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Creating Momentary Ethnic Unity:

Voting Habits of the German Element in St. Louis, Missouri, 1856-1860

by Petra DeWitt

Historians have claimed that German-Americans always voted as an ethnic block, that they supported the Republican Party as a group since 1854, and that their votes constituted the votes Abraham Lincoln received in St. Louis in the 1860 presidential election. Examination of German-language newspapers and election results from German wards in St. Louis between 1856 and 1860 indicates that German-Americans did not always behave as an ethnic block. Despite the occasional coalition between liberal, anti-clerical, freethinking, and socialist factions, ordinary Germans were quite conservative, often oriented their values according to religion, objected to radical political actions, and divided along the lines of local and personal, not ethnic interests.

German immigrants who settled in St. Louis came from a Germany that in fact did not yet exist as a nation. Instead, Germany during the early nineteenth century was a mosaic of duchies, princely domains, and states. Germans in St. Louis, as a result, hailed from diverse geographical, economic, religious,

intellectual and social backgrounds. They also brought with them their old animosities toward each other. Consequently, attitudes and interests differed and fragmentation and disunity existed from the early days of immigration.

Germans expressed their separate identities by establishing their own schools, seminaries and social clubs. For example, singing societies, such as the Schwäbischer Sängerbund (Swabian Singer Union), Bayerischer Männerchor (Bavarian Men's Choir) and Rheinischer Frohsinn (Rhenish Cheerfulness) divided membership according to common geographic origin. Germans also exhibited their diversity in intellectual and political opinion by establishing a number of German-language newspapers, including the Whiggish *Deutsche Tribüne*, the Democratic *Anzeiger des Westens*, the National Democratic *St. Louis Tages Chronik*, the free-thinking *Freie Blätter*, and the Republican *Wesztliche Post*. This disharmony also shaped voting behavior in antebellum St. Louis



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Historically, many Germans in Missouri had supported the Democratic Party until 1850 because Jacksonian democracy and its ideology of the common man appealed to their most basic liberal principles of individual freedom, free labor, free enterprise, and universal white male suffrage. St. Louis Germans, especially the liberal minded intellectuals and workers, preferred Democratic Senator Thomas Hart Benton who respected his German constituency and listened to their needs. Heinrich Börnstein, the editor of the *Anzeiger*, although claiming to be independent, supported Benton because the once "intimate friend of General Jackson" stressed the importance of freedom and union. Several German societies and clubs also supported the Benton Democrats. Both the *Arbeiterbund* or Working Men's League and the anti-Catholic *Verein Freier Männer* or Association of Free Men became Democratic political powerhouses.

As the nation became more polarized on the slavery issue, the Democratic Party in 1850 split into the Benton Democrats and National Democrats. Like their leader, many German supporters of Benton opposed the spread of slavery to the western territories, but not necessarily the institution of slavery. Yet, others also embraced the pro-slavery and pro-southern National Democrats who denied Congress the power to legislate slavery in the states and territories. For example, in January 1851, the National Democrats united with the Whig minority in the state legislature and replaced Benton in the United States Senate with the pro-southern and pro-slavery Whig Henry S. Geyer, a German immigrant who had arrived in St. Louis in 1815. An editorial in the *Deutsche Tribüne* in 1851 proudly claimed that he had become indistinguishable from Americans and that he was the first German to serve in the United States Senate. The *Anzeiger*, short of calling Geyer a traitor, did not support him in his new position; after all, he replaced Benton. The paper, however, took a more restrained position after the Senator died in 1859 and argued that

Geyer's political position was understandable when one considered that he and his parents were among the earliest German immigrants in Missouri and, therefore, "quite conservative and not opposed to slavery." German-Americans in St. Louis could support these two parties because they held different views on slavery. Some initially accepted slavery as an existing labor system. It may have been a repulsive labor system and contrary to all ideals of liberty, but slaves were legally sanctioned property. Respect for the law, therefore, required acceptance of the institution. Indeed, several Germans did own slaves or hired slaves as farmhands and laborers. But others did express opposition to slavery at an early date. This split was most apparent in the *Tribune* and the *Anzeiger* as the former charged the latter with abolitionism and the *Anzeiger* accused the *Tribüne* of supporting "slave autocracy."

While the issue of slavery divided the German community, local issues were often more important than national ones in influencing party affiliation and voting behaviors. In 1852 Germans in the First Ward voted for Democrat F. R. Conway for mayor over his challenger Luther Kennett, a Whig, who was associated with corruption, graft and misuse of funds. In the 1855 municipal election, many Germans demonstrated their political power and their willingness to change party affiliation and to champion those who supported their own special interests by creating an independent ticket. They were upset that Benton Democrats had allied with Whigs, had turned previously open mass-political meetings into closed caucuses to select candidates for city offices, and had placed only one German candidate on the party ticket. Worse, Benton Democrats had not voted against the newly passed Sunday laws that prohibited the sale of alcohol on that day. The mid-fifties also witnessed a transition of the German position on slavery. Once Missourians began to play a role in the debate over slavery, several German-language newspapers paid more attention and became dedicated free-soilers. They spoke out



From the Deutschheim State Historic Site in Hermann

by Site Administrator Bruce Ketchum

Deutschheim has been very busy in a number of different ways this spring and early summer. Improvement to the appearance of the site has been completed and the site has hosted three special events and will soon host one Division of State Parks training conference.

