Inventing America's First Immigration Crisis

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Introduction

Why have Americans expressed concern about immigration at some times but not at others? In pursuit of an answer, this book examines America’s first nativist movement. Open immigration and citizenship persist in the United States because Americans have historically believed their principles are universal. The founding generation made it radically easy for immigrants to become full American citizens. Boards of education provided free public schooling for foreign-born children. A host of benevolent organizations raised enormous amounts of money to assist newcomers to the states. U.S. cities announced to the world that they were open for business. Citizens made these efforts to spread the American gospel of “Capitalism, Protestantism, and Republicanism.” Political nativism—the exception—replaced tolerance—the rule—when Americans panicked that assimilation, conversion, and economic progress were not happening quickly enough. The first self-proclaimed nativists in the United States seized the reins of political power at the national level for only a few years between 1854 and 1856, but the tactic they employed, namely identifying “outsiders” as the source of their various anxieties, has persisted as a useful political tool.

Nativism is the idea that a certain group of people can be identified as original to, or the rightful heirs to, a geopolitical territory; consequently, “natives” claim the privilege of deciding who belongs and who counts as an “outsider” based on supposed foreign connections.¹ The case could be made that nativism in this sense is universal. Nativist movements stress the interests of the locally born as a priority over nonnative, or foreign-born, people (for example, “Americans First”). Political nativism describes the coming together of nativism—the belief in inheritance—and a nativist movement—the reemphasis on “natives first”—to induce measurable political changes. At its core is the innate human desire to feel at home. What people need to feel “at home” varies across time and space but often entails economic stability and some combination of uniform behaviors, values, religious beliefs, language, or race. It must be noted that nativism does not always entail racism, although the intensification of race-based ideas and acts often corresponds to a rise in political nativism.² Nativists fashion themselves as
protectors of local attributes against perceived foreign threats in their midst and are often willing to take extreme actions.  3

America’s first nativist movement responded to the rapid influx of roughly 4.2 million European immigrants between 1840 and 1860. Immigrants composed up to 15 percent of the total population of the United States. These figures do not take into account second-generation immigrants—that is, children born to immigrant parents on American soil.  4 Most of these newcomers were German or Irish. Not only did they speak different languages, but they also harbored diverse cultural customs and ideas, approached politics in alternative ways, and worshipped within different religious traditions. While the vast majority of white Americans born on American soil worshipped in Protestant Christian churches, approximately 95 percent of all Irish immigrants after 1840 were Catholic, while more than 30 percent of Germans were as well.  5

Political nativism gradually emerged within the ranks of the American Republican, or “Native American,” Party in the mid-1840s, the Know-Nothing Order in the 1850s, and the National American, or “Know-Nothing,” Party between 1854 and 1858. In the election of 1856, the presidential candidate running on behalf of the American Party received roughly 22 percent of the popular vote. The American Party thus became the second-largest third party in American history. Its official platform demanded raising the residency requirement for citizenship from five to twenty-one years, supported only native-born Americans for office, and resisted all who would pledge a higher allegiance to a foreign church or state than to the U.S. Constitution.  6 Certain anti-immigrant thought patterns in the antebellum era have since been repeated, especially amid demographic changes due to immigration, yet much of the historical context for American nativism, and thus its meaning, has varied across time and place.  7

Before the 1960s, much of the relevant scholarship disregarded antebellum nativist propaganda as mere cultural panic or xenophobia. In the classic book on the subject, The Protestant Crusade, 1800-1860 (1938), historian Ray Allen Billington argued that American nativism originated in and was driven by English prejudices and religious fanaticism.  8 Historian Richard Hofstadter famously equated political nativism to paranoia.  9 With Strangers in the Land (1955), historian John Higham inaugurated a more nuanced line of inquiry about what American nativism has revealed about society across time and place. He argued that Americans are more likely to endorse political nativism when they perceive threats to their social status within the nation.  10 Higham changed the way scholars treated American nativism, historian Jason McDonald observed, as “not just the preserve of ‘crackpots’ but a major characteristic of American public
opinion.” Rather than religious fanaticism, a common desire to identify and solidify proper roles within the nation motivated these movements. Much of the scholarship since Higham has focused on nativism as a national identity-making process.

Historian Tyler Anbinder’s seminal book, *Nativism and Slavery* (1992), attributed the rapid rise and demise of the American Party between 1854 and 1856 to the sectional crisis over slavery. Political expediency was the primary factor, according to Anbinder. After the collapse of the Whig Party in 1854, many ex-Whigs in the North courted the Know-Nothings because they initially promised antislavery and antialcohol reforms. Although most members were indeed anti-Catholic and xenophobic, once party leaders downplayed the issue of slavery, ex-Whigs in the North left the American Party for the solidly antislavery Republican Party. Anbinder’s account of political nativism still holds much of its original value. As it focuses primarily on the Northeast, however, it does not entirely explain why so many proslavery and neutral-on-slavery Americans in the western border states supported Know-Nothings. As most studies have focused on the coasts, historians have not yet produced a complete explanation for why residents of the North American interior espoused political nativism when they did and why the nation’s bloodiest election-day riots erupted in western cities, namely the St. Louis Election Riot of 1852, the St. Louis “Know-Nothing” Riot of 1854, the Cincinnati Election Day Riot of 1855, the Chicago “Lager” Riot of 1855, and the Louisville “Bloody Monday” Riot of 1855.

