Ideology and the Failure of the Whig Party in New Hampshire, 1834–1841

STEVEN P. MCGIFFEN

ANDREW JACKSON’S election to the presidency in 1828 signaled the beginnings of the development of a new two-party system in the United States. During Jackson’s first term, his supporters throughout the Union consolidated and built upon the organizations that had brought him to power. These new Jacksonian parties marked an important change in the style of American politics. They presented themselves as radical, progressive, suspicious of the wealthy and powerful, impatient with those who based their arguments on tradition and precedent. Their appeal was to the agrarian republicanism of Jefferson, from whose party they claimed direct descent. They were the first not only to accept but to welcome suffrage for all white males, and they developed the ability both to respond to and manipulate the wishes of a mass electorate. Their more conservative-minded opponents were slow to realize that the Democrats, as Jackson’s followers came to call themselves, were playing the game of politics to new rules. Though they tried to organize an opposition in Congress and elsewhere under the banner of the “National Republicans,” most anti-Jacksonians had inherited the Federalist distaste for party and were suspicious of too great a degree of popular participation in politics. The role of the people, they believed, was not to determine the policies of governments, nor to have their whims consulted on every issue, but to choose the most honest and able men for office. Eventually, these men would realize the need to identify themselves with clear and attractive policies, to broaden the
appeal of their conservative views, and to create party organizations as disciplined as those of their opponents.

After the humiliation of a second defeat at Jackson’s hands in 1832, this realization led to the formation of the Whig party. The Whig party perfectly mirrored the structure of the Democratic state organizations, and its leaders began to copy the methods of their opponents: taking the stump at elections, finding orators and even demagogues in their midst, caucusing and holding state conventions. The conservative temperament of many of those who despised Jackson’s plebeian style and feared the effects of his innovations in economic policy, delayed the emergence of an effective Whig challenge to the Democrats. Nevertheless, by the mid-term elections of 1838, the two parties were more or less evenly balanced in most states. In New England, the Whig party had come to dominate, though for the most part it did so in contention with a Democratic opposition capable, under favorable circumstances, of winning elections. Massachusetts’ Whig party came to embody the conservative traditions of that state’s religious and secular establishments at the same time as it identified itself closely with their concern for social reform; it also reflected the growing influence of commercial and industrial capital. A dynamic, intelligent, and issue-based party emerged that was conservative without being reactionary. The influence of the Massachusetts party spilled over into neighboring states as it set the pattern of New England politics from the mid-1830s until its demise some twenty years later.

The exception to that pattern was New Hampshire, which was consistently dominated by the Democratic party. Concord newspaper proprietor Isaac Hill and Portsmouth judge Levi Woodbury had first organized support for Jackson’s presidential ambitions in the mid-1820s. Though they had failed to carry the state for Jackson in 1828, his victory nationally had put his followers everywhere in a strong position, and in March 1829 Hill’s Jacksonian Democrats had swept into power in the state elections. Only once between then and
1854 would the Democrats’ grip on New Hampshire’s government be broken; thereafter the new Republican party prevailed, as it has with few interruptions to the present day.

Despite the efforts of dedicated activists, the Whig party never got off the ground in the Granite State. Explanations for that phenomenon extend beyond New Hampshire’s boundaries to address larger issues concerning the national Whig party, the political system of mid-nineteenth-century America, and certain debates that currently occupy historians.

New Hampshire emerged from the annual state elections in March 1835 as it had entered them, as one of the Union’s several one-party states. Though a Whig central committee had been formally organized in 1834, the party failed to contest elections that year. The decisive defeat of Henry Clay’s bid for the presidency in 1832 seemed to have taken the heart out of New Hampshire’s political minority, for the following year the National Republicans held no state convention, made no nomination for governor, and gave few other signs of their existence. Twelve months later the situation remained unchanged. “The republicans appear to have withdrawn from the field,” lamented the Clayite Concord New Hampshire Statesman; “the contest,” it added, “will be no more than a family quarrel.” The new Democratic governor, William Badger, was returned in 1834 with 28,542 votes out of 30,173 cast. Badger lacked a significant opponent, and the Democrats’ ascendancy was rather less marked in elections to the legislature. In the House of Representatives of the state’s General Court, about sixty members, something less than a third of the total, comprised a loosely organized opposition to Jacksonian measures.1

