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Alison Clark Efford

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# ABRAHAM LINCOLN, GERMAN-BORN REPUBLICANS, AND AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

ALISON CLARK EFFORD\*

A month before the presidential election of 1860, Carl Schurz took a break from his grueling speaking schedule to write to his wife, Margarethe. He told her that Abraham Lincoln had named him “foremost of all” among his campaigners.<sup>1</sup> The tribute was not implausible. Schurz’s greatest asset to the Republican Party was his ability to speak to crowds in his native German. He had been forced to migrate to the United States after participating in the unsuccessful European Revolutions of 1848.<sup>2</sup> Political refugees such as Schurz became known as “Forty-eighters,”<sup>3</sup> and many of them lived in Watertown, Wisconsin, where Schurz first settled.<sup>4</sup> During the 1850s, Germans emigrated by the hundreds of thousands when their hopes for economic and political reform at home were disappointed.<sup>5</sup> By 1860, there were more than 1.2 million German-born people living in the United States,<sup>6</sup> and during the Civil War they would make up about one soldier in ten in the Union Army.<sup>7</sup>

Despite these statistics, it is debatable whether Schurz was in fact “foremost” among Lincoln’s campaigners. Historians have thoroughly discredited the claim that German-Americans cast the deciding votes for

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\* Assistant Professor of History, Marquette University.

1. Letter from Carl Schurz to Margarethe Schurz (Oct. 2, 1860), in *INTIMATE LETTERS OF CARL SCHURZ, 1841–1869*, at 225, 226 (Joseph Schafer ed. & trans., 1929).

2. See HANS L. TREFOUSSE, *CARL SCHURZ: A BIOGRAPHY 14–45* (2d ed., Fordham Univ. Press 1998) (1982).

3. See, e.g., CARL WITKE, *REFUGEES OF REVOLUTION: THE GERMAN FORTY-EIGHTERS IN AMERICA*, at v (photo. reprint 1970) (1952). See generally BRUCE LEVINE, *THE SPIRIT OF 1848: GERMAN IMMIGRANTS, LABOR CONFLICT, AND THE COMING OF THE CIVIL WAR* (1992).

4. See TREFOUSSE, *supra* note 2, at 52–57.

5. See LEVINE, *supra* note 3, at 15–19.

6. JOSEPH C.G. KENNEDY, *U.S. DEP’T OF THE INTERIOR, POPULATION OF THE UNITED STATES IN 1860: COMPILED FROM THE ORIGINAL RETURNS OF THE EIGHTH CENSUS 620–21* (1865).

7. WILLIAM L. BURTON, *MELTING POT SOLDIERS: THE UNION’S ETHNIC REGIMENTS 38–41* (1988).

Lincoln.<sup>8</sup> It is estimated that a slim majority of German voters remained Democratic in 1860. Only in Illinois did they perhaps tip the balance for the Republicans.<sup>9</sup> Yet Lincoln certainly believed that German-Americans had contributed to his victory, as his appointment of German-born ambassadors, consuls, and generals attests.<sup>10</sup>

In all events, Lincoln's support of German-Americans—and prominent German-Americans' support of Lincoln—left its mark on the Republican Party. German immigrants influenced the party's move away from an anti-immigrant sensibility and toward a single-minded focus on preventing the spread of slavery.<sup>11</sup> Examining the particular cast of German Republicanism also reveals a more specific ideological contribution. This essay argues that German Republicans' self-interested defense of their rights as new citizens bolstered the notion that American men's citizenship conferred the right to vote.

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When the Republican Party took shape in the mid-1850s, it was not initially clear that it would seek the votes of German-Americans.<sup>12</sup> The party largely was, in historian Eric Foner's words, "an expression of the hopes and fears of Northern native-born Protestants."<sup>13</sup> The same people who considered slavery inimical to their vision of the future were troubled by the decade's influx of German and Irish immigrants. Particularly in eastern states, Republicans drew supporters from the short-lived American or Know-Nothing Party.<sup>14</sup> The Know-Nothings were nativists.<sup>15</sup> They indulged in anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic polemics and advocated laws that would make it more difficult for

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8. See, e.g., Jay Monaghan, *Did Abraham Lincoln Receive the Illinois German Vote?*, in *ETHNIC VOTERS AND THE ELECTION OF LINCOLN* 62, 62 (Frederick C. Luebke ed., 1971).