During the antebellum era, Americans often thought of the West in three parts, the Far West, like California, which became the destination of some migrants after the Mexican-American War in 1848, the Trans-Mississippi West, or the territory west of the Mississippi River, and the First West, the region in the interior touched by the Mississippi River and its tributaries. Unless otherwise noted, all references to the “West” in this study generally refer to the Upper Mississippi and Ohio River valleys. Several regional factors rendered the “First West” a rather distinct place. Residents experienced ceaseless migration, rapid growth, a large and active German immigrant population, and a politics of compromise between the slaveholding states of Kentucky and Missouri and the free states of Illinois and Ohio. American-immigrant tensions increased in the western border states regardless of their slaveholding status, precisely in the areas where immigration from Europe surged. In focusing on the antebellum West, this study illuminates the cultural, economic, and political issues that originally motivated American nativism and explains how it ultimately shaped the political relationship between church and state.
The antebellum nativist movement aspired to replace local tribalism, regional sectionalism, and religious factionalism with a national identity based on a set of shared American values, but immigrants challenged the status quo. Chapter one explains how unprecedented levels of immigration, the evangelical revivalism of the “Second Great Awakening,” and rapid westward expansion reignited fears of Catholicism as a corrosive force. For native-born Americans living in the mid-nineteenth century, the successful assimilation of German and Irish immigrants, many of whom were Catholic, was not a foregone conclusion. The United States thus became a testing ground for what happens when a pluralist nation committed to universal democratic principles encounters an unexpected host of immigrants with unpopular beliefs. Native-born Americans often expressed more concern about European immigration to the West than to any other region of the country because Catholics and immigrants would influence new towns there as they took shape. European immigrants did not spread out evenly across North America; rather, they followed regular pathways of settlement and concentrated in northern and western cities. Much has been written about their influence in big port cities like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia; immigration to burgeoning western cities like Chicago, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis occurred at a rapid rate as well. Fifty percent of all immigrants who came to the United States during this period arrived at the port of New Orleans before they began their journey up the Mississippi River. By the time of the Civil War, 60 percent of St. Louis’s population of more than 160,000 was foreign born. These daily arrivals fueled the astonishing growth of previously nonexistent Lutheran and Roman Catholic churches, seminaries for priests, Catholic schools, and German and Irish groceries and pubs. In entire quarters of the city, one could hardly hear anything spoken other than German or English in an Irish brogue. Foreign-born residents increasingly influenced state and national election cycles. Many Americans believed that the outcome of religious competition in the West would decide the fate of the republic.

Catholics remained primary targets, but chapter two explores an ensuing culture war that circumscribed various immigrant customs deemed culturally corrosive by native-born Americans. Schools performed the vital function of teaching children the values that supposedly united Americans into one nation. Because many Americans insisted on using the King James Bible as a textbook in public schools, an essentially theological disagreement between immigrants and the native born became a national dilemma. Likewise, local leaders utilized Sunday closing laws to prevent Catholic feasting and German-style recreation on the Lord’s Day. The Sunday laws not only enabled native-born Americans to define
the requirements for national belonging but also compelled immigrants of all backgrounds and creeds, ironically enough, to unite politically against Sunday regulations and thus mainstream “Americanness.” This process was most clearly observed among the German population in the antebellum West. The school and Sunday controversies directly motivated the rise of political nativism in the mid-1840s.

Chapter three explains the power of nativist rhetoric to mobilize disaffected voters across the country. Rhetoric emphasizing the incongruities between the beliefs and behaviors of native-born Americans and immigrants signaled simultaneously a national-identity crisis and a solution. In the American nativist mindset, Protestant forms of Christianity, as opposed to Roman Catholic practices, formed the basis of American values and behaviors. To this end, nativists developed a mythical, nationalist story that rendered Catholicism incompatible with true Americanism and Christianity.

Chapter four examines the intermittent phase of secret nativist fraternalism during the early 1850s. To this day, especially little is known about the Order of Know-Nothings in the West. Shedding new light on the inner sanctums of such orders has proven particularly difficult because Know-Nothings attempted to confound outsiders with misinformation. The extant evidence, including minute books and private correspondence, reveals, on one hand, continuity with the political nativism of the mid-1840s and, on the other, the forging of a new political response to an increasingly polarized and volatile nation. The fraternal secrecy of these organizations exhibited a hallmark of American nativism: the tendency of its most ardent supporters to take drastic measures to protect their communities against unwanted outside influences. Another hallmark of American nativism, which the Know-Nothing movement in the West well attested, has been the tendency of nativists on the fringe to mimic the very behaviors and tactics they have projected upon their enemies. Their version of secret democracy featured as a perverse imitation of popular anti-Catholic motifs.