1 The party’s slump was so severe that many of its leading figures simply retired from public life and counseled younger men to support the best men from among the Jacksonian nominees. See, e.g., William Plumer to Samuel Bell, 5 February 1833, Plumer Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society, Concord, N.H.; New Hampshire Statesman, 1 February 1834. The gubernatorial election result is from the manuscript (on microfilm) Election Returns, “Record of Votes,” 1832–52, for State Senate, Governor, Council, Presidential Electors, Members of Congress, New Hampshire Department of State, Division of Records Management and Archives, Concord, N.H.
Despite weakness and lack of organization, those opposed to the administration were not entirely without hope. What optimism they could muster, however, derived its inspiration from beyond state borders. Electoral successes as close to home as Maine indicated that a new political force was emerging on the national level. Any chance of breaking the Jacksonian grip on the state must lie in establishing a relationship with this powerful movement; thus, New Hampshire's oppositionists hastened to claim it as their own. Newspapers like the *New Hampshire Statesman* adopted the "Whig" label and attempted to stir their readers with tales of victories in Maine and other states. Nonetheless, no serious steps were taken to create an effective Whig organization in the state until early in 1835.2

On 20 January 1835 over 300 delegates met at a Whig State Convention in Concord. They nominated Andrew Pierce for governor, but after a fortnight Pierce withdrew and was replaced by his nearest rival, Joseph Healy. Healy was a hotelier from the traditional National Republican stronghold of Cheshire County. Though he had been the choice of only a third of the delegates, his credentials were good. He had been a state senator and councillor and had served in the United States Congress from 1823 to 1827. Initially the convention and its nominee met with considerable enthusiasm. Newspapers that had newly claimed the title of Whig vowed "no longer to slumber" while they were able to "contribute anything to the public good." Anti-Jacksonian papers all over the state were at last able to carry a full slate of nominations.3

2 The first occurrence in a New Hampshire paper of the word Whig to describe anti-Jacksonians in other states is in the *New Hampshire Statesman*, 19 April 1834. New Hampshire's opposition is first given the name in the paper's issue of 10 May 1834.

At meetings held in a number of towns in the south of the state during January and February, the Whigs sorted out their campaign issues. They condemned the alleged extravagance of state and federal governments, corrupt practices in the post office, and the autocratic behavior of the administration, and they demanded that surplus revenue from the sale of public lands be distributed. Two issues previously central to anti-Jacksonian propaganda in the state were ignored; no mention was made of either the protective tariff or recharter of the Bank of the United States. In later years New Hampshire’s Whigs and Democrats would acknowledge that these two issues formed the crucial dividing line between the two parties; therefore, an explanation of why the Whigs chose to omit both from their first election platform should be instructive.

New Hampshire’s Whigs avoided the tariff issue because compromise measures adopted to defuse the nullification crisis had been supported by conservative Yankee interests. This compromise had probably come as a relief to the opposition in the Granite State, for the New Hampshire voters’ overwhelming refusal to rally around the protectionist Clay ticket in the 1832 national election had demonstrated their indifference to the issue. The *New Hampshire Statesman* had declared the tariff issue to be a dead letter. Since the Whigs were anxious to identify their party with order and stability, it was not in their interest to revive an issue that had threatened the peace of the Union; rather, they heralded the compromise as a victory for the conservative tradition from which they claimed their pedigree and refused to dwell on what had thereby been lost. Discussion of the tariff in opposition newspapers gradually diminished during 1834 and had disappeared completely by late summer, when the campaign for the following spring’s elections began.

Although voter indifference was also a factor with the Bank issue, the Democrats’ propaganda provided a more compel-
ling reason for playing down the Whig position. Following in the conservative tradition, Whigs hoped to base their appeal on a claim to stand for the unity of all classes: productive and responsible capitalists, farmers, and urban laborers were mutually interdependent, and the respect that naturally underlay such a relationship was the basis for an ordered, prosperous, and free society. The new party’s leaders feared that their opponents had succeeded in making the Bank a divisive, class-oriented issue. The *Portsmouth Journal* noted that the Democrats used “the Bank for a further purpose, that of exciting the feelings of the poor against the rich, by making them believe that the wealthy alone are stockholders.” Though the *Journal* countered that it was “well known that a very large portion of the stock is held by the middling interest, widows, orphans, charitable societies, &c,” the argument was not aired again in the two months prior to the election.6 Instead, Whigs sought to divert attention away from the Bank and to choose a different ground on which to fight the election.

