

Politics and Society in Indiana During the Civil War

Indiana was a state frequently divided over politics and social issues during the Civil War era. Much like residents in neighboring Midwestern states, most of Indiana's men and women supported the new Republican Party in the 1850s and President Lincoln and the United States war effort against the Confederacy. But they were very slow to embrace emancipation and many voters failed to support racial equality. Like Ohio and Illinois, too, Indiana had profound regional divisions. The southern part of the state, settled primarily by families from Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee, retained many southern sympathizers and supporters of slavery who normally voted Democratic. Some southerners even thought that Indiana might support the Confederacy, partly due to the large number of Hoosier families with southern roots but also because the state depended on trade that flowed down the Mississippi River. These intrastate regional divisions sharpened as the war progressed and the Republican Party moved toward more forthright support of emancipation and civil rights. Even so, the state contributed mightily to the United States victory.

Indiana's politics during the Civil War era followed patterns and alignments from the later antebellum years, and in turn profoundly shaped the decades that followed. The war's immediate cause, secession, resulted from the election of a Republican president, the leader of a northern-only, mildly antislavery party that did not even exist in 1855. The Republican Party was founded on the principle of Free Soil: no expansion of slavery beyond where it currently existed. Throughout the war Abraham Lincoln and his party struggled to maintain political support for the military effort, threatened by some wavering Republicans but primarily a large body of

Democrats who favored peace. The United States victory ushered in a period of Republican ascendancy in national politics that was possible because of the party's dominance in the northern states. Indiana was no exception. Throughout Reconstruction the state generally supported the Republicans, although Democrats recovered more quickly among Hoosiers than in many northern states. And despite their Republican allegiance, Indiana's voters generally did not support the program of racial equality and civil rights favored by the Republicans' more radical postwar leaders.

*

From the mid-1830s Whigs and Democrats competed as national parties. Whigs predominated in New England and the Northeast as the party of native-born WASPs and the evangelical middle class; Democrats usually registered a majority in the southern states and in northern cities behind a doctrine of personal liberty that appealed to immigrants (particularly Catholics) and southerners who feared—as they saw it—moralizing Yankees. The tier of states running west from New York to Iowa (sometimes called the Lower North) was more frequently divided. Settled by a mixture of New Englanders, people from New York and the Middle Atlantic, and some southerners, the national parties battled for these states throughout the antebellum years. The leaders of both organizations tried to avoid slavery-related issues to preserve inter-sectional harmony and cooperation. But the American war with Mexico reopened the question of slavery expansion when a large tract of new territory was added to the country in 1848. After the tenuous Compromise of 1850, Democratic Senator Stephen A. Douglas (IL) pushed through the fateful Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. This measure, strongly supported by Democrats and southerners, potentially allowed for slavery to expand into two new territories of

Kansas and Nebraska. The Kansas-Nebraska Act outraged many northern voters and led to formation of the free-soil, northern-only, Republican Party in late 1855 and 1856. At about the same time, a growing fear of Catholic immigrants sparked creation of the Nativist “Know-Nothing” Party that surged to prominence in northern cities in late 1854 and early 1855. Thus, two powerful political forces—Nativism and Free Soil—operated simultaneously to disrupt the old Whig and Democratic Parties.

These partisan trends were evident in Indiana, too. Whigs generally controlled the state in the 1830s and early 1840s; Democrats usually dominated from that point until the late 1850s. Indiana voters also held social and cultural values in line with white men in other Midwest states. The racism that was evident among northern voters was reflected in Indiana’s 1851 constitution, which prohibited African Americans from moving into the state and offered incentives for current black residents (about 11,000 people) to leave the state. This desire to create a theoretically all-white society extended to the western territories. Indiana voters who supported the emerging Free Soil coalition—united after 1855 in the new Republican Party—often did so from racist motives in order to “preserve the West” for white family farmers. Nativism also helped the new Republican Party gain strength in the state as many Indiana voters worried about the impact of German-speaking and Irish Catholic immigrants who tended to vote strongly Democratic.

