
Old Kinderhook and Civic Integration in America

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It is difficult to disentangle civic integration in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America from the urban political machine. Although most scholars agree that political machines (most notably Tammany Hall in New York) were primarily responsible for the political mobilization and integration of immigrants, they offer different perspectives as to why immigrants were mobilized in the first place. Some scholars argue that a given party “boss” would be motivated by a seemingly paternalistic desire to inculcate new immigrants with American virtues, which was likely rather a lever for obtaining support at the ballot box (Addams [1898] 1965, 124; Reid and Kurth 1992, 432–33). Others assert that the initial generations of immigrants were “characteristically insecure, culturally and often linguistically alien, confused, and often in actual want” (Cornwell 1964, 28), leading political machines to offer goods and basic social services in exchange for participation in grassroots and voter-intimidation efforts (Cornwell 1964, 28–29; Buenker 1969, 306; Scott 1969, 1144; Allen 1993, 50). Under this framework, the machines reasoned that if the flow of goods and services remained consistent, the electoral fealty of the immigrant would be preserved both before and after naturalization (Buenker 1969, 306).

More recently, Golway (2014, xxiv), using Tammany Hall’s example, suggested that while political machines were far from selfless, they had genuine positive

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feelings toward immigrants such as Irish Catholics, and their motivations for providing goods and services contained some normative component.¹ However, Golway's history of Tammany Hall, like most inquiry into political machines, is most interested in the waves of immigration that first began in 1845, after the onset of the Irish potato famine. Although these inquiries are necessary, they fail to address critical components of our understanding of political machines as an institution, those being the normative commitments that undergirded the political machines' initial development.

Tammany Hall, even under the notoriously corrupt William "Boss" Tweed, was not merely a glorified patronage scheme; if nothing else, any machine had to develop an ideological justification for its policies, programs, and mass mobilization strategies. Therefore, the formation of political machines, as well as the ideological motivations of those machines prior to their post-1845 heyday, needs further inquiry, especially as to how those motivations informed their approach to civic integration. The origin of political machines can be traced back to a network of chapters of the Society of Saint Tammany,² which first appeared in Philadelphia in the early 1770s (Von A. Cabeen 1901, 442; Paulsen 1953, 81). Initially, Tammany was expressly apolitical, and members "met monthly for an evening of conviviality, with much drinking and storytelling" (Allen 1993, 6). Ironically, Tammany's earliest iterations were explicitly "American" organizations that forbade foreigners from joining, a policy that would remain unchanged for several decades (Allen, 8). It would take far less time for Tammany to formally embrace politics, however, and both Aaron Burr and Thomas Jefferson, who hoped to secure New York's allegiance in the 1800 presidential election, made great use of Tammany's resources and reputation (Paulson 1953, 78; Golway 2014, 6). From then on, Tammany, and all the political machines modeled after it, were tied to democratic politics. However, Tammany's transformation from a Democratic-Republican faction to modern political machine would not occur until the rise of figures like Martin Van Buren (Remini 1958, 341).

Van Buren himself can be considered an example of civic integration. Without even considering his later support of including Irish immigrants in the Democratic Party, Van Buren was far removed from the "Anglo-Saxon" nature of early American politics and society. Born in Kinderhook, New York, to a humble Dutch-speaking father, Van Buren remains the only American president to have spoken a language other than English as his native tongue (Widmer 2005, 6). His family was of modest means, and Van Buren held a deep, lifelong insecurity of being seen as inferior because of his upbringing. He was raised in his father's tavern, which served as a

1. I use the word *normativity* or *normative* throughout this essay. In political theory, those terms refer to discussions of values: what values we should prioritize and how those values should be implemented in politics.

