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Machine Bosses, Reformers, and the Politics of Ethnic and Minority Incorporation

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

Throughout American history, political party organizations have served both as effective forces of political incorporation of newly arriving immigrants and as powerful barriers to fuller representation for minority groups. This chapter examines how urban political leaders and institutions have shaped the political emergence or suppression of ethnic groups from the Civil War era to the early twenty-first century. With particular focus on New York and Chicago, it critically reassesses the conventional paradigm of big-city party bosses as ethnic integrators fashioning and rewarding multiethnic “rainbow coalitions” and of political reformers as defenders of native-born Protestants.

Keywords: Machine politics, party bosses, urban politics, political parties, immigration, political participation, ethnic politics, political reform

Political machines, the bosses who controlled them, and the reformers who fought against them have been a mainstay of America’s ethnic history. A comparison between urban politics in the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first century provides a way to understand American ethnic politics. Does the incorporation of immigrants and minorities in the early twenty-first century follow the same political dynamics as in earlier periods of American history? Or, have the processes and character of ethnic political incorporation fundamentally changed over time? Answering both of these questions requires a reconsideration of the pivotal role played by urban political leaders and institutions in shaping the political emergence and suppression of various immigrant and ethnic groups throughout American political history. Although many scholarly accounts identify big-city party bosses as ethnic integrators—fashioning and rewarding multiethnic “rainbow coalitions”—and paint political reformers as defenders of native-born Protestants, the political record points to a much more nuanced and complicated pattern of racial and ethnic politics.

New York City and Chicago, two well-studied cities with strong machine and ethnic political traditions, provide good exemplars. In the nineteenth century, New York politician William Tweed (commonly known as Boss Tweed) built Tammany Hall—the executive committee of New York City’s Democratic Party and a known hotbed of political corruption—through the political mobilization and incorporation of Irish Americans. In Tweed’s wake, the Irish firmly controlled Tammany Hall and much of city politics until the 1930s, only partially incorporating later-arriving immigrant groups. In the twentieth century, New York’s famed reform mayor, Fiorello La Guardia (1934–1945), defeated Irish-controlled Tammany Hall, in part by appealing to and including Jews, Italian Americans, and, to a much lesser extent, African Americans in his political coalition.

In Chicago, legendary Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley (1955–1976) established the city’s powerful Democratic machine while providing few accommodations to the city’s African American community. These are among the leading examples of nineteenth and twentieth century boss and reform rule. In the early twenty-first century, urban politics continues to parallel many of these dynamics, with New York’s Afro-Caribbean community confronting

challenges of leadership development and political inclusion in the face of rear-guard resistance from the remnants of the once-powerful borough party organizations.

Boss Tweed, Tammany Hall, and the Irish

William M. Tweed was an early leader of Tammany Hall, the legendary political machine that played a major role in New York City politics from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1960s. Tammany Hall controlled Democratic Party nominations and patronage in Manhattan from the Civil War until the election of reform mayor Fiorello La Guardia in 1933. Despite a brief resurgence in the 1950s, Tammany collapsed in the 1960s.

Tweed, of Scotch Irish ancestry, had become head of Tammany Hall in 1863 and consolidated control over city government by early 1869. The reign of the so-called, "Tweed Ring," with the boss's political allies appointed to key public offices, was short lived. In 1871, Tweed was arrested and later convicted of stealing an estimated \$25 million to \$45 million—between \$1 billion and \$2 billion in 2010 dollars—or even more from New York City's treasury through fraud and corruption.

The initial research on Boss Tweed's legacy and, more generally, nineteenth-century Tammany Hall, was firmly rooted in the early twentieth-century muckraking tradition and focused on the techniques and epic scale of the Tweed Ring's graft and corruption. By the 1960s, however, a more positive scholarly view of Tweed and Tammany Hall began to emerge. Seymour J. Mandelbaum's *Boss Tweed's New York*¹ invoked communications and organization theory to show how Tweed organized and centralized a political marketplace, exchanging patronage jobs for the political support and votes of newly enfranchised immigrant voters.