Like their opponents, the Whigs claimed that the very existence of the republic was at stake, but in their view the enemies of its institutions were not the Bank or the wealthy but the Jackson government itself. “The times demand the united and cordial exertions of all true-hearted Whigs,” urged the *Portsmouth Journal*,

to sustain, if possible, our free system of governments, and to protect our republican institutions against the abuses and encroachments of those in Power. The extraordinary spectacle is now for the first time exhibited in this country, of the Government wielding its great power, and dispensing its immense patronage with the view to perpetuate itself, and subdue and control the free people of the Republic.

A pillar of the tyranny to which the *Journal* referred was the “executive control of the public treasure,” allegedly the true

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The ‘professions’ of the government were ‘republican’ but, warned the *Journal*, ‘its practices are monarchical.’ An issue that had originally been secondary to the defense of the Bank now came to the fore as the major focus of the Whigs’ electoral campaign. As was the case in their decision to drop the tariff issue, by emphasizing the subject of executive tyranny the Whigs showed their concern both for popularity and for the conservative traditions of National Republicanism. Presenting themselves as both conservative constitutionalists and committed democrats, they used their accusations of executive ‘usurpations’ to counter Jacksonian assertions that the Bank and the Whig party were instruments of an aristocracy hostile to the will of the people. As it took shape, the debate involved none of the complex economic arguments that could not have been avoided in discussion of the Bank itself but dealt instead with comfortably familiar political abstractions.

The new party’s leaders, careful to place such national concerns in a local context, claimed that New Hampshire, as much as the Union, was in the grip of men who had no respect either for the will of the people or for the institutions that embodied that will. The claim was not without substance. The 1834 elections had been notable for accusations of corruption by both sides, but whereas the opposition had no power to act on its allegations, a Democratic legislature moved to bar anti-Jacksonian delegates from Somersworth on what appeared to be the flimsiest of grounds. The same body expelled the editor of the *New Hampshire Statesman* from the public gallery, ostensibly for misreporting the proceedings but in reality for ridiculing them. Attempts were made to instruct and then to remove the venerable U.S. Senator Samuel Bell, who, then in his final year of office, had been elected in 1828 by the last National Republican majority in the General Court. In addition to drawing attention to these alleged abuses of power, Whigs claimed that the internal

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7 *Portsmouth Journal*, 31 January and 7 February 1835.
practices of the Democratic party in the state were dictatorial and exclusive.8

Despite the care with which the Whigs chose their ground for the 1835 elections and the new spirit of optimism that characterized their fledgling organization, they failed to make a serious showing. The new party’s candidates lost almost everywhere, and Joseph Healy was soundly beaten.9 The Whig press blamed the party’s defeat on corrupt electoral practices, an accusation that, although exaggerated, contained a core of truth. A more compelling reason for the Whigs’ failure, however, was their inability to attract the votes of the disaffected. The tide of Radical Democracy—marked by a hostility to commercialized agriculture, railroads, manufacturing and banking corporations—was rising, and many feared its effects. A substantial number of these men, however, preferred to support candidates who shared their anti-Radical views and yet were still Democrats, often of long standing. Calling themselves the Conservative Democrats, a number of politicians organized an opposition to the plans of the Radicals from within the party. On the state level their policies were similar to those of the Whigs, but they remained loyal to Jackson, opposed the recharter of the Bank of the United States, and disapproved of protective tariffs, any encroachment on states’ rights, Daniel Webster and Henry Clay. The Whigs needed time to construct an organization