2. Henceforth known as "Tammany" or "Tammany Hall."

waypoint between Albany and New York City, as well as a polling place (Widmer, 24). Being in such a valuable location, and owing to Van Buren's father's passionate support of Patriot, Anti-Federalist, and Democratic-Republican causes, the tavern was frequented by many travelers of numerous ethnicities and economic backgrounds, most notably Aaron Burr (Cole 1984, 12–13, 19). As a politician, Van Buren is credited with founding the modern Democratic Party, as well as the Albany Regency, the nation's first political machine (Cole, 4). The Regency, at its peak between 1822 and 1838, allowed Van Buren to exercise nearly complete control over the Democratic-Republican (and later Democratic) Party in New York, as well as substantially influence policymaking at the state level (Van Buren 1867; Remini 1958, 352; Cole 1984, 4–5). At that point, Van Buren himself was a member of Tammany Hall, and the organization was closely tied to the Regency (Allen 1993, 30–37). It was during the 1828 election, in which Van Buren worked incessantly to propel Andrew Jackson's candidacy, that Tammany Hall enlisted the aid of the “many thousands of immigrants now flooding into [New York City] for the first time,” with Tammany leaders now “[abandoning] all hostility to foreigners” (Allen, 35).

Beyond purely historical investigations into his seemingly milquetoast defenses of Catholics living in the United States in the early 1830s (Cole 1984, 269), Van Buren's commitments to civic integration remain almost entirely unexplored. The reasons are twofold: First, historians generally mark Van Buren's election as president in 1836 as the end of the Jacksonian era (Shade 1998, 459). Ergo, scholarly interest in the period tends to begin and end with Andrew Jackson. Second, throughout his political career, Van Buren, nicknamed “The Little Magician,” was labeled a self-serving schemer who had no moral or political convictions other than what would leave his party victorious (Widmer 2005, 8–12). It is difficult to study the thought of a man who did not have any principles at all. But as biographer Edward Shepard noted, Van Buren was a “politic after the fashion of a statesman and not of a demagogue,” and merely “disliked to commit himself upon issues which had not been fully discussed, which were not ripe for practical solution by popular vote, and which did not yet need to be decided” (1899, preface). Although Shepard was perhaps overly laudatory of Van Buren, it is evident from Van Buren's writings that he did have a cogent political theory, that his political theory was consistent, and that his actions largely reflected his principles (Mintz 1949, 423). Although the limited scholarship surrounding Van Buren's political theory provides valuable context, it does not discuss his views regarding civic integration, nor does it assess how those views affected the political machines that followed him.

In short, Van Buren was a devoted Jeffersonian liberal, and, while he maintained a considerable bias in favor of farmers, he was far more sympathetic toward the United States' burgeoning urban population than Jefferson himself (Mintz 1949; Silbey, 2005). His ethics were largely utilitarian, but Van Buren couched these convictions in the language of Lockean natural rights, as he argued that the key

characteristic of good government was “the security of the rights of persons and of property” (Van Buren 1867, 72; Mintz 1949, 431). America, he thought, was “founded upon freedom in thought and action, imposing no unnecessary restraints,” where “occasional differences of opinion are not only to be expected, but to be desired” (Van Buren 1920, 512). He was skeptical of federal power and preferred limited state government as well. He initially attempted to block the construction of the Erie Canal in New York on the grounds that infrastructural development was not the proper role of government (Cole 1984, 50).

The political party was, for Van Buren, a means to an end (Mintz 1949, 428). He asserted that “the disposition to abuse power, so deeply planted in the human heart, can by no other means be more effectually checked; and it has always therefore struck me as more honorable and manly . . . to recognize their necessity, to give them the credit they deserve” (Van Buren 1920, 125). Even if the party was to engage in political patronage, Van Buren firmly believed in meritocracy and was committed to elevating only capable men of virtue (Cole 1984, 94–96). It is from these Jeffersonian roots that Van Buren’s sympathetic views of immigrants and civic integration emerge. With Van Buren’s contributions toward the development of political parties and machines in mind, understanding Van Buren’s views of civic integration is crucial for understanding both the political machines that would dominate American politics for the next century and the political tactics that have emerged in the modern era.

This article seeks to contribute to that understanding, as it would assist in further research regarding the political-intellectual machinery of the Jacksonian era. First, I examine the early nineteenth-century American political landscape with special attention to immigration and integration. Then, I situate Martin Van Buren in that wider political context and outline his political theory as it relates to civic integration. In addition, I expand on the historical ties between Van Buren and political machines by grounding them in Van Buren’s political theory. I conclude with a reflection on Van Buren’s importance and influence within American politics.