The new paradigm placed Boss Tweed and urban political machines at the center of efforts to incorporate the first generation of European immigrants, particularly the Irish, into American democracy. Between 1846 and 1855, 1.4 million Irish immigrants escaping the potato famine came to the United States. Though nearly all were rural cottars and laborers, more than 90 percent of the migrants would settle in cities. The immigrants were field laborers, not farmers, in a single-crop economy that had failed. Because of the transatlantic packet boat routes, most of the immigrants landed in the eastern port cities of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia and were too poor to move inland. The Irish diaspora dramatically altered the complexion of these northern cities. By 1850, there were 133,730 Irish-born inhabitants of New York City, 26 percent of the total population.²

The Irish migration soon took political form. The machine represented the dominant urban political institution of the late nineteenth century. Assisted by early party leaders such as Boss Tweed, the Irish became arguably its leading architects. By 1890, Irish bosses ran most of the big-city Democratic machines constructed in the post-Civil War era. Party organizations such as Tammany Hall organized and linked the "input" and "output" dimensions of the local political system. On the input side, precinct captains mobilized the electorate. Local bosses controlled party caucuses and conventions and thus nominations to local offices. By controlling voters and officeholders, the machine could control the output side of politics—patronage jobs, contracts, franchises, and services. The machine maintained itself in power by skillfully deploying these resources. Bosses purchased voter support with individual economic inducements such as offers of public jobs or services.

Advancing a cultural theory, Daniel Patrick Moynihan,³ a senator from the state of New York (1977–2001), argued that urban machines like Tammany Hall were transplants of village life in Ireland. Other scholars such as Martin Shefter⁴ focused on the role of entrepreneurial political leaders. Party bosses like Tweed built centralized machines by successfully resolving the organization's maintenance needs—creating a winning supply of votes, rewarding and disciplining the party's henchmen, controlling public officials, and securing adequate party financing and patronage.

Boss Tweed's prodigious efforts at incorporating and rewarding poor Irish immigrants are well documented. First, he cranked up Tammany's naturalization mill. During his short tenure, the city's electorate nearly doubled in size, from 71,000 to 135,000 voters. Under "Honest John" Kelly, Tweed's successor, Tammany's citizenship factory continued to churn out now-eligible voters. By Kelly's death in 1886, Tammany had naturalized nearly 80 percent of the city's Irish, German, and other "old" (western European) immigrants. These new citizens swelled the ranks of machine voters and helped consolidate Tammany's hold over the party and the city.

During this formative stage of machine building, Tammany and other big-city Democratic Party organizations did more than mobilize immigrant voters. They also substantially increased public spending in order to reward these supporters. Boss Tweed, for example, embarked on a program in the late 1860s of massive deficit financing in part to enlarge the city payroll. A contemporary observer estimated that there were 12,000 to 15,000 members of Tweed's "Shiny Hat Brigade," the holders of newly created municipal sinecures. Under Tweed, the city's debt nearly tripled, rising from \$36 million in 1868 to \$136 million at the end of 1870. By 1868, Tweed controlled state as well as city government. He broadened his appeal to immigrant and working-class voters, such as the Irish, by state subsidies to Catholic schools and to religious charities.

As Tammany Hall and the other big-city Democratic machines consolidated power, they began to turn their back on the "rainbow" approach to coalition building and public spending. To reduce the threat of middle-class and business tax revolt, post-Tweed Tammany Hall, now firmly under Irish control, fashioned alliances with the business community. What ensued was a late nineteenth-century era of municipal retrenchment as per capita public spending and debt fell. The machine's monopoly status and more conservative fiscal policies did not bode well for later arriving immigrants. An entrenched Tammany Hall would no longer quickly turn out newly minted voters. Between 1886 and 1897, under boss Richard Croker, the city's electorate grew at one-half the rate it had under his predecessor "Honest John" Kelly (1872–1886)—33 percent as opposed to 68 percent.⁵

The paradigm of big-city bosses and machines as ethnic integrators best fits the case of the nineteenth-century Irish immigrants. For the Irish, there were Old World roots to their political skills. In Ireland, the late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century struggle to repeal the Penal Laws, which had reduced Irish Catholics to penury and powerlessness, brought the Irish group solidarity and experience with mass political organization. The Irish would also benefit politically from the spread of the national educational system in the early nineteenth century. The proportion of the population who spoke English rose from an estimated 50 percent in 1800 to 95 percent in 1851. Yet the development of the American party system also shaped the character of Irish American political participation. The Irish affected by the famine arrived in the late 1840s and early 1850s as the parties were entering their modern or mobilization phase. Urban Irish immigrants benefited from the fierce competition among urban Democratic Party factions in their electoral contests with Whigs and Republicans.

