



Image from: [An 1852 Whig Party campaign banner for candidates... in Encyclopedia of U.S. Campaigns, Elections, and Electoral Behavior](#)

Summary Article: **Whig party**
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one of the two major political parties of the United States in the second quarter of the 19th cent.

Origins

As a party it did not exist before 1834, but its nucleus was formed in 1824 when the adherents of John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay joined forces against Andrew Jackson. This coalition, which later called itself the National Republican party, increased in strength after the election of Jackson in 1828 and was joined in opposition to the President by other smaller parties, the most notable being the Anti-Masonic party. By 1832, Jackson had also earned the enmity of such diverse groups as states' rights advocates in the South, proponents of internal improvements in the West, and businessmen and

friends of the Bank of the United States in the East. This opposition was built up and correlated by Henry Clay in the election of 1832. Two years later, in 1834, all the various groups were combined in a loose alliance.

Party Successes

In the 1836 presidential election the Whigs were not unified or strong enough to join behind a single presidential candidate; instead several Whig candidates ran for office. The most prominent were Daniel Webster in New England, William Henry Harrison in the Northwest, and Hugh Lawson White in the Southwest. The election went to the Democrat, Martin Van Buren, but in opposition the Whigs grew steadily stronger.

The two great leaders of the party were Clay and Webster, but neither was ever to head a victorious national ticket. This failure was partly a result of the sectional variations in the party, which had only one common aim, opposition to the Democrats, and partly a result of the power held by intraparty forces opposed to them, including the political bosses of New York, Thurlow Weed and William Seward. The party went on to victory in 1840 with the rousing “Log Cabin and Hard Cider” campaign, which put William H. Harrison in the White House. Harrison died after only one month in office and was succeeded by his Vice President, John Tyler of Virginia.

A definite break now ensued between Tyler and the Whig leaders in Congress—a break that illustrated the Whig philosophy of government. The Whigs had originated in objection to what they considered the excessive power of the executive branch under Andrew Jackson. To them the legislative branch of the government represented the wishes of the people, and the task of the executive was to serve as the enforcing agent of the legislative branch. When Tyler ignored the counsel of his cabinet and vetoed bills that sought to reestablish the Bank of the United States, about 50 Whig members of Congress met in caucus and read Tyler out of the party. At the behest of Clay the entire cabinet resigned; even Webster retired after completing the Webster-Ashburton Treaty (1843).

Clay became the standard-bearer in 1844 but was defeated by James K. Polk. In 1848, Weed and his associates swung the nomination from Webster and Clay to Zachary Taylor, who had gained wide

popularity as a commander in the Mexican War. This move temporarily prevented a division of the party, and although Taylor died while Clay was formulating the Compromise of 1850 in Congress, Millard Fillmore, his Vice President and presidential successor, kept the faith of the Whig party.

Disintegration

By the time Fillmore had succeeded to the presidency, the disintegration of the party was already manifest; in 1848 several important Whigs joined the new Free-Soil party, along with the abolitionists. In New England a bitter struggle developed between antislavery "Conscience Whigs" and proslavery "Cotton Whigs," in other places between "lower law" Whigs and "higher law" Whigs (the term "higher law" had originated from a famous speech by William H. Seward, who declared that there was a higher law than the Constitution).

In the election of 1852, the party was torn wide open by sectional interests. Both Clay and Webster died during the campaign, and Winfield Scott, the Whig presidential candidate, won only 42 electoral votes. This brought about a quick end to the party, and its remnants gravitated toward other parties. The newly formed (1854) Republican party and the sharply divided Democratic party absorbed the largest segments. Other Whigs, led by Fillmore, drifted into the Know-Nothing movement.

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