9. See James M. Bergquist, *People and Politics in Transition: The Illinois Germans, 1850–1860*, in *ETHNIC VOTERS AND THE ELECTION OF LINCOLN*, *supra* note 8, at 196, 212–24; Walter D. Kamphoefner, *German-Americans and Civil War Politics: A Reconsideration of the Ethnocultural Thesis*, 37 *CIVIL WAR HIST.* 232, 232–45 (1991).

10. See WITKE, *supra* note 3, at 217–18.

11. For a synthesis of the extensive literature on the subject, see James M. Bergquist, *The Mid-Nineteenth-Century Slavery Crisis and the German Americans*, in *STATES OF PROGRESS: GERMANS AND BLACKS IN AMERICA OVER 300 YEARS* 55, 55–71 (Randall M. Miller ed., 1989).

12. See Bergquist, *supra* note 9, at 198–207.

13. ERIC FONER, *FREE SOIL, FREE LABOR, FREE MEN: THE IDEOLOGY OF THE REPUBLICAN PARTY BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR* 227 (1970).

14. See WITKE, *supra* note 3, at 177–89, 207.

15. See *id.* at 178.

immigrants to naturalize, vote, and drink.<sup>16</sup> Even after the Republican Party consolidated around opposition to the extension of slavery, German Democrats continued to dismiss it as a hotbed of “Know-Nothing,” Yankee, Puritan, temperance fanaticism.<sup>17</sup> Although Republican state platforms did not propose restrictions on immigrants, the party’s moralizing tone and affinity for temperance were enough to alienate German immigrants in certain states such as Wisconsin.<sup>18</sup> Schurz had to take his political ambitions to the national stage.

Republicans in other parts of the Midwest distanced themselves from nativism more successfully. Lincoln always disdained it. In 1855, he asked a friend, “How can any one who abhors the oppression of negroes, be in favor of degrading classes of white people?”<sup>19</sup> Characteristically, Lincoln’s position represented both his personal convictions and his sensitivity to the electorate. In Illinois, Gustave Koerner, a former Democratic lieutenant governor who had moved to the United States in 1833, alerted Lincoln to potential German votes.<sup>20</sup> For Lincoln, whose priority was to halt the spread of slavery, it made political sense to attract a German-speaking constituency by steering the party away from nativism. The prospect of German support allowed a defense of immigrants to become part of Republican rhetoric.

As the Republican Party self-consciously constructed a broader coalition, German Republicans fought to influence its ideology. A cadre of Forty-eighters saw Republican politics as an outlet for the ideals that they had seen thwarted in Europe. In 1859, Schurz traveled to Massachusetts to convince Republicans to oppose a ballot measure that would deny foreign-born citizens the franchise for two years following their naturalization.<sup>21</sup> Speaking in Faneuil Hall, Schurz

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16. *See id.* at 177–78.

17. *See id.* at 204–08.

18. *See id.* at 203–07.

19. Letter from Abraham Lincoln to Joshua Speed (Aug. 24, 1855), in ABRAHAM LINCOLN: SPEECHES AND WRITINGS, 1832–1858, at 360, 363 (Don E. Fehrenbacher ed., 1989).

20. *See* 1 MEMOIRS OF GUSTAVE KOERNER, 1809–1896, at 71–95, 271–72, 590–603 (Thomas J. McCormack ed., 1909).

21. Republicans in the state legislature compromised with Know-Nothings to propose the measure. *See* ALEXANDER KEYSSAR, THE RIGHT TO VOTE: THE CONTESTED HISTORY OF DEMOCRACY IN THE UNITED STATES 86 (2000); *see also* Dale Baum, *Know-Nothingism and the Republican Majority in Massachusetts: The Political Realignment of the 1850s*, 64 J. AM. HIST. 959, 973–76 (1978).

likened the institution of slavery to laws against immigrants.<sup>22</sup> He argued that the United States could fulfill its “ideal mission” as the world’s standard-bearer of progress only if it both eliminated slavery and welcomed immigrants.<sup>23</sup> Like Lincoln, Schurz saw world history as a story of the steady triumph of “universal freedom” over the “dead weight of customs and institutions and notions and prejudices.”<sup>24</sup> The United States had already overcome European feudalism and monarchical government; it now had to set slavery on a path to demise and eradicate nativism. Schurz compared the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, equating expelling foreign-born residents with returning fugitive slaves.<sup>25</sup> To him, the proposed Massachusetts amendment resembled restrictions on abolitionists’ freedom of expression in the Southern states.<sup>26</sup>