New Immigrants and the Rise of La Guardia's Reform Coalition

During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, growing economic and political hardships in parts of Europe transformed the ethnic composition of migrants arriving in American cities. While earlier waves of immigration were dominated by Irish and German families, newcomers came increasingly from southern and eastern Europe during this period. In 1890, Jews—from Russia and Poland—and Italians represented one in twenty New York residents; over the next four decades, the figure would rise to 36 percent of the total, or more than one in three New Yorkers.

Although the immigrants generally supported Democrats and voted for Tammany Hall candidates, Italians and Jews were clearly the machine's junior partners. These groups received far more limited public benefits than Irish supporters and, partly as a result, maintained weaker ties to the party organization. This arrangement represented a deliberate, and in many ways rational, decision on the part of Tammany bosses. Among Italians, for example, the growing population counts greatly overestimated the group's electoral importance due to very low naturalization rates among Italian immigrants. A large number of Italian immigrants were temporary workers who eventually moved back to Europe.

Unlike its energetic efforts to incorporate Irish and German immigrants, the now-entrenched Manhattan machine had few incentives to invest resources in helping Italian immigrants attain citizenship and thus become eligible voters. Although Italians won some low-level positions within the organization, Italian voters received substantially fewer benefits in exchange for their support compared to the machine's core constituency, the Irish.

By contrast, Jews posed a considerably greater threat to the continued electoral dominance of the Tammany machine and thus won substantially greater recognition. Overall, Jewish voters were more numerous compared to their Italian counterparts and were also far less reliably Democratic, creating a swing bloc large enough to potentially help unseat the machine in a strong anti-Tammany year. During the tenure of powerful boss Charles Francis Murphy (1902–1924), Tammany diligently courted Jewish voters. Boss Murphy assiduously rooted out anti-Semitism within the party while Tammany-linked politicians in the state legislature provided strong symbolic support

for the Jewish community through the introduction of legislation outlawing discrimination.⁶ However, in their effort to attracting Jewish voters, neither Boss Murphy nor his successors attempted to redistribute political resources away from the Irish. Although the machine helped many Jews find well-paying government jobs, these were primarily new positions created through the dramatic expansion of the city's public school system during this period rather than a reallocation of spots previously filled by Irish workers.

This two-tiered coalition—Irish at the core with Jews and Italians enjoying the residual benefits—helped preserve the electoral dominance of the Tammany machine through the 1920s. However, by the early 1930s, the local Democratic Party faced serious challenges to its continued rule. First, highly publicized scandals triggered a series of investigations that exposed deep corruption within the organization, stirring anti-Tammany sentiment. The Great Depression also strained city finances, triggering deep retrenchment in the city budget. In an effort to protect Irish positions, city leaders concentrated the cuts on the public schools, hitting Jews particularly hard. Finally, national presidential campaigns that featured Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Al Smith, the first Catholic to run for president, led to substantial mobilization and participation among new immigrants, Italians in particular. These new voters did not have the same ties to the local Democratic machine, nor did they enjoy access to the substantial benefits that depended on Tammany's continued electoral success.

Collectively, scandal, retrenchment, and record turnout dramatically weakened the machine's electoral foundation and deprived it of key resources needed to sustain its political operation. In 1933, Tammany-supported Mayor John Patrick O'Brien—first elected to the job a year earlier after corruption scandals had forced out another machine-backed incumbent—was defeated by former Congressman Fiorello Henry La Guardia in a three-way race. Although La Guardia was a nominal Republican, he came from the shrinking progressive wing of the party and was a strong supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal. La Guardia rose to prominence in 1917 when he defeated another Tammany candidate and won a congressional seat long controlled by the party machine.

His personal background and political history made La Guardia a particularly effective candidate to woo Jewish and Italian voters. Born to Italian immigrant parents, La Guardia was half-Jewish and could speak Yiddish. During his time in Congress, La Guardia made himself a strong advocate for immigrants, opposing efforts to enact new barriers to naturalization and immigration. He had also opposed Prohibition and for many years worked with grassroots groups to naturalize Italian immigrants and register them to vote.⁷ Unlike Tammany Hall, which saw organized labor as a threat to its power and heavily cracked down on unions, La Guardia was friendly with both unions and New York's Socialist Party, two groups with close ties to the Jewish community. Perhaps most critical to the 1933 election, La Guardia also had strong supporters in the native-born reform community that had long sought to eliminate corruption and bring about changes in local government that would weaken the Democratic machine.

