

Of Donkeys and Elephants

Over the years, the donkey and the elephant have become the accepted symbols of the Democratic and Republican parties. Although the Democrats have never officially adopted the donkey as a party symbol, we have used various donkey designs on publications over the years. The Republicans have actually adopted the elephant as their official symbol and use their design widely.

The Democrats think of the elephant as bungling, stupid, pompous and conservative -- but the Republicans think it is dignified, strong and intelligent. On the other hand, the Republicans regard the donkey as stubborn, silly and ridiculous -- but the Democrats claim it is humble, homely, smart, courageous and loveable.

When Andrew Jackson ran for president in 1828, his opponents tried to label him a "jackass" for his populist views and his slogan, "Let the people rule." Jackson, however, picked up on their name calling and turned it to his own advantage by using the donkey on his campaign posters. During his presidency, the donkey was used to represent Jackson's stubbornness when he vetoed re-chartering the National Bank.

The first time the donkey was used in a political cartoon to represent the Democratic party, it was again in conjunction with Jackson. Although in 1837 Jackson was retired, he still thought of himself as the Party's leader and was shown trying to get the donkey to go where he wanted it to go. The cartoon was titled "A Modern Baalim and his Ass."

Interestingly enough, the person credited with getting the donkey widely accepted as the Democratic party's symbol probably had no knowledge of the prior associations. Thomas Nast, a famous political cartoonist, came to the United States with his parents in 1840 when he was six. He first used the donkey in an 1870 *Harper's Weekly* cartoon to represent the "Copperhead Press" kicking a dead lion, symbolizing Lincoln's Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, who had recently died. Nast intended the donkey to represent an anti-war faction with whom he disagreed, but the symbol caught the public's fancy and the cartoonist continued using it to indicate some Democratic editors and newspapers.

Later, Nast used the donkey to portray what he called "Caesarism" showing the alleged Democratic uneasiness over a possible third term for Ulysses S. Grant. In conjunction with this issue, Nast helped associate the elephant with the Republican party. Although the elephant had been connected with the Republican party in cartoons that appeared in 1860 and 1872, it was Nast's cartoon in 1874 published by *Harper's Weekly* that made the pachyderm stick as the Republican's symbol. A cartoon titled "The Third Term Panic," showed animals representing various issues running away from a donkey wearing a lion's skin tagged "Caesarism." The elephant labeled "The Republican Vote," was about to run into a pit containing inflation, chaos, repudiation, etc.

By 1880 the donkey was well established as a mascot for the Democratic party. A cartoon about the Garfield-Hancock campaign in the *New York Daily Graphic* showed the Democratic candidate mounted on a donkey, leading a procession of crusaders.

Adlai Stevenson provided one of the most clever descriptions of the Republican's symbol when he said, "The elephant has a thick skin, a head full of ivory, and as everyone who has seen a circus parade knows, proceeds best by grasping the tail of its predecessor."

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How did Republicans pick the elephant, and Democrats the donkey?

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They didn't pick these labels – they got stuck with them! Their origin as symbols for the parties is attributed to a political cartoonist, Thomas Nast, who used the donkey

Why Nast chose the donkey and the elephant is a pretty complicated story. One version traces it to the "Central Park Menagerie Scare of 1874," a hoax foisted on its readers by the New York Herald newspaper. The Herald ran a deliberately false story about animals breaking out of the zoo and foraging for food throughout Central Park. Around the same time, the Herald was running a series of editorials against a 3rd term for President Ulysses S. Grant, calling the possibility "Caesarism."

Nast combined these two elements together for the first time in an 1874 cartoon for Harper's Weekly. He had a donkey disguised as a lion trying to scare away the animals in a forest. The donkey was a symbol for the New York Herald; the lion-skin costume was a symbol for a scare tactic [the paper crying wolf with "Caesarism"], and the animals in the forest were the symbol for the newspaper's hoax about zoo animals in Central Park.

One of the animals frightened by the donkey's roar of Caesarism was an elephant – a symbol for Republican voters, who were abandoning President Grant, and in Nast's view, about to fall into the Democrats' trap. Other cartoonists of the time picked up the idea of the timid elephant representing Republicans, and that symbol for the party became widely recognized and accepted by the general public.

Although Nast's original interpretation used the donkey to stand in for a Democrat-leaning newspaper scaring away Republican voters, his cartoon showing a duplicitous donkey attacking a weak-minded elephant, became a handy symbol for other cartoonists wanting to represent Democrats attacking Republicans. Popular recognition of the image overrode the party's own wishes – the Democratic party has never officially adopted the donkey as its emblem, but came to accept the reality that the symbol had stuck.

Another explanation for the donkey as political symbol stems from the 1828 presidential campaign -- during which Andrew Jackson was labeled a "jackass," for his populist views. Jackson proudly seized the label and began using donkeys on his campaign posters. During his presidency, cartoonists sometimes used the donkey to illustrate President Jackson's stubbornness on certain issues. After Jackson, the donkey symbol largely faded, to be revived again by Thomas Nast in his 1870's cartoons.

Over time, Republicans came to view the elephant emblem as a sign of strength and intelligence, while their opponents portrayed it as a timid and clumsy behemoth. Democrats seized the "jackass" label, and transformed it into a clever and courageous donkey.

As is still true today, it's all in the spin!