Although German-American Republicans were motivated by many of the same concerns as Anglo-American Republicans, their insistence that anti-nativism and antislavery were expressions of the same progressive spirit was distinctive. German antislavery was often expressed in conjunction with what Russell Kazal calls a “vernacular pluralism,” in this case a rough ideology that celebrated diversity and held that democratic institutions had the power to incorporate different groups into American life.<sup>27</sup> Schurz’s Faneuil Hall speech proposed that “True Americanism” meant accepting that the United States was blended from a variety of “national elements.”<sup>28</sup> “They modify each other,” he declared, “and their peculiar characteristics are to be blended together by the all-assimilating power of freedom.”<sup>29</sup> If Massachusetts denied some naturalized foreign-born men the right to vote, Schurz maintained, it would endanger the very principle that allowed the United States to find strength in diversity: equal citizenship.<sup>30</sup> Schurz assumed that, for men, citizenship included the right to vote, and he

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22. See Carl Schurz, True Americanism (Apr. 18, 1859), in 1 SPEECHES, CORRESPONDENCE AND POLITICAL PAPERS OF CARL SCHURZ 48, 48 n.1 (Frederic Bancroft ed., 1913).

23. *Id.* at 51; *see id.* at 51–72.

24. *Id.* at 50, 57.

25. *See id.* at 64.

26. *See id.* at 59–60.

27. Russell A. Kazal, *The Lost World of Pennsylvania Pluralism: Immigrants, Regions, and the Early Origins of Pluralist Ideologies in America*, 27 J. AM. ETHNIC HIST. 7, 9 (2008); *see id.* at 7–42.

28. Schurz, *supra* note 22, at 54.

29. *Id.*

30. *See id.* at 67–68.

rejected on principle the idea of a second-class, non-voting form of citizenship.<sup>31</sup>

Schurz was promoting a specific definition of citizenship, a crucial legal status over which Americans fought bitterly. Although the U.S. Constitution implied the existence of a national citizenship, the document had not clarified its boundaries or rights. During the early years of the republic, state citizenship was much more important, especially when it came to the franchise.<sup>32</sup> Laws varied, but all states patently denied political rights to women and minors, and most denied political rights to African Americans and resident aliens.<sup>33</sup> Boys and white male immigrants could become voting citizens, but some authorities maintained that non-voting women and black men were not citizens at all.<sup>34</sup> During the antebellum period, however, courts and legislatures had increasingly taken another route. By the Civil War, they were differentiating between a full, voting citizenship and a second-class, non-voting citizenship.<sup>35</sup> Women, for example, could expect the courts to protect most of their civil rights, but they were not permitted to vote.<sup>36</sup> The rights of free African Americans varied much more from state to state.<sup>37</sup>

In 1859, Schurz specifically told Bostonians that “the title of manhood is the title to citizenship.”<sup>38</sup> As predictable as this comment might seem, it suggested that Schurz saw citizenship as all or nothing. In

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31. See *id.*; see also James M. Bergquist, *The Forty-Eighters and the Republican Convention of 1860*, in *THE GERMAN FORTY-EIGHTERS IN THE UNITED STATES* 141, 144 (Charlotte L. Brancaforte ed., 1989) (identifying “two classes” of citizenship in the amendment provisions).

32. See JAMES H. KETTNER, *THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP, 1608–1877*, at 218–24, 248–86 (1978); ROGERS M. SMITH, *CIVIC IDEALS: CONFLICTING VISIONS OF CITIZENSHIP IN U.S. HISTORY* 115–64 (1997); MARC W. KRUMAN, *BETWEEN AUTHORITY AND LIBERTY: STATE CONSTITUTION MAKING IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA* 94, 97 (1997).

33. See KEYSSAR, *supra* note 21, at 9–17.

34. See *id.* at 12–14.

35. See DEREK HEATER, *A BRIEF HISTORY OF CITIZENSHIP* 75–77 (2004).

36. See Nancy F. Cott, *Marriage and Women’s Citizenship in the United States, 1830–1934*, 103 *AM. HIST. REV.* 1440, 1444–54 (1998); see generally Linda K. Kerber, *The Paradox of Women’s Citizenship in the Early Republic: The Case of Martin vs. Massachusetts, 1805*, 97 *AM. HIST. REV.* 349 (1992). *But cf.* DON E. FEHRENBACHER, *THE DRED SCOTT CASE: ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN AMERICAN LAW AND POLITICS* 342–46 (1978) (noting that U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney suggested in 1857 that citizenship involved voting and was restricted to a limited number of men).