There was a crumbling concrete wall located between the current site office and the building at the corner of Market and Second Streets. Removing the wall and installing new concrete would have been an expensive and labor intensive project. Instead, loose concrete was removed, the earth bank on the street side of the wall was removed and a stone textured concrete block wall was installed in front of the remnants of the old concrete wall. In front of that, roses were planted. This project done as it was, saved a great deal of money and vastly improved the appearance of the site.

On Saturday June 3, 2006, the site hosted its third Hermann Living History Day event. This year it featured a fiber spinner, weaver, scherenschnitte and fraktur arts, German bobbin lace, basket weaving, and the music of the zither, dulcimer and scheitholt. Also, Civil War re-enactors were present to interpret the camp life, accoutrements

and history of the soldier. The event was well attended and thoroughly enjoyed.

On Saturday June 24, 2006, the site hosted a completely new event. The World Bird Sanctuary from St. Louis, Missouri, was here with a collection of hawks and owls, as well as a vulture and a kestrel. The event was well attended and many children were here to enjoy this extraordinary educational and entertaining program.

Hermann will experience an influx of Division of State Park employees on July 10 and 11 this year as Deutschheim State Historic Site was chosen as the site for mid-season interpreters training. Some 30 state employees will be here to both receive training on interpretation and enjoy Hermann. Lastly, on Friday August 18, 2006, Deutschheim State Historic Site will be holding its annual public meeting. Public meetings are held each year to give the public an opportunity to express ideas, opinions and concerns in regard to Deutschheim State Historic Site. Site and district staff will be present and refreshments will be served. I would strongly urge anyone who is interested in German culture and history, and Deutschheim State Historic Site in particular to attend this meeting.

more strongly against slavery because it unfairly competed with free enterprise and limited the ability of a farmer in the territories, possibly a German one, to hire free labor. Local economics also played a role. The *Anzeiger* argued that western Missouri had turned into a "land of outlaw activity" and that "Bleeding Kansas" would cause the death of democracy. It also stressed that the conflict in Kansas impacted St. Louis's economy because railroad construction across the state had come to a "virtual halt" and "contributed to unemployment in the city." The *Mississippi Blätter*, by contrast, feared that the expansion of slavery might cause racial amalgamation and insisted that confinement of slavery to the South where it existed legally would prevent this "unwished-for result." The paper also argued that the colonization of freed blacks to Central and South America was the only conceivable and peaceful solution to the slavery question because white society in the South as well as in the North would never accept blacks as equals.

Yet, St. Louis Germans were not united under a free soil ideology and did not rush en masse to the newly created Republican Party. Börnstein recognized and accepted that a "few individual Germans" supported Know-nothing candidates and that a "sizable number" still supported the anti-Benton and pro-slavery National Democrats. He, however, was quite disturbed by the fact that two German-language newspapers, the *Lutheran Volksblatt* and the *Catholic Nacht-Chronik*, were "organs for slavery" and spoke out in favor of "ultra-pro-slavery" candidates. He urged his readers to remember that local and state decisions affected the everyday life. In his opinion, slavery was a "local, not a national issue" because it disrupted local business and harmony. Therefore, Benton Democrats were the best candidates because they recommended the expansion of the railroad, opposed the "fanatics in western Missouri" who tried to turn Kansas into a slave state, and advocated the return to law and order.

However, the election results for governor and the U.S. House of Representatives in August 1856 show that not all Germans followed

Börnstein's suggestions. Thomas Hart Benton lost his bid for governor in 1856 in the state but he carried St. Louis with quite an impressive margin of 5,565 to 2,371 votes over his National Democrat opponent and winner of the gubernatorial race, Trusten Polk. Election results from the German wards indicate that 38 percent of eligible German voters supported Benton in his quest for governor and 20 percent voted for Polk. During the same election, 35 percent of German-American voters supported Frank Blair the Benton Democrat candidate and 19 percent voted for Thomas Reynolds the National Democrat for the House of Representatives. Surprisingly, nearly 40 percent of German voters did not cast a vote in this election.

The presidential election in November 1856 had similar results and demonstrated that Germans again stayed at home and that those who voted were divided on slavery. Benton Democrats broke ranks over the presidential candidates. Benton campaigned for fellow Democrat James Buchanan who advocated compromise but did not support his son-in-law, John C. Fremont, the Republican Party candidate. Börnstein could not understand why Benton, who believed in free-soil principles, had sold out to pro-slavery Buchanan. Although Börnstein was not yet ready to support the Republican Party as a whole because it was too closely associated with nativism, he nevertheless openly endorsed Fremont as the best candidate for the presidency in the *Anzeiger*. As he pointed out, even German scientist Alexander von Humboldt, "a man whose word weighs more than the entire Democratic Party's voice," endorsed him. The Republican Party and its candidate, however, were not on the official St. Louis and Missouri ballot due to Benton's influence. Börnstein advised his readers to "thwart the triumph of the pro-slavery party" and to vote for American Party candidate Millard Fillmore, instead, who advocated the preservation of the Union. Such a vote would then not only protest the Democratic choice but also express German opposition to the spread of slavery.

Buchanan won the presidency but he lost St. Louis to Fillmore by a vote of 5,374 to 6,094. Although German voters preferred Buchanan to Fillmore by a two-to-one ratio, they did not vote as an ethnic block. Remarkably, election totals

from the German Wards show a striking absence of voters when compared with the number of votes cast for the candidates in the August election. Börnstein calculate that about 900 eligible voters stayed at home. It is possible that German voters expressed their opinion and discontent with Benton and the absence of the Republican ticket and thus a local candidate from the presidential ballot by staying at home. They probably believed that none of the national candidates on the ballot in Missouri offered any reasonable solution to the divisive issues of the expansion of slavery and "Bleeding Kansas."

During the 1857 mayoral campaign, St. Louis Germans again demonstrated their political power by creating the "Emancipation Party." It supported the repeal of Sunday closing laws, opposed the expansion of slavery, objected to secession and disunion, and now even supported the gradual emancipation of slavery including in Missouri. German-Americans, however, were not united in their support for this party. Notable conservative Germans such as Henry Overstolz, William Palm, and John Degenhard campaigned for the National Democratic Party. The *Catholic Tages Chronik*, the *Christian Volksblatt*, and the newly established German-language newspaper, the *Westliche Post*, also supported the National Democratic Party candidate. John Wimer, a German blacksmith and the Emancipation candidate, won the mayoral election over his challengers, American Party candidate Carr Lane and National Democrat Bernhard Pratte. While absenteeism was still prevalent, more German voters participated in the election than in the previous year and preferred Wimer over Pratte by a two-to-one ratio.

The success of the Emancipation ticket in 1857 demonstrated that slavery and the problems in nearby Kansas increasingly became deciding factors for Germans to support freesoil and eventually Republican Party candidates. Carl Dänzer, the editor of the *Westliche Post*, realized that the slavery question caused much hostility between the parties. The only end to the problem, in his opinion, "will be the definite victory of the system of free labor." But he also

admitted that people had to respect the law and that the Constitution protected slavery as a legal institution. Nevertheless, he argued that the time had now come for action to eliminate it from Missouri as well.

In 1858, the German support for freesoil or Republican candidates grew even more owing to the issues debated during the election campaign, such as the deteriorating situation in Kansas and the U. S. Supreme Court's *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision in 1857. Now, local economic problems, such as the brief financial panic, bank crash, and business slump in 1857 that resulted in high unemployment in St. Louis, gave German-language newspapers more fuel for their argument that slavery threatened the economy of St. Louis. The *Anzeiger*, for example, called upon Mayor Wimer and council members to set aside their differences and to apply themselves to the critical and pressing needs at hand. The paper minced no words and promised that the electorate, including the German element, had a "good memory" and that the paper would help them to "remember who their friends and foes were" at the next municipal election. German voters may have believed as he did because they were instrumental in electing Oliver D. Filley, a free-soiler and local businessman as mayor in 1858.

During the election for the House of Representatives in August 1858, German-Americans must have believed that their votes would count and that candidates offered acceptable solutions to the problems that increasingly divided the nation and the state because only four percent of eligible German-American voters did not cast a ballot. While the free-soil ideology had gained increasing support in the German-American community and 54 percent voted for Francis Blair, the free-soil candidate, 41 percent still voted for the National Democrat Richard Barrett. Clearly, while a slight majority of eligible German-American voters in St. Louis followed the old Benton Democrats to the freesoil ideology and the Republican Party, a sizable proportion continued to support the National Democrats in 1858.

As the nation split further over the issue of slavery expansion and states' rights, the Germans of St. Louis also tried to find their place with the

multiplying parties and supported those that best served their personal interests. By 1859 the German-American leadership, including intellectuals such as Friedrich Münch, and German-language paper like the *Westliche Post*, openly supported the Republican Party. The *Anzeiger des Westens* by 1860 also embraced the Republican Party because its editor, like his readers, believed in land reform, favored the expansion of the railroad across the state and further West, supported the Homestead Bill discussed in Congress, and insisted on equality of all citizens, regardless of national background. Nevertheless, conservative German voters and some German-language papers, particularly the *Catholic Tages Chronic* and the *Volksblatt*, continued to support the Democratic Party.