Immigration and Civic Integration from 1810 to 1830

With the notable exception of African slavery,³ the role of immigration in America in the early republic is often considered to be marginal, if not outright negligible. Between 1810 and 1820, 126,700 people emigrated to the United States, the vast majority being from the United Kingdom, Switzerland, and northern Germany (Grabbe 1989, 194). These numbers were greatly exceeded by natural population increase, as fertility rates in America were higher than anywhere in Europe. That being

3. The subjects of civic integration, in the context of this article, are white immigrant groups from Europe—particularly the Irish. The politics, attitudes, and practices surrounding Asian, Hispanic, and African Americans were entirely different and well beyond the scope of this article.

said, immigrants were beginning to alter the demographic and political makeup of American cities. As many as half of these immigrants, particularly the Germans and Swiss, settled in Philadelphia (Grabbe, 192), and a steady stream of Irish immigrants flowed into New York as well (New York University 2013). These changes spurred a reactive federal response. The 1819 Steerage Act limited the amount of weight a single ship could carry, which increased the price of ocean-borne travel and priced many prospective emigrants out of the market (Baxter and Nowrasteh 2021). This policy was largely ineffective, as net white immigration continued to increase between 1820 and 1830, possibly as relations between the United States and the United Kingdom began to normalize after the end of the War of 1812 (Grabbe 1989, 195).

Furthermore, not all responses to increasing immigration were expressly negative. As early as the election of 1804, Federalists and Democratic-Republicans alike attempted to garner support from the 250,000 immigrants who had arrived since 1783 (Zolberg 2006, 101). This trend was reflected in Van Buren's home state of New York. In 1809, Tammany Hall permitted Patrick McCay, an Irish Catholic, to run for the New York Senate under its ticket, though McCay was still not permitted to be a Tammany member. The systematic exclusion of the Irish from Tammany Hall would come to a head in 1817, when hundreds of Irishmen stormed a Tammany meeting to demand representation within the organization (Golway 2014, 7). Tammany's situation worsened after organization rival DeWitt Clinton—who had styled himself as the Irish's champion—won New York's gubernatorial election with Van Buren's help, though the two men would soon become bitter rivals, with Van Buren aligning himself with Tammany's more radical democratic ideas (Cole 1984, 53; Widmer 2005, 44–46; Golway 2014, 1). Van Buren's attachment to radicalism would grow in the coming decades, but that attachment would only reinforce his commitment to civic integration.

In this period, the most important barrier to civic integration was anti-Catholic sentiment. Although the earliest Irish immigrants to the then-American colonies were primarily Protestant, this would begin to shift in the early nineteenth century (Golway 2014, 34–35). The political memory of England's 1688–89 Glorious Revolution, which overthrew the Catholic James II (who was widely considered to be a tyrant), had survived well into the Founding era (Reising 2022), and Catholics often struggled to obtain full political rights. Even after the Bill of Rights was ratified, American Catholics were still well aware of their precarious political position, “as they faced legal restrictions . . . in some state constitutions,” as well as general social and cultural intolerance (Carey 1989, 325). New York's John Jay was particularly insistent about these requirements, and all seeking naturalization within New York's borders were required to “abjure and renounce all allegiance and subjection to all and every foreign king, prince, potentate, and state, in all matters, ecclesiastical as well as civil,” which effectively prevented Catholics and Anglicans from obtaining citizenship (N.Y. Const. of 1777, art. XLII; Carey 1989). Prospective officeholders were targeted as well. In 1806, Francis Cooper, a Catholic Democrat aligned with

Thomas Jefferson, refused to take the oath of office, which contained the same “in all matters, ecclesiastical as well as civil” language as the state constitution, for his seat in the New York State Assembly on the grounds that it violated his religious freedom (Carey, 329).