37. See CHILTON WILLIAMSON, *AMERICAN SUFFRAGE: FROM PROPERTY TO DEMOCRACY, 1760–1860*, at 277–78 (1960).

38. Schurz, *supra* note 22, at 57 (original emphasis omitted).

this context, he did not recognize a halfway status, even for women. The German-American politician ignored the fact that some members of his New England audience must have supported women's suffrage. Anglo-American abolitionism fostered a critique of restrictions on women.<sup>39</sup> German-American antislavery did not. Schurz and other German-American men concentrated on defending the position of their community in the United States.

When Massachusetts voters approved the amendment that denied naturalized immigrant men the vote for two years, Lincoln renounced it, but that did not ensure that he had an easy relationship with German Republicans.<sup>40</sup> Lincoln did win the loyalty of Forty-eighter Georg Schneider, who edited Chicago's *Illinois Staatszeitung*,<sup>41</sup> and he tactically bought a half share in a Springfield German-language newspaper in 1859 (he sold it once he was safely nominated).<sup>42</sup> Yet as Lincoln's political ambitions grew, he disassociated himself somewhat from the more radical Forty-eighters. Revealingly, an 1854 ambrotype photograph of Lincoln holding the *Staatszeitung* was altered in 1858 to show him holding a more moderate English-language newspaper.<sup>43</sup> When German-born delegates met before the Chicago Republican Convention in 1860, only the Illinois residents were committed to Lincoln from the outset.<sup>44</sup> Most, Schurz included, initially supported New Yorker William Seward, whose condemnation of slavery was more strident.<sup>45</sup> After much discussion, German-American attendees decided they would support any candidate who supported a platform that was antislavery, anti-nativism, and offered cheap western land to settlers.<sup>46</sup> More surprisingly, a group of German Republicans opposed Lincoln's

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39. See generally JULIE ROY JEFFREY, *THE GREAT SILENT ARMY OF ABOLITIONISM: ORDINARY WOMEN IN THE ANTISLAVERY MOVEMENT* (1998); JEAN FAGAN YELLIN, *WOMEN AND SISTERS: THE ANTISLAVERY FEMINISTS IN AMERICAN CULTURE* (1989).

40. *Lincoln über die Fusion und das Massachusetts-Amendment [Lincoln on the "Fusion" and the Massachusetts Amendment]*, WISCONSIN'S DEMOKRAT (Manitowoc, Wis.), June 1, 1860.

41. See WITTKE, *supra* note 3, at 217, 273.

42. HAROLD HOLZER, *LINCOLN PRESIDENT-ELECT: ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE GREAT SECESSION WINTER, 1860-1861*, at 149 (2008).

43. Vernon Burton, *Picturing Lincoln*, *Lincoln Remembered: Commemorating the Bicentennial of Lincoln's Birth*, <http://www.las.illinois.edu/news/lincoln/picturing/> (last visited Aug. 16, 2010).

44. See Bergquist, *supra* note 9, at 213-14; see also WITTKE, *supra* note 3, at 212-14.

45. See WITTKE, *supra* note 3, at 212-14.

46. See *id.*

renomination in 1864, backing the more radical John C. Fremont instead.<sup>47</sup>

We might see German-born Republicans as merely one more constituency for Lincoln to mollify—if it were not for their rejection of a second-class citizenship for men. Before the war, they did not pursue the implications of this argument for African Americans, but their assertive pluralism created a framework with which non-whites could work. After the war, German Republicans' perspective as new citizens would find a place in Radical Republicans' efforts to safeguard equal citizenship for people born or naturalized in the United States. Enough Republicans eventually found political, economic, philosophical, and emotional reasons to enfranchise African-American men. Among them were the notions that, for men, second-class citizenship was incompatible with "True Americanism" and that the American nation had the power to uplift and integrate diverse peoples.<sup>48</sup> However self-serving they were, these were ideas that Germans had championed within Lincoln's coalition.

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47. See generally JÖRG NAGLER, *FREMONT CONTRA LINCOLN: DIE DEUTSCH-AMERIKANISCHE OPPOSITION IN DER REPUBLIKANISCHEN PARTEI WÄHREND DES AMERIKANISCHEN BÜRGERKRIEG* [FREMONT VERSUS LINCOLN: THE GERMAN-AMERICAN OPPOSITION IN THE REPUBLICAN PARTY DURING THE CIVIL WAR] (1984).

48. ERIC FONER, *RECONSTRUCTION: AMERICA'S UNFINISHED REVOLUTION, 1863–1877*, at 271–80 (1988).