Throughout the late 1850s Republicans expanded the appeal of Free Soil and by 1860 it was the dominant party among native-born northerners, particularly in the Northeast and Upper North. Democrats remained strong in urban centers and in large parts of the Midwest, especially southern Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana. Lincoln and the Republicans won Indiana in 1860, a critical

step on their road to the White House. Republican Henry Lane also became governor but was quickly chosen for the United States Senate; he was replaced by Oliver Morton, who became a loyal and skilled ally of Lincoln during the war. Republicans also took control of the state legislature in 1860. Abraham Lincoln's election united men in the lower South, most of whom were unwilling to accept a president that many of them wrongly considered an abolitionist. Seven states voted to leave the Union before Lincoln took office. Upper South voters waited for the attack at Ft. Sumter and Lincoln's call for troops—presumably to invade the Confederate states—to leave the Union. Like other states in the North, Indiana delivered thousands of volunteers in the first weeks of the war; as elsewhere, that enthusiasm soon faded and state leaders worked hard to recruit new men for the U. S. Army. Governor Morton delivered 10,000 troops in the first few weeks of the war, and about 200,000 over the course of the war; more than 25,000 of these Indiana servicemen died. According to one estimate, Indiana contributed the second-highest percentage of its eligible men to the U. S. military (behind Delaware).

When the war began most northern voters united behind Lincoln's insistence that the Union was perpetual and secession unconstitutional. Prominent Democrats, led by Stephen Douglas, supported Lincoln's call for troops and helped with recruiting. The same thing happened in Indiana as the state's two parties joined forces to support the Union. This bipartisan war effort lasted only until August, 1861, when Republicans in Congress passed the [First] Confiscation Act. It allowed Union military commanders to receive runaway slaves (from rebel masters) as "contraband of war," based on the logic that slave workers aided the Confederate war effort. Northern Democrats broke with Republicans, opposing any measure that seemed to threaten slavery and alter the war effort from simple reunification to something more "radical."

From this beginning, and throughout the war, issues related to slavery and race united Democrats behind the status quo.

Most Republicans supported the Confiscation Act and anything else that weakened the Confederate war effort, even though issues related to emancipation and racial equality frequently divided Lincoln's party. Essentially three factions emerged within the Republican ranks. Smallest in number were Conservatives, who dominated the party in border slave states and some southern areas of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois. Conservative Republicans, some of whom owned slaves, opposed emancipation when the war began, and many remained uncertain for much of the conflict; they did not support equality or civil rights for African Americans. Moderate Republicans controlled the party's agenda in 1860-61 and most hoped to restore the Union quickly with minimum destruction of southern property and loss of life; they did not expect that the war would lead to emancipation and few believed in racial equality. Finally, Radical Republicans were strongest in New England, argued that slavery caused the war, and as the war lengthened they insisted that its primary cause must be addressed. These three Republican factions vied for party supremacy, with Radicals gaining strength throughout the war.

Indiana's Republican Party generally followed the trend toward greater Radical influence as the war progressed. The war's unexpected length and unprecedented level of killing pushed the northern majority toward the Radical Republican agenda as hatred for southerners grew with each passing day. All the deaths had to be made worthwhile and the cause of the war needed to be addressed: by 1863 no one wanted to face the prospect of another war over slavery. These factors convinced enough northerners that Radical Republicans, and Lincoln, were basically right to support emancipation. Still, Republicans had to convince voters that the Union could win the

war. The overriding issue in Northern politics during the war was the progress of Union forces and prospects for victory. Other important political issues—emancipation, enrollment of African-American men in the army, conscription, civil liberties, Reconstruction policy, and more—were tied to the one great issue of military conflict. Republicans enacted other legislation, including the Homestead Act (1862) to facilitate settlement in the West, the Morrill Land Grant Act (1862) that supported agricultural colleges, a higher tariff on manufactured goods, and measures to help build a transcontinental railroad. They were secondary, though, to the Emancipation Proclamation that Lincoln issued September 22, 1862. Lincoln’s Proclamation changed the nature of the war, even though it did not take effect until January 1, 1863 and exempted the border states and most occupied portions of the Confederacy. It built upon Congress’s Second Confiscation Act, passed in July, 1862, which declared slaves who ran away from rebel masters “forever free.” Lincoln presented the Proclamation as a war measure to weaken the Southern war effort. Democrats opposed the Proclamation, and to the end of the war all race-related issues united Democrats and formed the core of their political strategy.