8 For detailed allegations of fraudulent Jacksonian electoral practices, see the Statesman, 22 March 1834; for counter-accusations, see Concord New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette, 17 June 1834. Moves to expel Somersworth delegates were reported in the Statesman, 7, 14, and 21 June 1834. For the vote to expel reporter George W. Ela, see the Statesman, 21 June 1834, which explained, “The report for Thursday and Friday, which should fill this space [purposely left blank], is omitted, having been forbidden by the Tory majority of the House.” In fact, both expulsions met considerable resistance from Democrats, which weakened the Whigs’ ability to use the incidents to their advantage. Attempts to remove Senator Bell also provoked widespread sympathy from Democrats. See, e.g., Charles B. Goodrich to Samuel Bell, 26 January 1833, and M. B. Parker to Samuel Bell, 1 March 1833, Bell Papers, New Hampshire Historical Society. For Whig attacks on the structures and practices of the Democratic Party, see the Statesman, 2 February and 8 March 1833.

9 New Hampshire Archives, Election Returns; Statesman, 16 and 23 March 1835; Portsmouth Journal, 14 and 21 March 1835.
that could rival that of both Radical and Conservative Democrats. Until they could do so, they would be unable to take advantage of divisions in the Democratic ranks. In 1835 the new party also suffered the fate of any opposition campaigning to oust a ruling group during a period of acknowledged prosperity. While prosperity persisted, the Whig party failed to make progress and, in fact, declined from its initial, if limited, impact of 1835. The catastrophe that beset the nation in the spring of 1837 probably saved New Hampshire’s Whig party from oblivion.10

The Whigs blamed the Panic of 1837 on the policies of successive Democratic administrations in Washington, in particular upon their refusal to recharter the Second Bank of the United States. This refusal, the opposition party claimed, had led to the currency crisis, which in turn brought about an economic collapse that forced thousands into bankruptcy and millions out of work. As an anonymous correspondent explained to the readers of the _Portsmouth Journal_, the Bank had

possessed both a _sustaining_ and _restraining_ power over other State and private institutions, and kept them in a _sound and healthy state_, but so soon as this regulating power became inert from the acts of the executive of the nation, many of the state institutions cast off all restraint, and traded in their paper to any extent that suited their convenience.

“Speculation” was admitted to be the immediate cause of the financial crisis, but it was a speculation made possible by the “experiment of dispensing with a National Bank,” which “gave credit and currency a severe shaking” and led the nation down the “road to ruin.”11 The Whigs lauded New Hampshire’s state banks for ameliorating the effects of the crisis

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10 _Portsmouth Journal_, 21 and 28 March 1835, and _Statesman_, 23 and 30 March 1835, contain allegations of corrupt electoral practices. For Whig failure to organize, see _Portsmouth Journal_, 23 January, 13 February, and 12 March 1836, and letter signed “OLD REPUBLICAN,” 8 October 1836. Matters were not helped by bitter divisions between supporters of the presidential ambitions of Daniel Webster and those of William Henry Harrison.

11 _Portsmouth Journal_, 27 May 1837; 20 May and 8 April 1837.
within the state but argued that the policies of New Hampshire's Democrats had, in turn, aggravated the situation. Despite their misgivings, the Conservatives had, in a compromise with the Radicals, allowed the legislatures of 1836 and 1837 to pass restrictive banking laws. No bank in the state was allowed, for instance, to issue bills of less than twenty-dollar denomination. Such laws were plainly designed to destroy an effective paper currency and replace it with specie.

Whigs, condemning such restrictions as "hum bug," claimed that they would "embarrass trade" and "give rise to an illegal currency." Great inconvenience and distress, not an increase in specie circulation, would result. The poor would suffer most, for it was "well known that the rich have no use for small bills," having "everywhere credit which answers the purpose." The Panic was portrayed as a struggle between the productive forces of labor and legitimate capital, on the one hand, and speculative, non-productive capital on the other. Whigs claimed that Van Buren's policies, compounded by those of the state government, had brought "peculiar hardship to every class of citizens except the money lenders and usurers," but "the evils [had] borne most heavily upon the working people, whose employment [had] been abridged" while prices had risen. Whigs stressed that the grievances of working people should not be directed against their employers, for the interests of manufacturers and their employees were identical. Democratic policies benefited neither:

President Jackson's "experiment" has stripped the business men of their means, till they can no longer employ their mechanics, while it has enabled the capitalists to 

\[ \text{shave notes and grind the poor at the rate of 24 PER CENT PER ANNUM}. \]