La Guardia's success—and, in particular, the role of new immigrants in his electoral coalition—presents an important challenge to the conventional scholarly wisdom about the machine-reform dynamic. Both Edward C. Banfield and James Q. Wilson's classic text on urban politics, *City Politics*,⁸ and Richard Hofstadter's historical account in *The Age of Reform*⁹ stress the sharp ethnic and racial divide that defined the battle lines between machine bosses and reformers. Both of these accounts emphasized the importance of immigrants in providing electoral support for the machines and identified the native born—especially white-collar professionals and Protestants—as the political base of the reformers. Although perhaps an adequate description of La Guardia's first election, the conventional model does a poor job of explaining the patterns of electoral support that led to La Guardia's two subsequent terms and the pivotal role of new immigrants in supporting the reform slate during these elections. In his successful 1933 mayoral campaign, La Guardia ran on a combined Republican-City Fusion Party ticket. The ticket was ethnically balanced, with Italian and Jewish candidates nominated for prominent offices. La Guardia won a substantial number of votes from these two groups and also from other Republicans and reform voters.

Once in office, La Guardia worked quickly to dismantle the apparatus of the Tammany machine and to create new opportunities for his supporters. The mayor greatly expanded the reach of civil service reforms, eliminating thousands of politically appointed positions and replacing them with jobs filled on the basis on merit and competitive exams. His administration also changed the formal qualifications required for many city jobs, increasing the weight given to formal schooling and imposing educational requirements for many city jobs. Both sets of reforms benefited La Guardia supporters, especially well-educated Jews who received much greater access to city jobs previously reserved for Tammany Hall's Irish supporters. In addition, La Guardia appointed both Jews and

Italians to powerful positions in city government. La Guardia's outspoken opposition to Nazism, amid rising tensions in Europe, further strengthened his stature in the Jewish community.

Overall, La Guardia's reforms proved to be resoundingly successful in forging a new electoral coalition that attracted substantial support from Jews and Italians, two groups that had been neglected by the Democratic machine. In 1937, La Guardia became the first reform mayor in the city's history to be re-elected for a second term, winning more than 60 percent of the vote in heavily Italian precincts and almost 70 percent in Jewish districts. Four years later, La Guardia was re-elected once again. In the third contest, he again secured strong support from Jews, winning more than 70 percent of the vote in Jewish precincts. His support among Italians, however, declined somewhat due to both greater efforts by Democrats to win back the Italian vote and La Guardia's criticism of Mussolini and support for Roosevelt's interventionist foreign policy. La Guardia won a minority of the Irish and German vote in 1937, and his support among these pro-Tammany voters slipped even further in 1941.¹⁰

In both of the latter two elections, La Guardia also won overwhelmingly among African American voters. This sustained support is perhaps surprising, given the limited gains that blacks had made during the La Guardia administration. Blacks were hit particularly hard by the Great Depression, which only worsened their already-poor living conditions and further intensified grievances in the face of continued discrimination in both housing and employment. In 1935, false rumors that police had killed a black child accused of shoplifting sparked a riot in heavily black Harlem. In the aftermath, La Guardia appointed a biracial commission to investigate the causes of the riot. When the commission released a report highly critical of city government, however, the mayor buried the report and largely ignored its findings and recommendations.

There is little doubt that La Guardia sympathized with the struggles of New York blacks and invested more effort than his predecessors did in bringing needed economic development to black neighborhoods. Particularly after the riot, La Guardia appointed African Americans to several prominent public positions and opened new relief bureaus in Harlem. However, progress for the black community under La Guardia was uneven. In 1943, the mayor's support for a new housing project that planned to exclude African American residents helped contribute to another round of racial rioting in Harlem.

Indeed, the experience of African Americans during this period highlights La Guardia's mixed legacy in bringing about greater minority political incorporation in New York. Groups at the core of the La Guardia reform coalition—in particular, Jews and Italians—won access to greater public benefits under the mayor's watch. Blacks, however, remained much more on the periphery, replicating the two-tiered electoral coalition that had been the hallmark of the Tammany machine. Some of reforms pushed through by La Guardia would later hamper future incorporation efforts by emerging minorities. For example, strong civil service protections that insulated bureaucrats from political control would eventually come to represent a key barrier to reversing a culture of racism and discrimination. Excessive educational requirements kept many qualified blacks from attaining public employment. Decades later, strict height requirements for firefighting jobs put in place to limit the reach of patronage politics would also keep Puerto Rican immigrants and their family members from securing city firefighting jobs.¹¹

Richard J. Daley, the Chicago Machine, and African Americans

Richard J. Daley, who served both as Chicago's long-serving mayor and Democratic Party chieftain from the mid-1950s to his death in 1976, was arguably the most powerful twentieth-century urban boss. Despite the fact that he ruled the city with an iron hand and extended his influence deeply into state and national politics, Richard J. Daley and his son Richard M. Daley, Chicago's mayor from 1989 to 2011, would be among the last of a dying breed of big-city bosses.

