Symbols of the Two Parties = Donkey (Democrats) vs. Elephant (Republicans)

The Democratic Donkey

To understand the origin of the donkey as a symbol for the Democratic Party, you need to know a little about the politics of Thomas Nast's time. In particular, Nast despised the Copperhead Democrats. Copperheads were Northern Democrats who had opposed the Civil War from the start. Nast thought of them as anti-Union racists who had become far too prominent and influential in the North.

In his first cartoon featuring the donkey, which was published in 1870, Nast penned the animal kicking a dead lion. He branded the donkey as the Copperhead Press and the lion as Edwin M. Stanton, Lincoln's secretary of war, who had just died. The cartoon was an unflattering take on a Democratic press whose lingering anti-war beliefs dishonored Stanton in Nast's mind.

Nast's next use of the donkey appeared in an 1874 cartoon reacting to Democratic cries of Caesarism against Republican President Ulysses S. Grant. Grant was thought to be seeking a third term in office, and Democrats compared him to Julius Caesar, painting him as a greedy dictator trying to wield imperial power. Nast disagreed with these accusations. In his Nov. 7, 1874 cartoon, titled "Third Term Panic," he illustrated the Democratic press, specifically the New York Herald, as a donkey dressed in lion's skin. The donkey, labeled Caesarism, was scaring other animals off into chaos. The cartoon represented what Nast felt were fear mongering Democratic media -- they appeared as a ferocious predator but were actually foolish and harmless in their panic.

Despite the fact that Nast's donkey was another swipe at specific members of the Democratic press, not the party as a whole, the symbol remained synonymous with Democrats. The cartoonist's continued use of the symbol included an 1879 cartoon in which a leading Democratic Presidential candidate was grabbing a donkey labeled "Democratic Party" by the tail. The candidate was trying to prevent the donkey from hurting into a pit labeled "financial chaos." This was a commentary on the gold standard and inflation on the eve of the 1880 election. By the 1880s, Nast's use of the donkey had made it a national symbol for Democrats, although the Democratic Party never adopted the animal as its symbol.

In the cartoon in which a politician had the Democratic donkey by the tail, Nast's other famous political symbol, the Republican elephant, lay wounded and sluggish in the background. While the Democratic donkey was generally the symbol of a party of braying fools in Nast's eyes, the Republican elephant was another story. It symbolized a party that had departed from its roots in social liberalism, which Nast favored. Read on to find out about Nast's use of the elephant.

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The Party Shift

You might be wondering: if Thomas Nast favored social liberalism, why was he a Republican? Nast was a Republican before the two parties shifted in their philosophies. So how did the parties flip-flop? The history of each party is complex, and the shift was gradual, but the election of Franklin D. Roosevelt as a Democratic president was one turning point. Roosevelt's liberal New Deal policies as a Democrat made many in the Republican Party become Democrats. By contrast, it also sparked many Southern conservatives to start voting Republican.

The Republican Elephant

Just like the donkey, the elephant became a popular symbol through the political cartoons of Thomas Nast. But Nast had different feelings toward the elephant — it represented the party he'd idolized since his emergence on the New York political scene. Behind his renderings lay strong, Republican convictions. But Nast became frustrated with Republicans in the 1870s, when he felt the party had strayed from social liberalism. That frustration, in part, would spawn the Republican elephant image.

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Nast's famous "Third Term Panic" cartoon was his first use of an elephant to represent the Republican Party. A donkey in lion's skin (center) scares off other animals. Among them is the elephant (top left), representing the Republican vote.

The elephant had been used twice before as a political symbol, once in a piece of 1864 Lincoln campaign literature and again in 1872 by Harper's. Nast's first use appeared in the same 1874 "Third Term Panic" cartoon that featured a disguised donkey chasing frightened animals. An elephant bearing the title of "Republican Vote" bounded clumsily towards a pit labeled "inflation" and "Chaos." The elephant represented the effects of Copperhead Democrat scare tactics, as well as the confused behemoth that Nast felt many Republican voters and publications had become.

A Real-life, Elephantine Panic?

A common misconception about the "Third Term Panic" cartoon involves a hoax story the Herald ran about animals escaping from the Central Park Zoo in November 1874. Many believed the fleeing animals in the cartoon were Nast's response to the phony headline. However, Nast likely drew the cartoon prior to the hoax, and there is no indication he knew of the story beforehand.

After the "Third Term Panic" cartoon, Nast continued using the elephant to represent Republicans. An April 1876 cartoon entitled "The Political Situation" showed a confused Uncle Sam, labeled "The Vote of the People," atop a two-headed elephant forced to decide between the "Democratic Road" and the "Republican Road." Another cartoon released shortly before the 1876 presidential election showed a hulking Republican elephant stomping on a Democratic tiger.

Nast's first cartoon that used the elephant to represent the Republican Party as a whole came in March 1877. On the heels of the extremely controversial presidential election, he depicted a bruised and battered elephant crouched at a Democratic Party tombstone. The ailing elephant indicated Nast's belief that Republican Rutherford B. Hayes' victory despite losing the popular vote was a bitter, damaging one. In an 1884 cartoon, Nast even deemed it "The Sacred Elephant," the nostalgic symbol of the party he had once loved. Unlike the Democratic Party, the Republican Party eventually adopted the elephant as its official symbol.

Nast introduced the donkey and the elephant as national political symbols, but there is no definitive answer as to why they remain so popular nearly 140 years later. Perhaps the best explanation is the influence of Nast himself. He was a rare political cartoonist whose work influenced the politics of his era.