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Political nativism in New York State, pp. 203-459 by Louis Dow Scisco

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POLITICAL NATIVISM

IN

NEW YORK STATE

BY

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PREFACE

THIS work is intended to be a contribution to the history of partisan politics in the United States. Its primary purpose is to deal with the machinery and methods used by a certain great political organization which has played a part in American history. The issues upon which that movement based itself are also treated, but it has not been the purpose of the writer either to advocate, defend or condemn them. They are dealt with just to the extent that seems necessary to make intelligible the story of the organization that worked in their name.

The partisan system of the American people is the link between the people and the government which both rules and serves them. It is a mechanism that has grown up from the needs of the nation, altering from time to time as conditions change. Its duty is to respond to public sentiment on vital questions of the hour, to test the strength of such sentiment at the polls, and to enact the sentiment into law or administration if the people so express themselves. There have been times in American history when the partisan system failed to meet its duty squarely, and those are times of political confusion and re-arrangement. It was in one of these periods that the nativist movement came into state and national politics. Its experience is full of suggestion for those who like to trace the reasons of political changes. The story of the brief and stormy career of the Know-Nothing movement shows how an issue rejected by the regular parties can struggle into power despite them and to their hurt. It shows how public sentiment can cast aside an old political organization and build a new fabric when needs require. The issue of

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nativism wrecked the older party structures and was itself wrecked in turn by a stronger issue.

In tracing the evolution and fate of this interesting political experiment there have been many difficulties resulting from the peculiar nature of the organizations which sprang up from time to time to voice the sentiment of nativism. One of the features which has been especially productive of confusion in the pages of writers on political history has been the fact that there have been two classes of political organizations in American politics. One class is that with which the public is most familiar to-day. It is an organization whose extent is national, and whose aims include that of securing control of the national government. An organization of this sort cultivates exclusiveness in the control of voters. It seeks to make itself distinct from other political organizations and to make the division clear-cut between its adherents and those of similar organizations. We call it a political party. The second class of organizations are less familiar to-day than they were fifty years ago. They are of the type which Mayor Harper of New York city, in 1844, called "a political organization distinct from party." Usually an organization of this sort has no national scheme of effort, but plays its part in state or local politics. The special characteristic of this class, however, is not the area which it covers but the nature of the allegiance which it demands from its members. It is not exclusive in its claims. It permits its members to belong to other political organizations and to act openly with them. This type of organization the writer has preferred to call a "movement" rather than a "party." It was these "movements," which sprang up to represent the issues which the organizations of the regular parties refused to assume, that caused the extraordinary confusion of American politics in the decade of the fifties. The rise of nativism, as well as many other phenomena in American history are best understood when the real nature of a "movement" is kept in mind.

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