Although many German Catholics were subject to these restrictions, the primary targets were the Irish. Golway notes that “Catholics were considered incapable of understanding Anglo-Protestant ideas of liberty,” which would, in the minds of the Anglo-Protestant elite, pose a threat “to cultural, political, and economic norms such as laissez-faire economics, property rights, civic virtue, Anglo-Saxon supremacy . . . and Protestantism itself” (2014, 13–14). These fears served to delay rather than halt the tide of religious equality. Although American Catholics would struggle to reconcile their political convictions with their faith until the Vatican’s *Declaration on Religious Liberty* in 1965, Catholic immigrants and their descendants quickly began publicly embracing the ideals behind the American founding, thereby facilitating civic integration (Carey 1989; Finkelman 1992). For instance, in 1815, Demetrius Gallitzin, a Russian-born Catholic priest living in Pennsylvania, wrote a series of letters to the *Huntington Gazette* both defending Catholicism against Anglo-Protestant attacks and defending the young United States against Catholic suspicion—letters that were particularly influential in the latter case (Carey 1989; Schafly 1997). In essence, though immigration would not be at the forefront of American politics for many years yet, it was frequently discussed and debated, and there were indicators that immigration would become a dominant sociopolitical issue as it did later in the century. Arguments and actions in favor of civic integration were by no means universally accepted, making Van Buren’s decisions and views rather controversial.

Martin Van Buren, Class Conflict, and the Jeffersonian Argument for Civic Integration

It is under this sociopolitical backdrop that Martin Van Buren was first elected to the New York Senate in 1812. He quickly made a name for himself as a defender of the War of 1812, and it would not be long before his reputation for backroom political dealing preceded him. But Van Buren did not become the founder of modern political parties by his skills as a tactician and strategist alone. His influence also stemmed from his ability to synthesize disparate political theories into a unified platform. Although no elected official is immune from making decisions based purely on political expediency, Van Buren was a thoroughly honest man, and there is little evidence that any of his decisions were notable departures from his true thoughts (Mintz 1949, 445). Van Buren’s political theory can thus be ascertained through his actions and political strategy as much as his words. This is particularly important as Van Buren was a notoriously private man (his autobiography makes no mention of his

wife, with whom he was very close) who avoided expressing his full opinion unless he felt that he had no other choice. Ergo, this and any future study of Van Buren's role in American political culture "will remain fragmented since he kept his secrets and motivations to himself to a large extent. Historians are left to fill in the blanks" (Lucas 2014, abstract).

Nevertheless, one can conclude that Van Buren embraced, as understood in contemporary political nomenclature, classical liberalism (Mintz 1949). He embodied the term *democratic republican*, as he favored a republic built firmly on the backs of the common man, who, while prone to emotional or intemperate decision-making in the short run, could be trusted to make proper political decisions in the long run. He firmly supported a free market economy, and though he was amenable to some taxes and regulations after much deliberation, he reflexively opposed government intervention in the economy. This led Van Buren to emerge as a prominent state's rights advocate, prioritizing state as opposed to federal intervention if he deemed intervention to be a necessary evil (Mintz 1949; Silbey 2005). Perhaps most importantly for his relationship with the Irish, Van Buren openly espoused the "rights of man" language popularized by Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft decades earlier, holding that all men were born naturally equal, and that all were entitled to life, liberty, and property. In doing so, Van Buren consciously identified himself as a Jeffersonian, revitalizing and revamping the democratic and perhaps antinationalist character of Jefferson's party during the First Party System (Risjord 1965).

Although it is clear that Van Buren was a Jeffersonian liberal, scholars differ on what being a Jeffersonian, and later Jacksonian, liberal actually meant (Richards et al. 2006). At the heart of these disagreements is the question of whether the Jeffersonians were more concerned with class or ethnicity. Nineteenth-century historians whom modern scholars label as "progressives . . . generally portrayed Jefferson, Jackson, and their followers as the champions of the common man in a long, see-saw struggle against the mercantile elite and the forces of privilege" (Richards et al., 11). The "common man," in this context, refers to a coalition of farmers and laborers who were politically united against the interests of large businesses, whom they regarded with hostility (Richards et al.). This position is not a historical artifact.⁴ Scholars in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including Sellers (1958), Jewett (1997), and Carpenter (2013), all affirm that the Jeffersonians, and the Jacksonians that followed them, were primarily concerned with mitigating the effects of social class. A class-based political vision would have facilitated civic integration via an acceptance of heterogeneity and an understanding that alliances and ethnic compositions within a