The post-World War II era marked the decline and demise of nearly all of the old-style urban party organizations. The machine's traditional supply of patronage jobs and social services dwindled. The flight of industry and the white middle class to the suburbs cut sharply into the tax base of the older northern cities. The introduction of merit systems in the 1940s and 1950s cut further into the machine's patronage stock. In the 1960s, new urban political actors—public sector unions and minorities—mounted a frontal assault on the remnants of the patronage system using collective bargaining agreements and court-ordered affirmative action. The machine's control over social services weakened in the face of competition from the federal government and labor unions. The New Deal's legacy of social insurance and welfare programs lay beyond the bosses' apparent reach.

Machine Bosses, Reformers, and the Politics of Ethnic and Minority Incorporation

Perhaps the most serious challenge to boss rule was the rapidly changing character of the big-city electorate. Wartime and postwar prosperity benefited white ethnics, the machine's traditional supporters, many of whom had moved to the suburbs. Those who remained in the city demanded low taxes, homeowner rather than social services, and the preservation of white neighborhoods and property values. The postwar machines also faced the challenge of accommodating a third wave of poor migrants to the cities. Southern blacks flocked to northern cities like Chicago in the largest domestic migration in history. They were later joined by Hispanics migrating from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Latin America. In Chicago, African Americans and Hispanics constituted a majority of the population in 1980, up from one-quarter in 1960. The new migrants demanded the machine's traditional benefits—patronage and welfare services—at a time when the bosses were less able to supply them. Nevertheless, the Daley machine would show remarkable ingenuity and resiliency in the face of declining resources and shifts in the big-city electorate.

Chicago's African American community appeared well positioned to make claims on the Daley machine. Richard A. Keiser¹² argues that by 1950, African Americans had achieved more political empowerment in Chicago than any other city. The city's robust inter- and intra-party electoral competitiveness in the early twentieth century created strong incentives for competitors to woo the African American vote. Even though the black vote was small in this era, when it was mobilized, it could make a difference in competitive elections.

At first, the Chicago Democratic machine avidly courted the minority vote. Congressman William Dawson, the only black in Daley's inner circle, controlled Chicago's massive South Side ghetto. Blacks on the South Side and on the racially changing West Side supplied the margin of victory in three of Mayor Daley's six victorious campaigns. In the 1955 election, Daley defeated his Republican opponent by 127,000 votes, receiving a 125,000-vote plurality in heavily black machine-run wards. In 1963, when white homeowners staged a major revolt against the Daley machine because of a 100 percent increase in property taxes since 1955, Daley narrowly defeated his Polish American Republican challenger only because of a massive black vote in machine-controlled wards.

Despite their electoral fealty, African Americans received few material rewards from the Daley organization. Rather than giving Congressman Dawson significant power or patronage, Daley rewarded him with control of vice and gambling in the South Side ghetto. Blacks comprised 40 percent of Chicago's population in 1970, but only 20 percent of the municipal workforce, largely in menial positions. Untangling the complex relationship between the Daley machine and the black community, William Grimshaw¹³ documented the creation of several distinct party regimes. Daley carefully chose which black politicians to elevate within the party hierarchy, particularly Catholics and public employees to better ensure their loyalty. The poorer "black belt" wards on the South Side fared worse than the "plantation wards" on the West Side.

When Martin Luther King Jr. arrived in Chicago in 1966 to lead dramatic marches into all-white neighborhoods as part of an open-housing campaign, he was greeted by handpicked African American leaders with strong allegiances to the Daley machine. The resulting "summit accord" between King and the mayor, in which the protest marches would stop while city leaders would press for fair housing, was never seriously implemented by the Daley administration. In 1968, after King's assassination, Daley issued his infamous "shoot to kill" order to police during the ensuing ghetto riots.

