

Abraham Lincoln and the German Immigrants: Turners and Forty-Eighters

Introduction

Reporting from Springfield, Illinois, on December 9, 1860, only a matter of days after the election, Henry Villard, correspondent for the *New York Herald*, made a remarkable assertion about Lincoln's election to the presidency:

In Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Wisconsin, native Republicans now openly acknowledge that their victory was, if not wholly, at least to a great extent, due to the large accessions they received in the most hotly contested sections from the German ranks.

That an immigrant population should be the decisive element in a national election was unprecedented. Despite a cautious reservation ("if not wholly, at least to a great extent"), Villard offered a controversial assessment. He was saying, in effect, that Lincoln owed his success to German-Americans.* Historians since Villard have noted, on occasion, the formidable German vote for Lincoln, but assertions about its significance have been challenged. It is not surprising that the claims have been criticized or not taken at all seriously. Historians have ignored Villard's perspective. Statistics available for the 1860 election do not provide the evidence required to corroborate Villard's position. Are there other options? Is there a convincing test for Villard's assertion about the German factor? Can it survive close scrutiny?

I. The Radical Turners of New York

"[Sigismund Kaufmann's] name is indelibly linked with the history of the Turner Union and the Turner movement as one of the founders of the *New York Turnverein*. He was first chairman for many years. He was also one of the founders of the [national] Turner Union, whose chairman he became at that time." [Heinrich Metzner], "Sigismund Kaufmann," August 24, 1889

II. The Kansas Campaign

"There was in the action of those pioneers who left Boston and Worcester to settle in Kansas a moral grandeur that eclipsed anything in the history of emigration." Eli Thayer, *New York Times*, August 4, 1854

"[Kansas has been] settled against the South by immigration. J. H. Stringfellow, letter to the *Washington Union*, January 7, 1858

"The Germans are a power here. They are Republicans and it is their right to be fairly represented in the party." Champion Vaughan, *Leavenworth Daily Times*, September 4, 1858

III. The Movement against Immigrants

. . . the American [Know-Nothing] movement proposes to correct these evils and abuses by wise and humane legislation; to protect ourselves from the organized system in the Old World, which subjects us to the support of foreign paupers and the depredations of alien criminals; to thoroughly revise the naturalization laws. . . . Senator Henry Wilson of Massachusetts, *The Campaign Bee*, October 1855

IV. Lincoln's Gamble for the German Immigrant Vote

"In 1854, the wheel of history turned. A train of events that mobilized the antislavery North resulted in the formation of the Republican Party and ultimately provided Lincoln's generation with a challenge equal to or surpassing that of the founding fathers." Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*

V. A Thwarted Movement and Lincoln's Nomination

"The thing [Lincoln's nomination] was well planned and boldly executed." Edward Bates, *Diary*, May 19, 1860

VI. Lincoln's Election

". . . in the late contest it may be well said that the voters of German extraction held the balance of power in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa. In each of these states they numbered tens of thousands, and on whatever side they were to throw the whole weight of their vote was sure to be the winning one." Henry Villard, *New York Herald*, December 9, 1860

VII. Conclusions

"Lincoln himself had been willing to gamble on his chances of being nominated for the presidency as early as the spring of 1859. On May 30, 1859, he purchased through his friend Jacob Bunn the type and other equipment of *The Illinois Staats-Anzeiger*, a German language newspaper recently established in Springfield." Harry E. Pratt, *The Personal Finances of Abraham Lincoln*

VIII. Appendixes

- A. Felix Reifschneider, The New York Turner Society
- B. Engelhardt and Feigel, An Appeal to the Germans
- C. [Heinrich Metzner], Sigismund Kaufmann
- D. [Wilhelm Pfänder], Correspondence from Kansas
- E. [Hugo Tafel], The Turner Society of Leavenworth, Kansas (1857)
- F. [Hugo Tafel], The Turner Society of Leavenworth, Kansas (1858)
- G. The Canisius Correspondence
- H. Excerpt from Wilhelm Rapp's Letter to His Father, June 30, 1861
- I. [Wilhelm Rapp], The Edward Bates Candidacy, April 10, 1860
- J. An Appeal to the Turner Societies of the United States
- K. An Appeal to German Republicans

- L. The Republican Convention in Chicago, May 24, 1860
- M. The Republican Convention in Chicago, May 31, 1860
- N. The German Republican Newspapers of the United States
- O. [Henry Villard], Report on the Election

Bibliography

Index

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