In applying their philosophy to analyzing the financial crisis of 1837, the Whigs produced a view of the Democrats as

\[ \text{Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of New Hampshire, at Their Session Holden at the Capitol in Concord, commencing Wednesday, June 7, 1837 (Concord: Barton and Co., State Printers, 1837), p. 234.} \]

\[ \text{Statesman, 14 January 1837; Portsmouth Journal, 28 January 1837.} \]

\[ \text{Statesman, 3 June 1837.} \]
agents of a restless, speculative, dangerous spirit. Although Whigs spoke of “capitalists . . . grinding the poor,” their words contained no leveling or socialistic intent. To the Whigs the wealthy man, the manipulator of capital, was a natural leader, a person of responsibility, because capital had a social as well as a private function. Provided he invested to enhance productivity, the wealthy man was entitled to society’s respect and admiration, for his investments could and did promote the public good. Whigs condemned not the planned accumulation of capital but its reckless speculation, which, in their view, had been encouraged by the destruction of the Bank’s benign influence.

The Whigs’ analysis of the Panic of 1837 was well thought out and powerful. Their suggested solutions—to recharter the Bank and to repeal the state’s restrictive banking laws—were conservative policies that might be expected to hold some appeal for the electorate. Men of small as well as large property must have been confused and alarmed in the face of an unprecedented national economic crisis. The Whigs at last had a message, a coherent and distinctive platform that addressed genuine and urgent concerns of the voters. In the fall of 1837 they began to prepare for what would be the first serious threat to the Democrats since 1829.

On 21 November delegates from all but the northernmost areas of the state converged on Concord to plan the Whig campaign for the elections of the following March. After condemning the profligacy, corruption, and hypocrisy of state and federal governments, the convention attacked Van Buren’s plan for a subtreasury and called for a small-bill currency to alleviate distress. The mood of the delegates was different from that of any previous Whig gathering in the state. They were in a mood not for protest but for victory. Almost unanimously the delegates nominated James Wilson, Jr., of Keene for governor. A forty-year-old lawyer, former representative to the state legislature, and current justice of the peace, Wilson was noted for his skill as an orator. He was an exciting
choice for a party that had hitherto appeared to lack the common touch.15

The convention was followed by meetings in every county save Coos. The Statesman claimed a month before the election that the “people” were “everywhere moving” and that the Whig party was “daily gaining in strength and confidence.”16 As the election approached, however, the Whigs shifted their emphasis on the issues they had raised. The party’s challenge to the economic policies of state and federal governments had addressed corruption as a secondary issue. Corrupt practices, Whigs claimed, were an inevitable by-product of the restless and speculative spirit that made the Jacksonians’ philosophy so dangerous. Their “experiments” and their financial irregularities had the same source, a contempt for the established order, an order that had produced, Whigs argued, widespread prosperity and sturdy republican institutions. As the campaign progressed, however, the subtlety and power of this message were lost, and its emphasis changed. Whig propaganda came increasingly to concentrate on individual acts of corruption or impropriety, and the freshness and potency of its initial analysis of the Panic were forgotten.

The success of the party’s effort was limited. They failed to dislodge either Democratic governor Isaac Hill, or his party, from power but carried the two southwestern counties of Cheshire and Hillsborough, a number of large towns along the Piscataqua, and many of the new manufacturing centers such as Milford and Nashua. To their satisfaction, Whigs carried the state capital, its major commercial center, Portsmouth, and the anti-Jacksonian fortress of Keene previously claimed by the National Republicans. Their message had been received by many of the wealthier areas of the state to whose business and laboring communities it was most directly aimed, but the party had paid the price of ignoring the


16 Statesman, 3 February 1838.
concerns of voters in remote, rural areas. Elsewhere in the Union, Whig parties were able to reach out from their base of support amongst the most progressive elements of an expanding capitalist economy to attract the votes of both small and large farmers by convincing them that benefits would accrue from the creation of new markets. The growing centers of commerce and manufacturing would be linked to the farm gate by a new transportation system, and a new financial infrastructure would provide the credit the farmer needed if he were to take advantage of such opportunities. New Hampshire Whigs would take up this message in the 1840s, but for the time being they offered Granite State farmers nothing that could be measured, touched, or easily understood.17