4. This position justifies neither a Marxist nor a socialist reading of Jefferson or Jackson. Although Jefferson abhorred natural aristocracy, and considered property to be a function of positive law rather than a natural right, both Jefferson and Jackson did not consider property to be evil. Both generally defended a market economy as well. See Valsania (2020) and Hammond (1957) for more information.

political body could shift at any time (Archer and Blau 1993). One's economic position, as opposed to one's ethnic background, was the arbiter of political involvement.

On the other hand, opponents of the progressive perspective assert that the Jeffersonians were motivated primarily by ethnic concerns. This opposition is understandable, given that much of Van Buren's political career was spent diluting Jackson's nationalism to the point where it could be synthesized with Jeffersonian democracy. As Richards et al. noted:

Also rejecting Schlesinger's class conflict interpretation was Lee Benson, who after studying New York State voting behavior maintained that the primary divisions in Jacksonian America were ethnocultural, not class. He was soon joined by Ronald P. Formisano and Michael Holt. Yet, while these scholars found fault with Schlesinger et al., they essentially argued within the framework that the progressive historians established. In a word, the progressive historians set the agenda. (2006, 12)

However, Van Buren himself seems to have defended the class-conflict position, and he did so by analyzing the policies and actions of Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton. He argued that Hamilton's proposal that the federal government assume state debts was lobbied for by the "commercial class . . . at all times a powerful body and by the nature of their pursuits inclined to favor strong governments, banks, and funding systems" (Van Buren 1867, 154). For Van Buren, the commercial class was supported by stockbrokers, "a numerous, crafty, and influential portion of almost every community," and by "all who wanted to borrow or had money to lend, a class still more numerous" (155).

Van Buren, never one to sling personal insults, did not go so far as to question Hamilton's virtue, nor did he personally castigate the classes Hamilton represented. In fact, he praised Hamilton for his education and commitment to policy study, and noted his "sincere desire to promote the good of his country" (Van Buren, 166). However, Van Buren implied that Hamilton's commitment to the moneyed class, and his entire political platform, were "schemes" antithetical to the values of the United States (154). He determined that the very purpose of the Federalist and Whig parties was to "combat the democratic spirit of the country" (166). That "democratic spirit" included "a sufficient love of order and respect for private rights," as well as "respect [for] . . . property" (166–67), and he worried that Federalist, and later Whig, opposition to democracy would generate the same type of tyrannical, centralized government the American Revolution had overthrown.

In contrast, it was Jefferson's commitment to democracy on class rather than ethnic divisions that Van Buren had admired since he was a boy. Jefferson, per Van Buren, contrasted Hamilton's moneyed interests with what he called "landed interests" (176). These landed interests consisted of small farmers both in the North and the South, though Van Buren was careful to note that neither bore any resemblance to

the British aristocracy, which was also deemed “landed interests” in much of the era’s political dialogue. Van Buren’s opinion of the landed interests was overwhelmingly favorable. He asserted that “from the landing of the Pilgrims to the present day [the landed interests] have exerted an effective and salutary influence, not only upon the condition of the country, in respect to its material improvement, but also upon the strength and character of our political institutions” (177). It was because of their moral virtue, as well as their commitment to republicanism, that Van Buren thought the landed interests stood opposed to the moneyed elite that controlled much of the country’s financial infrastructure and would presumably control the banking infrastructure under Hamilton’s plan of assumption. He trusted the masses to elect proper candidates, and the political parties, representing the opposing interests of society more broadly, to serve as a mediating institution between the people and the government.