The Daley organization judiciously used welfare-state programs to control the minority vote and siphon off discontent at minimal cost to the city treasury and tax-conscious white homeowners. Public housing and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) represented major New Deal programs used to placate black constituents. Migrating blacks confronted an acute housing shortage in Chicago as the machine collaborated with real-estate brokers to confine blacks to the crowded ghetto. Daley secured federal money to build low-income housing projects, and these public housing projects not only soothed the fears of white ethnics, but they also concentrated the black vote and made it more controllable. Although the machine exerted little control over AFDC eligibility, it assisted black claimants in securing welfare benefits and claimed credit for increasing benefits. Under machine auspices, the AFDC participation rate for black families in Chicago rose from 18 percent in 1969 to 32 percent in 1979. The machine also commandeered Great Society programs to build support in the black community, particularly among the middle class. Federal antipoverty programs created sizable employment opportunities for managers and service providers.¹⁴

Using federal programs to influence the black vote, the Daley machine by the late 1960s had developed a new

formula for electoral success: mobilize the white ethnic vote, particularly in wards undergoing racial transition. Appealing to white ethnics, Daley froze the property tax rate; prioritized homeowner and neighborhood services such as street repair, tree trimming, and garbage collection; and supported the preservation of white neighborhoods and schools. In contrast, the large African American vote, so crucial in 1963, was no longer needed for victory. In fact, the black vote now loomed as a risk, particularly if black independents could capture it and challenge machine hegemony. The machine worked at diluting the now-superfluous minority vote. Wards on the South Side were racially gerrymandered. When black sublieutenant William Dawson died in 1970, the machine groomed no replacement.

After Daley died in 1976, the machine's winning formula seemed to unravel. In 1983, black mayoral candidate Harold Washington fashioned a rainbow coalition of blacks, Hispanics, and white liberals to narrowly defeat Republican candidate Bernard Epton. The city's white ethnics, the machine's traditional mainstays, voted heavily for Epton. Washington's razor-thin victory depended on a massive mobilization of black voters. In 1979, only 35 percent of eligible blacks had voted; in 1983, an unprecedented 73 percent of black voters went to the polls. Yet Washington's victory and the prospects for an enduring rainbow coalition proved to be short-lived. In 1987, Washington died while still in office, creating a succession problem. In 1989, Richard M. Daley, the legendary boss's son, defeated Washington's appointed successor and rebuilt the machine with white ethnic, Hispanic, and business support. Once again, African Americans were left largely on the outside looking in.

Afro-Caribbeans in Twenty-First-Century New York City

By the second half of the twentieth century, the weakening of the Democratic Party machines in both Chicago and New York created new—if temporary—opportunities for minority empowerment. In both cities, emerging African American leaders took advantage of the openings to increase representation and participation for the black community. In the 1980s and early 1990s, fragmentation among Democratic ranks helped lead to the election of the first black mayors in both cities, Harold Washington in Chicago (1983–1987) and David Dinkins in New York (1990–1993), although both headed weak administrations and served only one term each. In contrast to Chicago, however, African American leaders in New York succeeded in institutionalizing some of their newfound influence following Dinkins' re-election loss to Republican Rudy Giuliani. Black officials rose up through the ranks to secure top leadership roles in the various Democratic Party organizations in the outer boroughs.

Contrary to theoretical predictions that black mobilization would come primarily through the creation of successful "rainbow coalitions," uniting blacks with Latinos and other underrepresented minorities, the growing influence of African American leaders in New York did not translate into a new minority-led alliance. Indeed, near the end of the twentieth century, strong political coalitions between blacks and other minority groups failed to materialize, with conflict and tension marking both black Asian and black Latino relations.¹⁵

Dramatic growth in Afro-Caribbean migration under America's post-1965 immigration regime—with a large share of the newcomers from English-speaking Caribbean areas settling in New York City—created serious divisions even within the black community. By the year 2000, more than 500,000 Afro-Caribbeans were living in New York City, compared to just under 1.5 million African Americans.¹⁶ Rather than helping to incorporate the new immigrants into the political process to enlarge the size of the black voting bloc, however, African Americans within the established Democratic Party organizations have fought to preserve their own influence against attacks from emerging Caribbean political challengers.