During the August 1860 gubernatorial election, St. Louis and the Germans were as split as the nation. Northern Democrat Claiborne Jackson, who won the state, received 38 percent of the city's vote, Constitutional Unionists Sample Orr carried the city with 48 percent, and the Southern Democrat Hancock Jackson garnered a mere 1 percent of the city's vote. Surprisingly, the Republican nominee James Gardenshire received only 12 percent of the city's vote and carried only the German First Ward. Sample Orr, an unknown candidate, on the other hand carried the Eighth and the Tenth Ward, both with a heavy German population. As a Union candidate, he stressed the preservation of the Union and compromise on slavery. Germans may have preferred moderation in the statehouse in August.

The 1860 presidential election campaign, however, demonstrated that German-Americans could vote as an ethnic block if political issues were important to them and if they thought that their vote would make a difference. Carl Schurz reiterated the German-American position on slavery in a speech to Germans in St. Louis on August 1, 1860. He argued that forced labor was incompatible with the concept of free labor and free society. Slavery, however, posed a more devastating threat to the survival of democracy. In his opinion, the maintenance of the Union and the Constitution and the guarantee of individual

rights were more important than the preservation of slavery.

Although most Germans at first supported John C. Fremont as the presidential candidate for the Republican Party in 1860, they had few objections to the eventual nomination of Abraham Lincoln because he hailed from the Midwest and addressed their local needs and interests. But he was also "honorable, unshakably solid, and impervious to intrigue." He may not have possessed the "most elevated statesmanlike capacities" but he was a "man of the people, just as Jackson had been for his supporters," who could and would find the solutions to the present problems. Indeed, support for the Republican Party was now so widespread within the German-American community that several German-American candidates also hoped to gain public office through the Republican Ticket. Arnold Krekel, editor of the *St. Charles Demokrat*, ran for Attorney General, Henry Börnstein for superintendent of public schools, and Friedrich Münch for the board of public works.

In the presidential election, Northern Democrat Stephen Douglas carried the state but came in second in St. Louis with 37 percent of the vote. Southern Democrat John C. Breckenridge received 3 percent and Constitutional Unionists John Bell garnered 20 percent of the vote. Republican candidate Abraham Lincoln, who lost the state as a distant fourth, carried the city with 40 percent of the vote. He won the majority of his votes in the German wards indicating that German voters cast their votes for him.

Analysis of these election results clearly indicates that the heavily German populated wards altered their party affiliation that fall. But there is really no way of exactly knowing how many Germans actually became dedicated Republicans or voted for the party because they opposed the expansion of slavery. Germans, according to their newspapers, still held a quite moderate view on the "peculiar institution." They, as most progressives in the nation, opposed the expansion of slavery but did not necessarily support abolitionism.

Furthermore, parties had different platforms, followers and leaders across the United States and appealed to various interests. For example, the Republican Party on the national level emerged from

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the remnants of the Whig Party during the 1850s. In Missouri, however, the Republican Party rose from the split between the pro-slavery and the free-soil wing of the Democratic Party. Religion, economic status, and the ideology of secular and ecclesiastical leaders usually influenced immigrant political affiliation. But we do not know whether Börnstein, Schurz, and other German leaders had absolute persuasive power over their fellow Germans during the 1860 election.

The most significant factor that appeared to generate united political behavior was not slavery but the strong faith in democracy and the perceived need to protect the equality of rights for all citizens, regardless of nationality. Germans, whether Protestant or Catholic, held on to their undying faith and trust in the Constitution and the ability of the law and the vote of the people to eventually eliminate slavery from Missouri and the United States. And for a brief moment in history all the factions in the German community, including intellectuals, middle-class business owners, and laborers, united and cooperated for the single purpose they could all agree upon, the preservation of the Union and their new fatherland. And if elections could not preserve the Union then the Union was worth dying for, because republican liberty could only survive if its embodiment, the American republic, survived. This dedication to the preservation of the Union would also play an important role in their armed activism during the Civil War.

German-American voting behavior in St. Louis and, most likely, throughout the United States was quite complex. A majority of German-Americans gradually chose to embrace the Republican Party by the fall of 1860, yet a minority continued to support other parties. Most German-Americans continued to vote for Lincoln and the GOP during the Civil War, but during the era of Reconstruction they also participated in the party's division into Liberal and Radical Republicans. Local and personal interests, not ethnicity, shaped such political behavior.

Suggested Readings:

Steven Rowen, ed., *Germans for a Free Missouri: Translations from the St. Louis Radical Press, 1857-1862*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1983.

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