This emphasis on class allowed many Jeffersonians,⁵ including Jefferson himself, to defend an open door for non-Anglo immigrants. Originally hostile toward immigrants, Jefferson’s letters reflect a gradual improvement in his sympathies, and he nurtured a growing desire to integrate them into American political and cultural life. As Jefferson wrote in his First Annual Message:

Shall we refuse to the unhappy fugitives from distress that hospitality which the savages of the wilderness extended to our fathers arriving in this land? Shall oppressed humanity find no asylum on this globe? The Constitution indeed has wisely provided that for admission to certain offices of important trust a residence shall be required sufficient to develop character and design. But might not the general character and capabilities of a citizen be safely communicated to everyone manifesting a bona fide purpose of embarking his life and fortunes permanently with us, with restrictions, perhaps, to guard against the fraudulent usurpation of our flag. ([1801] 1904–5)

Jefferson’s positive sentiments extended to his private life as well. In a letter to James Monroe, he requested assistance for a “mr. Robinson,” a Protestant (though pro-Catholic) Irish revolutionary who had fled to the United States; the letter also identified Robinson as “a good Republican” (Jefferson 1800). Van Buren, who had worshipped Jefferson in his youth, and knew Jefferson personally later in life, was familiar with Jefferson’s feelings and public arguments and “piously devoted” to them (Hummel 1999, 256; Van Buren 1920). For Van Buren, under Jeffersonian auspices, a Dutch or Irish farmer was just as much a part of a democratic society as an Englishman—and all three were more valuable than bankers and financiers.

5. The Jeffersonian faction was by no means united on the issue of immigration. Many Jeffersonians, including Tammany Hall prior to the 1820s, remained actively hostile toward immigrants.

But Van Buren was more accepting of economic changes than Jefferson. No democratic thinker from a state rapidly becoming the country's most populous and economically important could entirely divorce political theory from the needs of urban laborers. Though it is unclear whether Van Buren would have had faith in a predominantly urban democracy (Mintz 1949, 426), he did include "the mechanics not manufacturers, and the working classes" in his definition of the common man (Van Buren 1867, 222). Moreover, though he was at this time skeptical of universal male suffrage on economic grounds, Van Buren supported and defended "the right of mechanics, professional men and small landowners to vote" during New York's 1821 Constitutional Convention (Mintz 1949, 426–27). Critically, while Van Buren had faith that "the people" would eventually make the right decision, he worried that their "immediate judgements" would be unsatisfactory (Mintz, 428). This argument implies that Van Buren was more than a base majoritarian; his vision of limited government recognized that the people could be and were often wrong.⁶ The masses, particularly the passionate working class, would have to be guided by expertise and prudence.

Indeed, Irish immigrants were the epitome of a passionate working class. The Irish who had emigrated to the United States prior to the potato famine were often political dissidents who, like the American colonists just a few decades prior, had actively resisted the oppression of the British government in London. Many were literate but relatively poor, and even when they were able to establish themselves economically in the United States, their ability to engage freely in trade, commerce, and industry was sometimes restricted by law (Feeney 2006; Sweeney 2014). As Golway noted, the Irish's social struggle was the same on both sides of the Atlantic; "they had left behind a country where they had been routinely denied access to power. They were not about to let that happen again" (2014, 4). The Irish believed in the idea and message of America, but traversing the integration process alone was difficult if not impossible. The Federalists and some of the Democratic-Republican Party had been historically unwilling to support them.

Van Buren, and those who espoused his political views, sympathized with that struggle. William Holland (1836), one of Van Buren's supporters and early biographers, characterized the relationship between landowners and their immigrant tenants as being analogous to that of feudal lords and their serfs. He described Van Buren as adhering to the maxim "Give man the privileges and rights which belong to the species, and he will prove himself worthy of them" (188–89). To Van Buren, being of Dutch origin, "the British were always foreigners," and a given citizen's specific European background did not preclude effective and virtuous participation in American politics (Widmer 2005, 41). Though a pious member of the Dutch Reformed Church himself, Van Buren did not typically judge or demean men because of their

6. Van Buren consistently opposed the annexation of Texas, despite popular support. See Morrison (1995) for more information.

religion (Duncan 2020).⁷ Furthermore, though Van Buren recognized that “both Great Britain and the United States have inducements of the strongest nature to a faithful observance of the duties which flow from these sound and acknowledged general rules . . . [including] the most essential of the rights of man,” he worried that Britain’s reliance on banking would stymie a genuinely democratic government (1920, 480).⁸ The Irish, in turn, were an oppressed class inclined to be friends of democracy. To support their integration into the American polity was not only prudent but also righteous.