Growing conflict between black-led Democratic Party organizations and the new wave of Caribbean immigrants belied the central role historically played by Caribbean leaders in the party. During the 1940s and 1950s, New Yorkers of Caribbean descent represented some of the most powerful black faces in the Democratic Party. When Saint Lucian-born Hulan Jack was elected as the borough president of Manhattan in 1954, he became the highest-ranking black elected official in the country. By the late 1960s, however, Caribbeans were replaced by a new generation of African American activists who took on leadership roles in Democratic organizations in Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx, home to ethnically segregated neighborhoods where a substantial share of New York's black population lived.¹⁷

Black Democratic Party leaders have been slow to embrace the growing ranks of Afro-Caribbeans who have arrived in the post-1965 wave of immigration, even though most have settled in many of the same historically black

neighborhoods in the outer boroughs. Although African Americans and Caribbean immigrants share many of the same political priorities, including concerns about continued discrimination and police abuse, and have both supported Democrats in national elections, the two groups have failed to form a unified political front.

During the 1980s, Caribbean political organizations—led by generally more conservative leaders than the overall immigrant population—broke ranks with other black groups in several high-profile contests. In the mid-1980s, a group of 150 prominent Caribbean leaders supported the re-election of Mayor Ed Koch—a conservative Democrat who had alienated many in the African American community—in the hope of increasing their access to the mayor, who was expected to win another term. Black leaders also resented Caribbean support won by other local white candidates who were facing strong insurgent challenges from African American opponents. In 1984, for example, leaders of the African American community attempted to unseat Brooklyn state senator Marty Markowitz by backing a strong challenger to him for the Democratic nomination. Although representing an increasingly black district, Markowitz successfully retained his seat by vigorously courting the Afro-Caribbean vote.¹⁸

In addition, leaders within the Democratic borough organizations have done little to speed the political incorporation of ethnic Caribbeans. Despite very low levels of naturalization, particularly among more recent arrivals, and even lower rates of voter registration and participation, the dominant Democratic Party has not organized a campaign to encourage immigrants to become citizens or voters. According to political science scholar Reuel Rogers, the party's approach has been marked by "benign neglect":

Although hundreds of thousands of Afro-Caribbeans have been migrating to New York since the 1960s, the city's parties have played almost no proactive role in encouraging their political participation. New York's Democratic Party has been more inclined to ignore Afro-Caribbean newcomers, even in the face of their growing numbers, expanding residential enclaves, and obvious potential for electoral influence, in boroughs such as Brooklyn and Queens. Party elites mostly have turned a blind eye to the immigrants, and sometimes even blocked their entry into the political system.¹⁹

In the face of political mobilization within the Afro-Caribbean community, party leaders have followed two strategies. First, they have used their influence to support incumbents who have faced Caribbean challengers. For example, the election of Una Clarke to City Council in 1991, becoming the first Caribbean-born person to be elected to New York's City Council, was initially challenged in court by the party-supported candidate. When such efforts have proved unsuccessful, party leaders have followed the Chicago and Tammany model by selectively incorporating handpicked Caribbean leaders into the party organization, without addressing the needs or representational aspirations of the broader immigrant community.

Reassessing Bosses and Reformers as Ethnic Integrators

Throughout American political history, municipal governments and their elected leaders have played a central role in incorporating newcomers into the political process. In the nineteenth century, political bosses and their machines assisted many immigrants, primarily Irish and German, in laying down roots and provided them access to jobs and critical social services. Although many machines were marked by patronage and corruption, it is important to recognize that political parties during this period served a critical redistributive function, channeling a significant share of governmental resources to needy urban populations.

Over the long term, however, political bosses did not prove to be unwavering allies of immigrants and minority groups. Although party organizations reached out to new groups when they faced competition from political opponents, by the twentieth century, entrenched machines largely neglected more recent waves of immigrants and, at times, discouraged participation from new voters who threatened to destabilize their electoral hegemony. In some cities during this period, it was political reformers, long considered opponents of immigrant interests, who reached out to groups marginalized by the political machine. In New York, reform mayor Fiorello La Guardia helped open local government to Italian and Jewish immigrants. In later years, another reformist leader, Mayor John Lindsay (1966–1973), similarly created new opportunities in the city for African Americans.

Indeed, the historical record suggests that the level of electoral competition—rather than the identity or partisanship of political incumbents—has had the most important impact on the extent of political empowerment of immigrant and minority groups. Political parties have reached out to and mobilized excluded groups when they

have faced strong the likelihood of losing elections to their political opponents. Under these conditions, party leaders have courted potentially pivotal and unattached voters to strengthen their electoral base. By contrast, entrenched parties—facing only weak opponents and a consistent record of election victories with large margins—have been free to pursue a more narrow distribution of public benefits, rewarding their core supporters. New groups that arrived after the formation of the governing coalition, like Jews and Italians under the Tammany machine, did not share equally in the fruits of victory.

