

Republican Party, Founded July 6, 1854:

A New Party Holds Its First Convention

This day in History, July 5, 2026



The first convention of the Republican Party, held in Jackson, Michigan, on July 6, 1854, was a watershed moment in American history, ignited by a national outcry against the expansion of slavery. This anti-slavery state convention event marked the birth of a new political force, destined to reshape the nation's future and lead the charge against one of its greatest moral crises.

The formation of the Republican Party was a direct response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, passed in May 1854. This contentious legislation repealed the Missouri Compromise, which had previously restricted slavery in certain U.S. territories, and introduced the concept of popular sovereignty, allowing settlers to decide whether to permit slavery. The Act's passage triggered widespread anger among anti-slavery advocates, spurring a wave of political realignment.

In the wake of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, a coalition of anti-slavery Whigs, Free Soilers, and anti-Nebraska Democrats began to take shape. United by their opposition to the spread of slavery into western territories, they sought to create a new political entity capable of addressing this critical issue. The first significant step in this effort was the convention held in Jackson, Michigan.

On July 6, 1854, approximately 1,500 people gathered in Jackson for what was billed as a "Mass Anti-Nebraska Convention." The event took place under a grove of oaks, providing a fittingly natural setting for this historic assembly. Among the attendees were notable figures such as former Michigan Governor Austin Blair and influential newspaper editor Zachariah Chandler.

The Jackson convention was characterized by passionate speeches and intense discussions about the future of the anti-slavery movement. Participants shared a

profound belief that the expansion of slavery threatened the nation's foundational principles of liberty and equality. They concluded that a new political party was essential to counteract pro-slavery forces and uphold the ideals of the American Republic.

One of the convention's most significant achievements was the adoption of a platform that clearly articulated the party's stance on slavery. The platform denounced the Kansas-Nebraska Act as a "gross violation of a sacred pledge" and called for its repeal. It also demanded the prohibition of slavery in all current and future U.S. territories, reaffirming the belief that all men are created equal. This platform established the ideological foundation for the Republican Party's future actions.

Additionally, the Jackson convention saw the formal adoption of the name "Republican Party." This name was chosen to reflect the party's commitment to republican principles, including individual liberty and opposition to tyranny. It echoed the legacy of the American Revolution and underscored the party's mission to preserve the Union as a bastion of freedom.

The first Republican convention in Jackson, Michigan, was a defining moment that marked the birth of a powerful political movement. With its strong anti-slavery stance, the Republican Party quickly gained momentum, culminating in the election of Abraham Lincoln as the 16th President of the United States in 1860.

Founding of the Republican Party

On July 6, 1854, just after the anniversary of the nation, an anti-slavery state convention was held in Jackson, Michigan. The hot day forced the large crowd outside to a nearby oak grove. At this "Under the Oaks Convention" the first statewide candidates were selected for what would become the Republican Party.

United by desire to abolish slavery, it was in Jackson that the Platform of the Under the Oaks Convention read: "...we will cooperate and be known as REPUBLICANS..." Prior to July, smaller groups had gathered in intimate settings like the schoolhouse in Ripon, Wisconsin. However, the meeting in Jackson would be the first ever mass gathering of the Republican Party.

The name "Republican" was chosen, alluding to Thomas Jefferson's Democratic-Republican Party and conveying a commitment to the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Party of Freedom

Though popularized in a Thomas Nast cartoon, the GOP's elephant symbol originated during the 1860 campaign, as a symbol of Republican strength. Republicans envisioned "free soil, free speech, free labor." Under the leadership of President Abraham Lincoln, the GOP became the Party of the Union as well.

President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, but it was the entire Republican Party who freed the slaves. The 1864 Republican National Convention called for the abolition of slavery, and Congressional Republicans passed the 13th Amendment unanimously, with only a few Democrat votes.

The early women's rights movement was solidly Republican, as it was a continuation of abolitionism. They were careful not to be overly partisan, but as did Susan B. Anthony, most suffragists favored the GOP. The 19th Amendment was written by a Republican senator and garnered greater support from Republicans than from Democrats.

Party of Prosperity

Low taxes, sound money, regulatory restraint: these were among the commonsense economic policies established by the GOP that brought about decades of prosperity after the Civil War. Republicans encouraged innovation and rule of law. Buttressed by Republican control in Congress, the McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt and Taft administrations cleared away obstacles to economic growth.

President Dwight Eisenhower and congressional Republicans appreciated the fact that the private sector, not government, is the engine of wealth creation. With his bold tax-cutting agenda, President Ronald Reagan revived the economy after years of Democrat malaise.

Party of Vision

Theodore Roosevelt embodies our Party's traditional concern for the environment, but the Republican commitment to the environment actually goes back much further than that. For example, the world's first national park, Yellowstone, was established during the Ulysses Grant administration.

President Eisenhower advocated groundbreaking civil rights legislation and vigorously enforced the *Brown v Board of Education* decision, sending the 101st Airborne to Little Rock when chaos erupted following integration at Central High.

Ronald Reagan explained the difference between Democrats and Republicans in a way that cannot be improved upon: “Two visions of the future, two fundamentally different ways of governing – their government of pessimism, fear, and limits, or ours of hope, confidence, and growth. Their government sees people only as members of groups. Ours serves all the people of America as individuals.

President George H.W. Bush championed community and volunteer organizations and the tremendous power they have for doing good. He famously described them as “a brilliant diversity spread like stars, like a thousand points of light in a broad and peaceful sky.”

In the first decade of the 21st century, President George W. Bush made an unprecedented commitment to helping those in need beyond our shores through the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), an aid program for countries devastated by HIV/AIDS. Since its inception, PEPFAR has saved over a million lives and currently provides over 5 million people with life-saving treatments.

Party of Strength

President Reagan and President George H.W. Bush led western democracies to victory over Soviet tyranny in the Cold War. The George W. Bush administration maintained the military second-to-none and projected that power in the fight against international terrorism.

Party of the Future

Drawing inspiration from our Party’s history, today’s Republicans believe individuals, not government, make the best decisions; all people are entitled to equal rights; and decisions are best made close to home.

At the state level, the nation’s 27 Republican governors are making government more effective and efficient, spurring economic growth and striving to put more power in the hands of the people.

Nationally, Republicans recognize that the slow, bloated, top-down Washington bureaucracy is out-of-date in the 21st century. Our Party works to give Americans more choices—in healthcare, in education, in energy, and in the economy—and to free individuals and families from the intrusive overreach of federal bureaucrats.

The Party’s core principles of freedom and equal opportunity are as relevant today as at our founding, and they are the roadmap for American renewal in a new and interconnected world.