It is possible that Van Buren’s ideal democracy was rooted in caste rather than class, with the word *class* in Van Buren’s writings holding a very different meaning from that of typical socialist understanding. After all, both the Democratic-Republicans and the Democrats were mostly concerned with preventing certain economic interests (like public education reformers and corporate monopolies) from becoming too active in public affairs and thereby obtaining undue authority over the otherwise disassociated masses (Rutland 1995). In other words, under this framework, Van Buren’s reason for mobilizing Irish immigrants was the prevention of tyranny as opposed to the outright modification of economic conditions.

In any case, Van Buren’s preferred method of civic integration was political involvement, ideally through a political party. In his mind, not only would the political party prevent one individual from gaining too much power, but it would also serve as a filter for ideas, policies, and perhaps most importantly, particularly passionate individuals (like the Irish). This system would empower the common man to make important decisions in the long term without sacrificing the stability of the state in the short term. It was the duty of anyone who loved America to recognize the necessity of political parties, “to give them the credit they deserve, and to devote ourselves to improve and to elevate the principles and objects of our own and to support it ingeniously and faithfully” (Van Buren 1920, 125). The Irish, being democrats firmly in the working class, were both natural allies and American patriots, and in Van Buren’s mind, deserved moral and institutional support (1920; Holland 1836).

In pursuit of integrating the Irish within the broader Democratic-Republican Party, Van Buren supported DeWitt Clinton’s efforts to court Irish voters, arguing that Clinton’s “partiality” toward New York’s Irish citizens was “sensible” (Van Buren 1920, 39). Van Buren would later make an enemy of Clinton, but he would never do the same to the Irish. Van Buren formed a professional connection with the Irish community in his own right through his law practice and small donations to Irish civic groups and charities as early as 1820 (Duncan 2020; Montaya 2021).

7. This fact applies primarily to Protestants and Catholics. Van Buren had a complicated relationship with America’s burgeoning Mormon community, and as president he repeatedly refused to assist them in their battles against the Missouri legislature. It is unclear whether Van Buren denied Joseph Smith’s request to intervene on the grounds of expediency or political principle. I contend that it is the latter, since Van Buren’s involvement in state politics tended to be personal rather than through federal power. See McBride (2016) for more information.

8. Many of Van Buren’s objections to Hamiltonian economics stem from their British influence (1867).

He also began to publicly decry anti-Irish bigotry on both sides of the Atlantic (Van Buren 1920; Duncan 2020).

These efforts became much easier after Clinton's sudden death in February 1828, and Van Buren's work proved both personally and philosophically fruitful. When Van Buren was elected governor of New York later in 1828,⁹ his strongest support in the Albany region came from the Fourth Ward, which was overwhelmingly populated by Irish immigrants (Montaya 2021). Van Buren's efforts to integrate immigrants continued with the foundation of the Democratic Party. In tandem with elected officials, the *Albany Argus*, which would later become the Regency's chief newspaper, quoting James Madison's second inaugural address, lauded the Irish in 1813 as people "incorporated by naturalization into our political family, and fighting under the authority of their adopted country, in open and honorable war, for the maintenance of its rights and safety." The *Argus* would later deem the Irish more patriotic than native-born Americans, as they, unlike native-born Americans, were forthright in their civic engagement both within the Democratic Party and elsewhere (Duncan 2020).

Van Buren also developed numerous personal relationships with many of the Irish immigrants around him. For instance, early in his political career, Van Buren became acquainted with Thomas Addis Emmet. Emmet, a prominent Irish revolutionary, had emigrated to New York after the execution of his brother. Because of his Irish origins, his rapid involvement in New York's political scene was a subject of great controversy. The storming of Tammany Hall in 1817 was a consequence of the Democratic-Republican establishment's refusal to support Emmet's election to Congress (Montaya 2021). In American terms, Emmet was a loyal Democratic-Republican and a fervent Jeffersonian, and frequently represented the interests of the Irish community in both law and politics (Golway 2014, 2). Van Buren "always found him liberal, honorable and just," and noted that he "lived down the censures and hatred which pursued him in his emigration and were for a season troublesome, and died universally lamented as an honest man and faithful citizen" (1920, 173). These relationships and ideas fostered Van Buren's healthy respect of the Irish community, which he used to facilitate civic integration throughout his time as a national politician (Montaya 2021).