Scholars have attributed political nativism during the antebellum era to cultural paranoia, social anxiety, and political expediency. Much less examined are the ways in which economic motives contributed to it. During the late 1840s and early 1850s, Americans in urban areas resented higher expenditures on poorhouses, prisons, mental asylums, police, and other institutions that expanded to serve immigrants. Chapter five argues that the outbreak of political nativism in western cities provides a representative example of the relationship between immigrant conditions, the election riots of the mid-1850s, and the dramatic rise of the American Party. Cultural issues and the potential increase in immigrant
voting power intensified economic-related resentment among the native-born population and resulted in the widespread outbreak of political nativism.

Chapter six explains why Know-Nothingism, while rhetorically powerful, struggled to overcome certain longstanding regional disputes, legislative limitations, and political circumstances. The debate over slavery raised seemingly insurmountable sectional disagreements. The increasing violence at the polls ironically forged the very thing nativists had feared: a coalition of Americans and immigrants, German and Irish, Catholic and Protestant, rallied together against the nativist onslaught. Moreover, the American Party tried to garner broad political support at the national level for immigration reform and additional social controls, but even contemporaries who sympathized with some of their fears rejected their policy goals as “un-American.”

Public discourse eventually forged the transformation of base anti-Catholicism within the nativist movement into a greater commitment to the ideal of church-state separation. Despite its hallmark bigotry, the nativist movement yielded a relatively more inclusive American civil religion in which it did not matter if one was Protestant or Catholic, only that each citizen pledge his highest allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, the guarantor of religious freedom. Nothing in this rearticulated formulation required an explicitly “Protestant Christian” language. Nativists in the West cast their net so wide by the end of 1854 that even German and Irish citizens, Catholics and Jews, could potentially embrace their principles, which they increasingly did during the Civil War era. Religious prejudices remained, but the country’s first bout of nativism culminated in a renewal of Americans’ commitment to the separation of church and state. These otherwise subtle developments are clearly observed in the antebellum West.

Native-born Americans compelled Catholics and immigrants who might have otherwise shared an affinity for monarchism to accept American-style democracy; Catholics and immigrants compelled many Americans to accept a more inclusive definition of religious freedom. During the era of anti-Catholic revolutions in 1840s Europe, the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy remained uneasy about the compatibility of democracy with its teachings and ecclesiastical structure. Political nativism in the United States might have seemed like another dark mark against secular democracy, yet Catholic American leaders around the country constructed a series of powerful arguments contra political nativism. “Catholic Americanness” developed in this milieu as a direct response to more exclusive versions of nationalism. American democracy, U.S. Catholics joined together in arguing, was the best mode of government for Catholics because, unlike some of the European regimes, it at least ensured their religious freedom.
That claim remained a debatable point, but the very act of asserting it seemed to warm Catholic immigrants to the idea of making America a new home. The constitutional principle of free exercise of religion was something with which both sides could firmly agree.25

Religious freedom thus became a panacea for many significant contests over individual rights long before U.S. courts bore anything resembling the power they gained at the turn of the twentieth century. The principle doubled as a catalyst for ethnic inclusion. Religious acts are often indistinguishable from cultural or ethnic customs, and thus the right to express one’s religious beliefs became indistinguishable from the freedom to express one’s cultural heritage or ethnicity in public spaces. By appealing to Americans’ special valuing of religious liberty, immigrants secured the potential to choose a path of gradual integration into U.S. society at a time when constitutional law did not necessarily guarantee equal treatment of newcomers, minority groups, or people of color.26

Nativists underestimated the resiliency of America’s democratic institutions. The ensuing debates between Americans and immigrants transformed U.S. political culture to yield an expanded, more inclusive, and more resilient system of democracy. The right to free worship has historically served as one of the most reliable sources of individual freedom in the United States. It is no wonder, then, why Americans have often framed their respective causes in the language of religious liberty. Overall, this study offers valuable insight into the historic role of nativism in American politics. The epilogue sheds light on present-day concerns regarding immigration, including the role of anti-Islamic appeals in the elections of 2016.

*Inventing America’s First Immigration Crisis* draws on a vast assortment of literature in archives spread across the Midwest, including rare books, campaign paraphernalia, court records, minute books, newspapers, political pamphlets, private correspondence, religious tracts, sermons, speeches, and state congressional records. The region generated its fair share of nativist propaganda as well as immigrant responses in German, Irish, and Catholic communications, both public and private. Primary-source materials from the Chicago Historical Society, the Newberry Library in Chicago, the Cincinnati Historical Society, and the Cincinnati and Hamilton County Library Records feature prominently, as do records housed at the Missouri State Archives, Missouri History Museum, Pius Library at Saint Louis University, Olin Library at Washington University, and Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri.
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