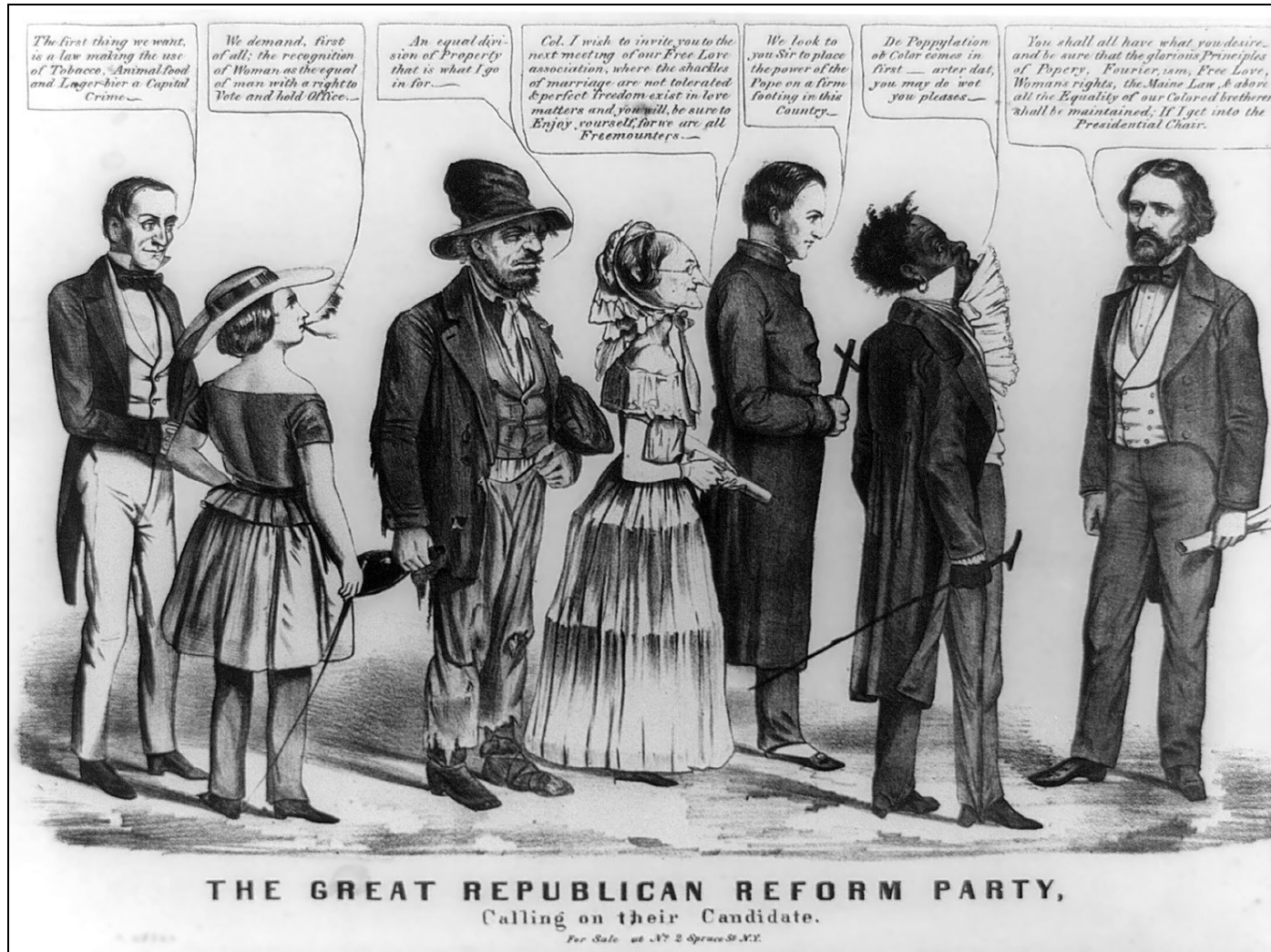


The New Republican Party



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The New Republican Party

When Abraham Lincoln entered the political arena there were two primary political parties, the Democratic and the Whig. The Democratic Party, originally started by Thomas Jefferson and retooled by Andrew Jackson, had elected nine presidents before the election of 1860. Democrats claimed to represent the common people, especially farmers. They desired a smaller, weaker central government that protected states' rights. They did not favor regulations on slavery nor the use of federal tax dollars to fund internal improvements.

One of Abraham Lincoln's political heroes was Kentucky's own Henry Clay (a.k.a. "The Great Compromiser") of the Whig Party. The Whig Party was in favor of high protective tariffs, internal improvements (especially roads and canals) and a firm Federal government grip over monetary policy. Only four Whigs held the office of president prior to 1860.

Lincoln joined the Whig Party in the early 1830s and was elected to the Illinois legislature as a Whig four times. When he served in Congress (1847-1849) he was a loyal member of the Whig Party. But by the early 1850s, like Henry Clay, the Whig party was growing old, and the slavery issue was so contentious that compromises could not be forged to hold the country together much longer.

In 1854, Congress experimented with the concept of "popular sovereignty" when it passed the Kansas-Nebraska

Act. Its failure and the ensuing mini-civil war, to determine if Kansas would be slave or free, fractured both parties. Pro-slavery Whigs joined the Southern Democratic Party. Anti-slavery Whigs helped form the new Republican Party.

The Republican Party was composed mostly of anti-slavery people who had been members of other dying or insignificant parties such as northern Whigs, Free-Soilers, Know-Nothings, and even some anti-slavery Democrats. At first, because of so many varied interests, the Republican Party struggled to define itself clearly. However, people outside the party, especially southerners, believed Republicans not only wanted to thwart the spread of slavery, but to abolish it completely.

In May 1856, Lincoln essentially became a Republican when he made a moving speech to hundreds of delegates at a convention in Bloomington, Illinois, all of whom were against the spread of slavery. The Republicans fielded their first presidential candidate in 1856, John C. Fremont, and the party slogan became "Free soil, free labor, free speech, free men and Fremont." Although Fremont lost the election to the Democratic candidate, John Buchanan, Lincoln made numerous speeches in support of the Republican candidate and cause. In 1858, his debates against the Democrat, Stephen Douglas, were widely published. Lincoln was becoming a nationally known, anti-slavery politician.