The Whigs still had some reason to take pride in their achievement of 1838. From a situation of almost total prostration a year earlier, they had rallied to restore the two-party system to New Hampshire. Improving enormously upon any previous electoral performance, they captured around 35 percent of the seats in the state House of Representatives, three out of twelve in the Senate, and two out of five on the Governor's Council. They had established themselves as a disciplined and serious party of opposition both outside and within the General Court and had supplanted the Conservatives as the major opponents of the increasingly dominant Radical faction of the Democratic party. In addition, Whigs had won a leading position in the local government of large areas of the southeast and of the Connecticut Valley. They had, however, failed to push the Democrats from power. Their task now was to use the electoral organization they had created to build their voting strength to a point where they could capture both the state government

17 For the Whig analysis of their own defeat, see Statesman, 24 March 1838. For pointing me in the direction of the view of the Whig party suggested in this paragraph, I am indebted to William R. Brock, Parties and Political Conscience: American Dilemmas, 1840–1850 (Millwood, N.Y.: KTO Press, 1979), p. 15. Neither Brock nor I mean to suggest that this was the only basis upon which Whig parties were constructed. With the wisdom of hindsight, however, it seems probable that this was the most likely basis upon which such a party could successfully have been built in New Hampshire.
and New Hampshire's six electoral college votes in the presidential election of 1840.\textsuperscript{18}

In fact, the Whigs failed to capitalize upon their vigorous performance of 1838, and the election of that year represented a high-water mark for the party. Thereafter its organization deteriorated, although Whig nominations continued to be made for most offices. Until 1842 the party retained its two senatorial seats and between seventy and ninety seats in the lower house. It continued to dominate local government in Cheshire and in certain towns in Hillsborough and along the Piscataqua, although it was able to win few elections in Portsmouth. Whig concerns continued to focus upon the defense of banks and corporations, the promotion of the interests of investment and manufacturing capital, and the rather hollow crusade against corruption. Their share of the gubernatorial poll declined to a respectable but never quite threatening 35 to 40 percent. In the presidential election, though they attempted to mirror Whig campaigns elsewhere by holding great parades and launching a bold attack on the record of the Van Buren administration, New Hampshire's Whigs were soundly beaten. By 1841 they had ceased once more to mount any effective resistance to the Democrats in the General Court. The death of Harrison and the defection of President Tyler had a disturbing effect upon Whigs everywhere. In New Hampshire, where the party was already suffering from poor morale induced by years of frustration and defeat, the loss of a sympathetic national government was devastating. Though the party's vote remained steady, it failed to make any tangible progress. Outside of the areas in which it had done well in 1838, the Whig party of New Hampshire never succeeded in establishing any significant presence.\textsuperscript{19}

New Hampshire Whigs were never able to extend the appeal of their party's socially conservative and economically progressive philosophy beyond the business community

\textsuperscript{18} New Hampshire Archives, Election Returns; Statesman, 9 June 1838.

\textsuperscript{19} New Hampshire Archives, Election Results; Walter Dean Burnham, Presidential Ballots, 1836–1892 (Baltimore: Ayer and Co., 1955), pp. 246–56.
which generated it or, at best, beyond the immediate dependents of that community. In part that failure stemmed from their reluctance to translate their ideology into a full-blooded program of reforms. Although their condemnation of their opponents was sometimes telling, their constructive alternatives were hard to pin down. Whig newspapers were full of articles advocating internal improvements—a program of state aid to improve transportation facilities—the promotion of business, railroads, commercial farming, and so on, but such concrete issues would be played down during election campaigns in favor of tirades against the allegedly corrupt and incompetent governments they opposed. Whigs also suffered because their organization was weak and patchy, no match for the powerful machine of the Democrats. Neither on the organizational nor on the policy level did New Hampshire’s Whigs seem to consider in any serious way the problem of how to break out of their established areas of strength. They thus remained a regional, minority party, always awaiting the revolution in public opinion that would make them an effective force in the affairs of the state.

Steven P. McGiffen teaches U.S. history and politics at Northern College, Barnsley, England. He is currently working on a book that will trace the origins of the modern Republican party in New Hampshire.