Outside of major immigration destinations in the North, which have been the focus of the case studies examined in this chapter, the politics of race and nationality tended to follow a different historical trajectory. In smaller suburban cities, like those in the Southwest, strong party organizations did not emerge. Instead, reformers won early political victories and used their control of local government to adopt electoral institutions—off-year elections, at-large districts, council-manager forms of government—that effectively depressed participation among minority groups and lower-income, poorly educated voters.²⁰ In this region, reformers did indeed fit the conventional wisdom academic accounts of native leaders' opposition to minority incorporation, although they appeared to be motivated primarily by the logic of electoral survival rather than a deeply rooted Anglo-Saxon Protestant "ethos."

Although individual political leaders, such as specific political bosses and reformers, made important personal contributions to the history of ethnic and immigrant politics in America, their most important and long-lasting impact may have been in the design of political institutions. In many cases, these institutions survived the administrations of individual leaders and continued to shape the pattern of political participation long afterward. In the Southwest, for example, reform institutions like at-large elections proved effective in diluting the voices of geographically concentrated minority populations, especially Latinos, for many decades. These groups did not attain recognition or representation until the Voting Rights Act led to the establishment of district (ward) elections. In many cities, the adoption of civil service reforms have greatly limited political discretion in public employment, with mixed effects on historically underrepresented minority groups.

While urban government has attracted much of the attention from scholars interested in understanding the politics of ethnic and minority incorporation, it is important to note that many issues critical to determining the nature of access and political participation have historically fallen under the purview of higher levels of government. The path to incorporation for newcomers has been shaped most critically by laws regulating immigration, naturalization, and voting, which in most cases have fallen outside of direct local government control. During the late nineteenth century, for example, state legislatures throughout the country eliminated voting by noncitizens, a common practice in many states during the previous era, and adopted literacy tests that disproportionately hurt immigrant voters. Such developments greatly limited the voices of immigrants and also created opportunities for political entrepreneurs like Boss Tweed who were intent on building new political coalitions by helping naturalize potential political allies. In the 1970s, by contrast, the federal Voting Rights Act proved pivotal in providing new legal tools to groups previously excluded from local government.

Broader issues of immigrant and minority access and political participation that were so salient in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continue to attract substantial attention, particularly among scholars of election law. Current political debates about what some see as the discriminatory impact of laws that require voters to present photo identification, voter registration requirements, and efforts to limit public services for undocumented immigrants tap into the same political undercurrents and grievances that animated the conflicts between newcomers and their more established neighbors in earlier periods of American history. Although today's immigrants come primarily from Latin America and Asia, the experiences of northern, southern, and eastern Europeans can help inform our understanding of the struggles facing these groups and identify the political barriers and empowerment strategies needed to ensure their full participation in the American political process.

It is also likely that immigration from developing countries—a growing phenomenon in global gateway cities but one that is also increasingly present in other American regions that have not historically attracted a large numbers of foreigners—will challenge existing client-patron political relationships and lead to realignment of traditional political alliances. Some scholars have predicted that the growing number of Latino and Hispanic migrants, both from Mexico and other parts of Latin America, will not follow the traditional paths of political, economic, and social integration and assimilation that have characterized the experience of European immigrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²¹

Emerging scholarship that examines the political dynamics among new immigrant communities suggests that these predictions will prove to be too pessimistic. Given the reality that many new immigrants continue to settle in areas with large populations of native minorities—in many major cities, Latino centers have developed in historically African American neighborhoods—it is likely, however, that new immigrant flows will lead to rivalry and political conflict among ethnic communities. These changes may also create conditions ripe for the emergence of new ethnic political bosses who can successfully mobilize newcomers and build lasting organizations grounded in their own co-ethnic bases of political support. It remains to be seen whether these leaders will adopt the same political strategies of patronage politics and machine rule that marked the era of the Irish boss, or whether the ethnic bosses of the twenty-first century will create new political models based on the unique social and cultural institutions of these communities.

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(5) Erie, *Rainbow's End*, 53.

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(¹⁶) Reuel R. Rogers, *Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation: Ethnicity, Exception, or Exit* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 44.

(¹⁷) Philip Kasinitz, *Caribbean New York: Black Immigrants and the Politics of Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992).

(¹⁸) *Ibid.*, 228–230.

(¹⁹) Rogers, *Afro-Caribbean Immigrants and the Politics of Incorporation*, 83.

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