

The Whig Party and its Presidents

The short-lived Whig Party had an outsized impact on U.S. politics

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The Whig Party was an early American political party organized in the 1830s to oppose the principles and policies of President [Andrew Jackson](#) and his [Democratic Party](#). Along with the Democratic Party, the Whig Party played a key role in the Second Party System that prevailed until the middle 1860s.

Drawing from the traditions of the [Federalist Party](#), the Whigs stood for the supremacy of the [legislative branch](#) over the [executive branch](#), a modern banking system, and economic protectionism through trade restrictions and tariffs. The Whigs were strongly opposed to Jackson's "[Trail of Tears](#)" American Indian removal plan forcing the relocation of southern Indian tribes to federally-owned lands west of the Mississippi River.

Among voters, the Whig Party drew support from entrepreneurs, plantation owners, and the urban middle class, while enjoying little support among farmers and unskilled workers.

Prominent founders of the Whig Party included politician [Henry Clay](#), future 9th president [William H. Harrison](#), politician [Daniel Webster](#), and newspaper mogul [Horace Greeley](#). Though he would later be elected president as a Republican, [Abraham Lincoln](#) was an early Whig organizer in frontier Illinois.

What Did the Whigs Want?

Party founders chose the name "Whig" to reflect the beliefs of the American Whigs—the group of [colonial period](#) patriots who rallied the people to [fight for independence](#) from England in 1776. Associating their name with the anti-monarchist group of English Whigs allowed Whig Party supporters to derisively depict President Andrew Jackson as "King Andrew."

As it was originally organized, the Whig Party supported a balance of powers between state and national government, compromise in legislative disputes, the protection of American manufacturing from foreign competition, and the development of a federal transportation system.

The Whigs were generally opposed to rapid westward territorial expansion as embodied in the doctrine of “[manifest destiny](#).” In an 1843 letter to a fellow Kentuckian, Whig leader Henry Clay stated, “It is much more important that we unite, harmonize, and improve what we have than attempt to acquire more.”

Ultimately, however, it would be the inability of its own leaders to agree on many of the issues making up its overly-diverse platform that would lead to its demise.

The Whig Party Presidents and Nominees

While the Whig Party nominated several candidates between 1836 and 1852, only two—William H. Harrison in 1840 and [Zachary Taylor](#) in 1848—were ever elected president on their own and they both died during their first terms in office.

In the 1836 election won by Democratic-Republican [Martin Van Buren](#), the still loosely-organized Whig Party nominated four presidential candidates: William Henry Harrison appeared on ballots in the Northern and border states, Hugh Lawson White ran in several Southern states, Willie P. Mangum ran in South Carolina, while Daniel Webster ran in Massachusetts.

Two other Whigs became president through the [process of succession](#). [John Tyler](#) succeeded to the presidency after Harrison's death in 1841 but was expelled from the party shortly afterward. The last Whig president, [Millard Fillmore](#), assumed the office after Zachary Taylor's death in 1850.

As president, John Tyler's support of manifest destiny and the annexation of Texas angered Whig leadership. Believing much of the Whig legislative agenda to be unconstitutional, he vetoed several of his own party's bills. When most of his [Cabinet](#) resigned a few weeks into his second term, Whig leaders, dubbing him “His Accidency,” expelled him from the party.

After its last presidential nominee, General Winfield Scott of New Jersey was soundly defeated by Democrat [Franklin Pierce](#) in the 1852 election, the days of the Whig Party were numbered.

The Downfall of the Whig Party

Throughout its history, the Whig Party suffered politically from the inability of its leaders to

agree on high-profile issues of the day. While its founders had been united in their opposition to the policies of President Andrew Jackson, when it came to other matters, it was too often a case of Whig vs. Whig.

While most other Whigs generally opposed Catholicism, eventual Whig Party founder Henry Clay had joined the party's arch-enemy Andrew Jackson in becoming the nation's first presidential candidates to openly seek the votes of Catholics in the election of 1832. On other issues, top Whig leaders including Henry Clay and Daniel Webster would express disparate opinions as they campaigned in different states.

More critically, Whig leaders split over the festering issue of slavery as embodied by the annexation of Texas as a slave state and California as a free state. In the 1852 election, its leadership's inability to agree on slavery prevented the party from nominating its own incumbent President Millard Fillmore. Instead, the Whigs nominated General Winfield Scott who went on to lose by an embarrassing landslide. So upset by the drubbing was Whig U.S. Representative Lewis D. Campbell that he exclaimed, "We are slayed. The party is dead—dead—dead!"

Indeed, in its attempt to be too many things to too many voters, the Whig Party proved to be its own worst enemy.

The Whig Legacy

After their embarrassingly ill-fated run in 1852 election, many former Whigs joined the Republican Party, eventually dominating it during the administration of Whig-turned-Republican President [Abraham Lincoln](#) from 1861 to 1865. After the [Civil War](#), it was Southern Whigs who led the white response to [Reconstruction](#). Eventually, post-Civil War American government adopted many Whig conservative economic policies.

Today, the phrase "going the way of the Whigs" is used by politicians and political scientists to refer to political parties destined to fail due to their fractured identity and lack of a unified platform.

The Modern Whig Party

In 2007, the [Modern Whig Party](#) was organized as a "middle-of-the-road," grassroots [third political party](#) dedicated to "the restoration of representative government in our nation." Reportedly founded by a group of U.S. soldiers while on combat duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, the party generally supports fiscal conservatism, a strong military, and integrity and pragmatism in creating policy and legislation. According to the party's platform statement, its overarching goal is to assist the American people "in returning control of their government to their hands."

Following the 2008 presidential election won by Democrat [Barack Obama](#), the Modern Whigs launched a campaign to attract moderate and conservative Democrats, as well as moderate Republicans who felt disenfranchised by what they perceived as their party's shift to the extreme-right as expressed by the [Tea Party movement](#).

While some members of the Modern Whig Party have so far been elected to a few local offices, they ran as Republicans or independents. Despite undergoing a major structural and leadership facelift in 2014, as of 2018, the party had yet to nominate any candidates for a major federal office.

Whig Party Key Points

The Whig Party was an early American political party active from the 1830s to the 1860s

The Whig Party was formed to oppose the policies of President Andrew Jackson and the Democratic Party.

Whigs favored a strong Congress, a modernized national banking system, and conservative fiscal policy.

The Whigs generally opposed westward expansion and manifest destiny.

Only two Whigs, William H. Harrison, and Zachary Taylor were ever elected president on their own. Whig presidents John Tyler and Millard Fillmore assumed the presidency through succession.

The inability of its leaders to agree on key national issues such as slavery confused voters and led to the eventual breakup of the party.

Sources

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