In the fall, 1862 elections Northern voters had their first chance to pass judgement on Lincoln and the Republicans’ war leadership. Democrats attacked Lincoln as incompetent and the Republicans as radical abolitionists determined to legislate racial equality and promote racial intermarriage. Republicans defended their war effort but downplayed the Proclamation, emphasizing its conservative exemptions and the underlying motive to weaken the Confederate war effort. Results were mixed. Republicans held in New England and most of the Upper North. Democrats, however, gained in the crucial, heavily populated swath of states from New York west to Illinois, all of which voted for Lincoln in 1860 but two years later went narrowly

Democratic. In Indiana the Democrats regained control of the legislature and began a program designed to undermine Lincoln's war policies. Fortunately for the president, though, Republican Governor Morton (as well as those in Illinois and Ohio) was not up for election until 1864.

The next two years were particularly controversial and divisive in the Hoosier State. Democrats hardened in their opposition to the new Republican war effort and tried to derail the state's contributions of men and materiel. When the new Democrat-controlled legislature met in 1863 the majority refused even to hear the Governor's annual message or to vote appropriations needed to run the state government, public schools, or fund the state's military efforts. When Democrats tried to take control of the state militia, and thus prevent the state from supplying men to the Union Army, Republican legislators denied Democrats of a quorum by sneaking out of Indianapolis. Gov. Morton out-maneuvered the Democrats, however, and borrowed money (close to one million dollars) from a New York bank with Indiana connections in order to run the state's war effort. Ultimately the state validated Morton's actions and repaid the loans. Gov. Morton also drew criticism for aggressively targeting secret societies led by Democrats that were allegedly aiding the Confederacy. These ended in several so-called "Treason Trials" in 1864. This issue was a state-level example of why some Democrats criticized Republican "high-handedness" in the area of civil liberties.

A strong Union Peace Movement emerged late in 1862 and early in 1863. It was driven by longer and longer casualty lists and led by a growing body of "Peace Democrats" who argued that the U. S. should stop the war and end the "radical" experiment in racial equality that they saw in Lincoln's Proclamation. Another immediate cause for growing anti-Republican sentiment was a draft law passed by Congress on March 3, 1863, which made men from twenty to forty-

five liable for service. When a district did not meet its quota—the number of men it was supposed to furnish for the Union Army—then there would be a draft of available men taken from existing militia rolls. Clement Vallandigham, a Congressman from Ohio, emerged as the leading anti-draft spokesman. Hatred of the draft blended easily with opposition to the Emancipation Proclamation and enrollment of African-American men into the Union Army. The latter development worried some northerners more than the Proclamation because military service had always carried an implication of equality and certain obligations on the part of society at large. By late spring and summer, 1863, anti-draft violence and obstruction was common across the northern states.

In Indiana these issues were particularly contentious because of the state's longtime Democratic majority and its opposition to African Americans. Recruiting fell off dramatically in late 1862 and some Democratic areas failed to make their quotas, triggering a draft. Ultimately there were several drafts in Indiana, with about 20,000 men forced into the U. S. Army. Many more men, of course, enlisted in order to avoid the draft (and the "stigma" of being labeled a conscript) and collect the various bounties offered by the national, state, and local governments. By 1863 bounties were big business, with men in some areas collecting hundreds of dollars. Others simply collected the bounty and deserted—according to one estimate, in Indiana more than two thousand "bounty jumpers" were reported in December, 1862. The draft also included provisions that discriminated against poorer men. Most odious was commutation, which allowed men simply to pay a \$300 fee that satisfied a man's obligation. Nationally, in the first draft calls during the summer of 1863, more than 52,000 men paid the commutation fee (in effect a tax to support the army) and another 26,000 provided substitutes. Nearly 40,000 men simply failed to

report when their names were called. Finally, the seemingly inept Union war effort came home to Indiana residents in the summer of 1863 during the infamous cavalry raid of John Hunt Morgan in July. The Peace Movement in Indiana, then, sprang from the same sources as it did nationally, but demonstrated a greater potential for political upheaval given the state's political and social history.

Perhaps Indiana's most infamous peace (and sometimes pro-Confederate) organization spawned in the state was the "Knights of the Golden Circle" (originally with the less sinister name of "Sons of Liberty"). In many ways it was typical secret society, with code words and handshakes, and its membership grew as the war lengthened. It appealed to traditionally Democratic voters and outright southern sympathizers. Members publicly advocated resistance to the draft and desertion, for which they received close scrutiny from the state executive. Like other peace groups, the Knights of the Golden Circle lost support due to high-profile events that discredited the Democratic Party, and by the rising fortunes of the U. S. Army. Governor Morton frequently tied Democrats to the Knights and similar in speeches that often accused his opponents of aiding the Confederacy.

Nationally the high point—or low point—of the Peace Movement in 1863 came in New York City. A Democratic stronghold, the city's immigrant population, particularly Irish Catholics, resented and feared emancipation and were outraged at the draft. New Yorkers, encouraged by Democratic Governor Seymour, believed their own quota was set too high and that the draft itself was unconstitutional. Starting July 11, when the first names were drawn in the city, and for several days after, the city's poor men and women rioted, targeting African Americans but also ransacking Republican homes and recruiting offices. Approximately a dozen

black men were killed and hundreds wounded, while thousands more simply left New York. Finally on July 16 Union troops arrived, most of them straight off the Gettysburg battlefield, and put down the mob, killing more than 100 rioters. On the heels of this tumultuous summer of divisive politics, the fall elections in several key states—particularly Ohio and Pennsylvania—provided another test of partisan strength. Lincoln and Republicans, however, were much more aggressive than the previous year. The president attacked Peace Democrats in a public letter written during the campaign. “You say you will not fight to free negroes,” he said to opponents, although “some of them seem willing to fight for you.” But even more to the point, Lincoln predicted that after the war “there will be some black men who can remember that, with silent tongue, and clenched teeth, and steady eye, and well-poised bayonet, they have helped mankind on to this great consummation; while, I fear, there will be some white ones, unable to forget that, with malignant heart, and deceitful speech, they have strove to hinder it.”

The election results registered how much strength the Peace Movement had lost. Clement Vallandigham lost the Ohio governor’s race by 100,000 votes and Republicans rolled up big victories elsewhere, winning every gubernatorial contest that year.

Indiana experienced many other social and economic changes during the Civil War that were common for northern men and women elsewhere. Inflation was a persistent problem. During wartime the government spent a great deal of money, and inflation ran about 75% for the war’s four years. This hurt working people, of course, whose wages failed to keep up with costs. Families dependent on soldiers’ income faced particularly difficult circumstances. Pay for privates was thirteen dollars a month, which could not support a family for even a week after the middle of the war. Like other states, Indiana tried to help them. Governor Morton called on

citizens to help with direct aid of food. Women were instrumental in organizing and providing direct relief: clothes, blankets, rolled bandages. They also wrote letters for and read to wounded men, and anything else that could help soldiers or their families. The state also shared in the general development of infrastructure that characterized the northern states during the war. In particular, railroad growth in the northern half of the state brought new immigrants and the population grew. Indianapolis, in particular, benefitted, and developed into a significant city.

Many of these changes and challenges in the Union came to a climax in 1864. The year began with great promise for the U. S. war effort and many northerners predicted a quick end to the fighting. Instead, Confederate resistance proved stubborn, and Federal losses were appalling. These military disappointments revived the northern Peace Movement and raised hopes that Lincoln and the Republicans could be defeated at the polls. Many Confederate leaders believed a Democratic victory in 1864 was their last real chance to win the war, albeit through a negotiated settlement. From the beginning of May to September 1, Union forces suffered 100,000 casualties; on July 18 Lincoln called for 500,000 more volunteers and Peace Democrats rejoiced. Although some Republicans opposed Lincoln's renomination, most came together after the Democrats nominated former General George McClellan in their convention at the end of August. McClellan favored winning the war first, then making peace, but the Democrats' platform called for "a cessation of hostilities" "at the earliest practicable moment [so that] peace may be restored." Most infamous was the phrase that called for an end to "four years of failure to restore the Union by the experiment of war." Labeling the war a "failure" proved costly with soldiers, veterans, and their families. Other Democratic planks attacked Lincoln and Republicans for suspending the writ of *habeas corpus* and other violations of civil liberties. Finally, of course,

Democrats united behind their opposition to emancipation and racial equality. Republicans defended their war effort, Lincoln's leadership, and the Emancipation Proclamation. Several strong planks commended African-American wartime contributions and declared slavery "the cause . . . of this rebellion" and "hostile to the principles of republican government." They praised Lincoln's Proclamation as a "deathblow at this gigantic evil" and supported the proposed Constitutional amendment to "terminate and forever prohibit the existence of slavery within the limits or the jurisdiction of the United States."

The election largely came down to the military progress of the U. S. Army. The other important issues—particularly emancipation and the use of African-American troops—were tied to the war. Even in late summer, northern forces had reached none of their major objectives: Richmond and Petersburg; Atlanta; or Mobile. But finally Lincoln got some good news from the battlefield. On August 23 the last fort guarding the entrance to Mobile Bay and the port of Mobile was taken by the U. S. Navy. That closed the city to blockade runners. More important was the Union occupation of Atlanta on September 3. Besieged for over a month, the Confederates finally decided to evacuate the city rather than risk being trapped and starved into surrender and capture. A grateful Lincoln thanked General Sherman in a personal telegram. It was the breakthrough that Lincoln and Republicans needed. Early voting in Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Ohio on October 11 foretold a Republican victory. Lincoln carried all three of these important states, although in Pennsylvania and Indiana it was particularly close. Lincoln received 53% of the vote in Indiana, just under 150,000 votes or a majority of about 19,000 over McClellan. Other states were even closer: in New York, for instance, Lincoln won by fewer than 7,000 votes out of 730, 721 cast. Governor Morton was also elected to a new term and

Republicans regained control of the legislature.

According to most estimates, soldiers probably gave Lincoln his margin of victory in the Hoosier state and elsewhere. Republicans benefitted from provisions that allowed for absentee balloting. Most states had passed legislation that allowed troops to vote in the field, although several Democratic-controlled legislatures—including Indiana's—refused to allow it. For troops from those states, Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin Stanton furloughed home thousands of troops so they could vote in their home towns. Eventually Lincoln and the Republicans garnered over 85 percent of the soldier vote. Lincoln won 212 electoral votes to just 21 for McClellan; the popular vote was closer, about 55 to 45 percent. Even more impressive for the Republicans would be their new dominance in Congress: 42-10 in the Senate and 145-40 in the House of Representatives.

Lincoln's victory ensured the war would be fought to its conclusion. The Republican landslide also meant that they would be able to impose whatever version of Reconstruction on which they could agree. In particular, Radicals gained momentum for the Constitutional amendment to guarantee emancipation and further legislation for civil rights; these eventually included citizenship for all men and women born in the United States, and suffrage for African American men. These accomplishments underscored the radical evolution of the Republican majority accomplished by the war: from free soil with a heavy dose of racism to emancipation and civil rights, even if somewhat unevenly supported. The elections in 1864 also confirmed Republicans as the dominant party in the North and completed the partisan realignment that began in the mid-1850s. Democrats needed to wait for the end of Reconstruction and return to politics of former Confederates before they could compete nationally.

Like many northern states, Indiana was transformed by the war. The extension of railroads and other construction helped set the stage for the late nineteenth century expansion of industry and immigration that made Indiana an important part of America's growing economic powerhouse. Indianapolis grew into a city of regional importance. The loss of men in the war disrupted local communities, but the postwar population growth compensated—only in raw numbers, of course—for the wartime deaths. Indiana's Republican majority similarly backed Radical Reconstruction in the first few years after war, with Governor Morton a leading supporter of the civil rights amendments in the late 1860s. Unlike other neighboring states, however, Indiana did not remain a Republican stronghold for nearly as long. Furthermore, many of its voters abandoned the Radical cause of civil rights for African Americans faster than many Republicans in other parts of the North. To be sure, there were postwar advances for African Americans in the state—the supreme court, for instance, invalidated the antebellum provision that barred black men and women from entering the state—but the politics of white supremacy soon returned, reflected in the state's prominent support of the revitalized Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s. Politically, Indiana's competitive politics returned, with Democrats and Republicans making the state a “battleground” for the next several decades.