’s own martyrdom at the hands of John Wilkes Booth at the end of the war, had the effect of causing the dominant voting bloc forged in 1860 to retain its vitality for decades. Often called the Third Party System, the period from 1860 to the turn of the century is, at its base, a testament to the achievement of Lincoln as a partisan politician. The Republican Party dominated the presidential elections during that period. The only years in which a Democratic candidate came out victorious were 1884 and 1892, and both times it was Grover Cleveland, an honest, reform-minded Democrat whose success was due less to any sudden revitalization of the Democratic Party than to his personal qualities compared to those of his Republican opponent in 1884 or the rise of the Populist Party in 1892. For most of that time the Republicans enjoyed a majority in both the House and Senate. While one can argue that for a period of time, especially during Reconstruction, the nation was split and so the Republicans faced no serious competing party, the failure of another viable party to emerge in the North is proof of the Republican Party’s lasting popularity.

While the fortunes of the Republican Party would ebb and flow during the twentieth century, Lincoln’s personal legacy has endured. Political parties change and their constituencies shift, yet the popular view of Lincoln himself has risen above parties and politics. Public opinion polls in recent years have consistently indicated that more Americans consider Abraham Lincoln our “greatest President” than any other. In a 2009 survey of 65 prominent historians, Lincoln ranked first based on an assessment of ten qualities of presidential leadership. As Howard
University’s Edna Medford summarized the results, “Lincoln continues to rank at the top in all categories because he is perceived to embody the nation’s avowed core values: integrity, moderation, persistence in the pursuit of honorable goals, respect for human rights [and] compassion.”30 While the political coalition-building skills of Abraham Lincoln and the Republican Party were the most important factor that led to the Party’s victory in the 1860 election, it was Lincoln’s abilities as a principled statesman dedicated to preserving the Union and later to the elimination of slavery, abilities sorely tested through the years of Civil War, that produced the election’s most enduring consequence: the leadership of Abraham Lincoln as an example to be emulated by future American presidents and citizens alike.

Appendix A

Native American on left says: “Now then little Dug! Put in and pull, while I cry ‘Tammany to the rescue,’ for I hear a rushing sound that bodes us no good.”

Man on right says: “Come Jack and Joe, pull up! And don’t let the other team stir the wagon. I’d rather the Machine would be smashed than have them run away with it.”

Appendix B

Appendix C

Source: Presidential Election Electoral College results provided by the United States Department of the Interior, 1969.
Notes


5. The 10 states in which Lincoln did not receive a vote were Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Tennessee.


15. Ibid.


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