As he was trying to coalesce the numerous democratic factions into a single party, Van Buren consciously incorporated many Catholic values and practices into his political tactics (Duncan 2020). Although some of these actions were undoubtedly motivated by self-interested behavior in his own right, Van Buren's opponents understood that they were motivated at least in part by normative feelings; the new Democratic Party was genuinely amenable to the Irish's desire for economic opportunity and a better life (Fuchs 1956). Van Buren's efforts were so obvious that

9. Van Buren ran for governor as part of Andrew Jackson's ticket. Jackson himself was the son of Scots-Irish immigrants. See Cole (1984) for more information.

numerous Whig newspapers dubbed him “Martin the Pope” or “Pope Martin the First” (Duncan 2020, 32). Of course, many of these attacks represent the brutal politics of the time rather than Van Buren’s political thought, but they were far from pure hearsay. Nevertheless, Van Buren’s efforts were enormously successful, and Irish communities in multiple states (at least initially)¹⁰ became among Andrew Jackson’s (an avowed nationalist) most fervent supporters (Duncan 2020). An Irish newspaper in New York remarked that Van Buren was “the favorite son of our flourishing state: his talents, patriotism and attachment to our common country calls forth our unqualified approbation” (quoted in Duncan 2020, 42).

In turn, Van Buren was able to complete his mission of using the political party as a mechanism for civic integration, thereby creating a generation of passionate and civically involved Americans. It was that generation of Irish Americans, who had come of age under Van Buren’s leadership, that would take control of political machines like Tammany Hall and ensure the survival of the Democratic Party after the Civil War (Fuchs 1956).

Van Buren’s Political Theory and New York Politics

Two questions remain when analyzing how Van Buren’s approach to civic integration affected Tammany’s actions on the matter. First, to what extent did Van Buren’s Regency directly control the perspectives and operations of its municipal allies like Tammany Hall? And second, even if the Regency, and hence Van Buren himself, exercised broad control over organizations like Tammany Hall, did Tammany comply with the edicts out of partisan loyalty to Van Buren, or out of sympathy with Van Buren’s political theory?

Although scholars generally agree that Van Buren was in control of Tammany Hall, this position is far from universal. Gatell (1966) held that arguments connecting the Regency to Tammany Hall were made by explicitly pro-Jackson historians who assumed that Democratic bankers in Albany and New York City were both politically and economically united. Although Gatell acknowledged that the idea that “New Yorkers would do all they could to increase the power of their state seems axiomatic,” he maintained that New York City’s Tammany elite were not nearly as committed to destroying the Bank of the United States as were their counterparts in Albany (20). Furthermore, Gatell warned against “[equating] Regency leadership with Wall Street power. It was not that Van Buren and his friends disliked money, but many of them were more interested in political success than in making a million dollars, and even the Regency businessmen looked westward for their gains rather than southward to the metropolis” (21). Gatell’s thesis, if taken at face value, would establish clear political lines between Van Buren and Tammany on banking, which

10. Jackson did not perform as well with Irish voters during his reelection campaign, particularly with Protestant Irish in Philadelphia. See McGovern (2020) for more information.

would make proving Tammany's complete fealty to the Regency difficult to prove elsewhere.

But the historical and political record suggests that any separation between Tammany and the Albany Regency regarding the bank war appears to have been the exception rather than the rule. For the most part, particularly prior to Van Buren's victory in the 1836 presidential election, the Regency determined Tammany's policy positions and tactics (Allen 1993, 33). For example, Tammany joined the Regency's push for expanded white male suffrage during New York's 1821 Constitutional Convention, and its application of the spoils system was largely derived from Van Buren's influence (Van Buren 1920; