

Republican Domination of Post-Civil War Politics

Between 1861 (the beginning of the [American Civil War](#)) and 1933 (the [Great Depression](#)), Republicans controlled the White House for sixty-four of seventy-two years. In other words, Republican candidates won sixteen of eighteen presidential elections. Republican dominance of American presidential politics was so complete that the only Democrat elected president during this period, [Grover Cleveland](#) (1884 and 1892), was a pro-business “[Bourbon Democrat](#),” meaning that his policies closely mirrored those of the [Republican Party](#). Moreover, Republicans controlled the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate for fifty-two and sixty years, respectively. The American Civil War had fundamentally reshaped U.S. politics, inaugurating an “Era of Republican dominance” that only ended with the Great Depression of the 1930s.

Origins of the Republican Party

The Republican dominance of post-Civil War American politics is particularly interesting given the fact that the party was less than a decade old when it elected [Abraham Lincoln](#) to the presidency in 1860. The party grew out of an alliance between members of the defunct [Whig Party](#) and [Democrats](#) who opposed the extension of slavery (known as “Free Soil” Democrats). The new party also absorbed members of defunct third parties, such as the nativist and anti-Catholic “[Know Nothing Party](#)” or the “[Free Soil Party](#),” which was solely dedicated to preventing the expansion of slavery. Thus, the Republican Party attracted a range of individuals bound together by their shared antipathy toward the expansion of slavery.

The first statewide Republican convention took place in 1854, and by 1856, the Party was strong enough to field a legitimate presidential candidate, [John C. Fremont](#). Fremont’s slogan aptly summarizes not only the Republican Party’s heavy emphasis on combating the extension of slavery, but also its approach to post-Civil War economic development: “free soil, free labor, free speech, free men.” This slogan contested the expansion of slavery into the territories (“free soil”), expressed the belief that an industrial capitalist economic model was more successful than a slave-centric one (“free labor”), and criticized the “[gag rule](#)” in Congress, which prevented discussion of abolitionists petitions on the floor of the House of Representative (“free speech”). Though Pennsylvania Democrat [James Buchanan](#) won the presidency through a plurality of 45.3% in 1860, Fremont managed to attract 33.1% of the popular ballot and 114 electoral votes. More worrying was the sectional nature of the vote: Fremont won only Northern States (Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Vermont, New Jersey, Ohio, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa), while Buchanan won all the Southern, Western, and remaining Midatlantic states (except Delaware, which supported former President [Millard Fillmore](#)). While this outcome



convinced many Republicans that they could win in 1860, it also demonstrated the degree to which partisan politics had become sectional politics, with the Republican Party representing the interests of the industrialized, capitalist northern states.

Two events occurred between 1856 and 1860 that exacerbated tension over the issue of slavery. The first was the infamous [Dred Scott](#) decision of 1857, in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that blacks never were and never could be citizens of the United States. Two years later, abolitionist [John Brown](#)'s attempt to stage a slave revolt by raiding the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, Virginia and distributing the weapons to slaves galvanized white southerners. By the 1860 presidential election, the rancor over slavery had split the Democratic Party into competing factions, none of which were powerful enough to win a majority of votes. This allowed the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, to win the election with a mere 39.8% of the popular vote. Lincoln's election enraged Southerners, who argued that the Republican was an illegitimate president who was intent on destroying slavery. As a result, Southern states began seceding from the Union, initiating a series of events that culminated in the American Civil War.

Republicans and American Politics After the Civil War

The various Southern states' decision to secede weakened Democratic political strength and inaugurated the Era of Republican dominance in American politics. In the [35th Congress](#) (1857-1859), Democrats decisively controlled both the Senate and the House (39 out of 64 seats in the former and 131 out of 237 seats in the former). Though the Democrats lost control of the House in the midterm elections of 1858 (a referendum on Buchanan's dismal leadership), they nonetheless retained control of both the Senate (38 out of 66 seats) and the White House. However, the South's decision to secede handed both houses to the Republicans; in the [37th Congress](#), Republicans dominated 31 of the atrophied Senate's 50 seats and 106 of the similarly shrunken House's 178. Partially, Republican control of the U.S. federal government was cemented by the fact that, even after the war, Southern states remained under military control in order to ensure that newly enfranchised former slaves, a key Republican constituency, were able to vote. At the local level, Republicans controlled many Southern state legislatures and governorships, which antagonized many whites but allowed Republicans to drive policy in these states. In other words, the South's decision to secede from the United States handed control of the White House and Congress to the Republican Party, which would continue to dominate both the executive and the legislative branches for the next seventy-two years!

As was noted earlier, the Republican Party was primarily comprised of individuals opposed to the expansion of slavery. For many, this opposition was moral; many felt that slavery was an evil institution. But for others, opposition was primarily



driven by economic concerns. This latter group, representing Northern industrial interests, saw slavery as a retrograde economic system that slowed economic growth. This group sought to influence national and state governments toward business-friendly policies like lower taxes and little government regulation.

The efforts of these anti-slavery Northern industrialists led to a period in American history that has come to be called the “[Gilded Age](#)” (named after the title of an 1873 novel by [Mark Twain](#) and [Charles Dudley Warner](#)). Following the Civil War, the United States experienced a period of massive economic expansion that came to be called “[The Second Industrial Revolution](#),” which was partially fueled by the pro-business policies enacted by the Republicans at the state and national level. New production techniques made goods better and cheaper. Economic prosperity allowed some people to amass theretofore unimaginable wealth, while at the same time creating a divide between the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Partially as a result of the Republicans’ close relationships with big business, the late nineteenth-century was a particularly corrupt period in American history. For instance, in 1876, Secretary of War [William Belknap](#) was forced to resign following bribery allegations, and 110 members of President [Ulysses S. Grant](#)’s administration (1869-1877) were convicted as part of the [Whiskey Ring Scandal](#). One of the most infamous corruption scandals, the [Credit Mobilier Scandal](#), arose because of kickbacks paid to U.S. congressmen by a subsidiary of the [Union Pacific Railroad](#). Moreover, at one point, financier Jay Cooke used his government connections in an attempt to corner the market in gold, causing a financial panic.

In other words, the exigencies of the Civil War created a unique moment in which the Republican Party controlled national politics for almost three-quarters of a century. Particularly in the era following the Civil War (known, as indicated above, as the “Gilded Age”), Republicans were able to set the tone of U.S. economic policy. Because of the Republicans’ business-friendly orientation, the U.S. government adopted a [laissez-faire](#) approach to regulating the emerging corporations. On the one hand, this approach encouraged the expansion of the U.S. economy, but on the other, it also created conditions ripe for government corruption.

