

The Anti-Freemason Party and its Impact on Modern American Politics

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In 1828, the Anti-Masonic Party was found in upstate New York and would forever change American politics. The Anti-Masonic Party was formed in direct response to growing concern and unrest in the lower socio-economic classes toward the Free Mason's fraternal organization. In the early to mid nineteenth century, the Anti-Masonic Party grew in popularity and its ideology struck a cord with the lower classes, helping the party grow exponentially in popularity. The Anti-Masonic Party could not stand the test of time, though, as this once roaring fire of an anti-Masonic movement has become little more than a historical flash in the pan. While the Anti-Masonic Party sought to bring down the fraternity we hold in such high esteem, they did add to our shared American political landscape and the ripples of the Anti-Masonic Party can still be seen in modern American politics.

In 1828, William Morgan was on the brink of writing a book that would detail the secrets behind Free Masonry in his upstate New York town of Batavia. Morgan was subsequently arrested, kidnapped, and (allegedly) killed by local Free Masons to maintain the secrecy of the group. The subsequent mistrial to implicate members of the Freemasons in the alleged kidnap and murder of Morgan fueled more unrest in the common man. Local Batavia anti-Masonic organizations, such as the National Christian Association, pounced on the opportunity to sow public unrest towards the Freemasons and used the Morgan Affair to perpetuate anti-Masonic propaganda. Morgan's disappearance sparked a public outcry, which was

perpetuated by the National Christian Association by such acts as raising a monument for the memory of William Morgan who, according to the National Christian Association, was killed at the hands of Free Masons. Indeed, the epitaph on the Morgan memorial reads, "He was abducted from near this spot in the year 1826, by Freemasons and murdered for revealing the secrets of their order." The Morgan Affair lit a flame that anti-Masonic groups fanned until there was a fire of anti-Masonic sentiment growing in New York and across the nation.

In the years immediately following 1826, the Anti-Masonic Party grew in popularity. The Morgan Affair led many to believe that Freemasonry was in conflict with good citizenship; because judges, businessmen, bankers, and politicians were often Masons, ordinary citizens began to think of it as an elitist group. Moreover, many claimed that the lodges' secret oaths bound the brethren to favor each other over outsiders; in the courts as well as in the markets. Because the trial of the Morgan conspirators was mishandled, and the Masons resisted further inquiries, many New Yorkers concluded that Masons controlled key offices and used their authority to promote goals that would favor other Masons. It was an underpinning of the Anti-Masonic Party that if good government was to be restored all Masons must be purged from public office. They considered the Masons to be an exclusive organization taking unfair advantage of common people and violating the essential principles of democracy.

In 1828, The Anti-Masonic Party was officially formed. That year Andrew Jackson, a Freemason, was attempting to ride the wave of his military popularity into the presidential office of the United States. To thwart Jackson, The Anti-Masonic Party threw its support behind the incumbent John Quincy Adams. Jackson eventually won the Presidential seat, but the Anti-Masonic Party continued

to grow in New York and Vermont. Indeed, Vermont's Governor William Palmer was elected into office in 1832 under the Anti-Masonic bill as was Pennsylvania's Governor Joseph Ritner in 1835. The gubernatorial victories would be the high water mark of the Anti-Masonic Party. Ultimately, the Anti-Freemason Party took the public outcry of the Morgan Affair and rode it to political office. Unfortunately for the Anti-Masonic Party, as with most popular political issues, a new political "hot button" in the form of abolition was beginning to take hold in the public's mind. The Anti-Masonic Party was folded into the Whig Party and, by the late 1800's, was all but gone in the American political landscape.

There was some benefit that came from the Anti-Masonic Party which can still be seen to this day in two important ways. First, the Anti-Masonic Party was the first political party to form a political convention. Before 1828, it was not a common occurrence for a political party to gather a number of delegates to vote on party issue and institute party leaders. The Anti-Masonic Party was the first political party to hold a party convention in Baltimore in 1831. Indeed, there would be no Democratic or Republican National Convention if there were no Anti-Masonic Political Party in the early 1800s. Additionally, the Anti-Freemason Party was the first party to implement a "party platform." A party platform is a list of the actions which a political party supports in order to appeal to the general public for the purpose of having said party's candidates voted into office. This often takes the form of a list of support for, or opposition to, controversial topics. In the early days of American politics, each politician spoke for himself, using political parties as a voter base, not a guideline for how to think. The Anti-Masonic Party was the first political party to implement a party rhetoric, an ideal that each member of the party must adhere to.

The Anti-Masonic Party was born in civil unrest. A few men with clout to gain used public ignorance toward a fraternity to garner political power. Additionally, those same men accused the Freemasons of the kidnapping and death of a man, drumming up more political unrest in one institution and political unity in another. Untimely, the Anti-Masonic Party would become the Whig party, which is the loose forbearer of the National Republican Party, and the Anti-Masonic underpinnings of the party were all but washed away. What remains, though, are two corner stones of the modern American political landscape; the political party platform and party conventions. Regardless of its beginnings, the Anti-Masonic Party has left a generally positive legacy in modern American politics.

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