

Politics in 1844

The two major political parties in 1844 were the Whigs and the Democrats. The Whigs had won the national contest in 1840 with the election of Harrison and Tyler. In 1844, the Democrats were prepared for an all-out effort to stage a comeback campaign with James K. Polk as the Presidential candidate. The Whig candidate was Henry Clay.

The national campaign of 1840 had been one of unparalleled enthusiasm. It found expression "in great mass meetings, barbecues, and in the processions and parades to which the people came, not to be instructed, but to listen to violent political declamation, to indulge in hard cider and to sing campaign doggerel about 'Tippecanoe and Tyler too'." The campaign of 1844 promised to follow a similar pattern.

Iowa was at that time still a Territory and had no voice in the selection of national officers. There was much interest, however, in party politics. Party lines were clearly drawn and partisan speeches were the order of the day.

The chief political issue in Iowa in 1844 was the question of Statehood. This had been an issue

since 1840 and, with increased migration from the eastern States, it was becoming more and more prominent. Members of the Democratic party argued that Territorial government was at best a temporary arrangement, and that Statehood was inevitable. They believed that a new State government would give political stability and add to Iowa prestige. Admission to the Union would stimulate more rapid settlement, facilitate the development of internal improvements, and promote prosperity.

Members of the Whig party presented the view that Statehood would increase taxes without bringing a corresponding benefit. They argued that there was a large measure of freedom and prosperity under the existing Territorial government, and they were not convinced that conditions would be improved by State government. Moreover, the Whigs were stimulated to more aggressive opposition by virtue of the fact that the Democrats had a majority in the Territorial Legislative Assembly and were therefore in a position to determine the procedure in acquiring Statehood.

In view of the increasing political interest in the admission of Iowa into the Union, the Sixth Legislative Assembly provided on February 12, 1844, that at the following April election an expression of opinion of the people of the Territory should be

taken upon the subject of drafting a State constitution. If a majority of votes should be cast in favor of Statehood, another election would be held on the first Monday of August to select delegates to a convention which would meet in the Capitol at Iowa City on the first Monday of October for the purpose of drafting a State constitution. According to another act of this Legislative Assembly, the first Monday of August was fixed as the date of the regular annual election of Territorial and county officers. In June, 1844, however, another statute provided that members of the Legislative Assembly should be elected in April. Thus, the August election in 1844 was confined to candidates for county offices and the constitutional convention.

With the program of elections thus definitely outlined by law, political interests developed rapidly. Within a week after the law was passed relative to a vote on the question of Statehood, the Whig viewpoint was clearly stated in an editorial presumably from the pen of Stephen Whicher. "We declare without fear of contradiction," he wrote in the *Iowa Standard* (Iowa City), "that the people are not prepared, and cannot be prepared, at so early a period as the first day of April to decide the momentous question of State government or no State government, and we say

further, that until Congress now in session shall have completed its business, and the decisions that it may make upon some questions concerning the interests of this Territory that it has before it, shall be generally made known, the people cannot make a proper and satisfactory determination of the question of State government."

As the April election day approached, both the Whigs and the Democrats were solicitous of support, and apparently both were reasonably confident of success. When the votes were counted, however, it was clearly a Democratic victory — a large majority in favor of a constitutional convention. Returns from twenty-one counties showed that only eight counties voted against Statehood. The *Iowa Standard*, a Whig newspaper, conceded the loss of the election and ventured the prophecy that the people would regret the decision before five years had elapsed. "Mark it, ye tax payers!"

Once it had been decided that a majority of the voters desired Statehood and that a constitutional convention would be called, political interests centered upon the election of the members of the convention. Delegates were to be elected by counties, and the national campaign had the effect of making party affiliation a matter of first consideration. The primary issue was Whig versus Democrat. Said the *Iowa Standard*: "Each party ex-

pects, in the event of its obtaining a majority in the Convention, that the Constitution of the State of Iowa will be modeled in a manner consistent with the principles it professes." Nominating conventions were held in each county by both parties in July.

The *Davenport Gazette* referred to the August election as more important than previous ones in the Territory. "Upon the nature of the Constitution drafted," it said, "depends the rapid settlement of Iowa, the availability of its resources, and the hidden treasures of its prolific soil." It also criticized the Democrats for their opposition to banks. "If elected they will unanimously advocate the insertion of a clause into the Constitution forever prohibiting the citizens of the State of Iowa from engaging in banking privileges. This is a subject that should be left just where the Whig candidates for delegacy propose leaving it, that is, to the good sense of the people of the State, and this we fervently maintain to be true republican principle."

Despite the political activities of the Whigs and their critical newspaper comments, the election resulted in a Democratic victory. In only six counties were the Whigs in a majority. Louisa, Jones, and Keokuk counties chose none but Whigs. In Henry County four of the five dele-

gates selected were Whigs, and in Muscatine and Washington counties, two out of three delegates in each were Whigs. But in the other counties all or a majority of the delegates were Democrats. Of the seventy-two delegates elected to the convention, only twenty-one were Whigs. The only comfort for the Whigs was in the election of important county officials.

Although the people of Iowa were not permitted to vote for national officers in the campaign of 1844, they were nevertheless interested in the candidates and issues. Democratic newspapers carried at the head of the editorial columns the names of James K. Polk and George M. Dallas. In like manner the Whig newspapers displayed the names of Henry Clay and Theodore Frelinghuysen. Moreover, public meetings and newspaper comments kept the national issues before the residents of the Territory of Iowa. Clay Clubs were organized in Iowa City and Burlington, and a large, enthusiastic political meeting at Burlington adjourned with "three rousing cheers for Clay and Freylinghuysen".

A glance at the party platforms of one hundred years ago reveals interesting contrasts and similarities with those of the present campaign. The Whig platform of 1844 was very brief — consisting of but four paragraphs, three of which were

devoted to eulogies of the party and its candidates. The platform advocated "a well-regulated currency", "a tariff for revenue", "a single term for the presidency", "a reform of executive usurpations", and administration of the public service with "the greatest practicable efficiency" and "wise economy".

The Democratic platform did not mention the candidates by name, but extolled the "liberal principles embodied by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, and sanctioned in the Constitution". It declared that "Congress has no power to charter a United States Bank", nor did the Constitution "confer upon the General Government the power to commence or carry on a general system of internal improvements". The Federal Government, declared the Democrats in 1844, "is one of limited powers, derived solely from the Constitution", and "it is inexpedient and dangerous to exercise doubtful constitutional powers." It may be noted, too, that the Democratic party, even a hundred years ago, was not in favor of a single term for the President.

The Democratic *Iowa Capitol Reporter* challenged the Whigs to defend Clay against "the just and merited indignation of an insulted and abused class of American citizens, who have been by him denounced as a 'lawless band' or as no

better than 'highway robbers'." To such thrusts the Burlington *Hawk-Eye* replied, "If Mr. Clay is hostile to the settlers of the public lands, why did he vote for the preemption law of 1841, which let it be remembered, is the only permanent prospective law, ever passed by Congress? Why did he vote large and liberal grants of lands to the new States, and why has he devoted the best years of his life, to his favorite policy of distribution?"

But the weight of opinion in 1844 tipped the balance in favor of the Democratic party, both in Iowa and in the nation. As the policy of that party had prevailed in the matter of seeking Statehood, and as the Democrats had won a majority of seats in the constitutional convention, so also Polk and Dallas were successful in the national campaign. Although Iowans did not participate in the Presidential election, their votes would have contributed to the same result.

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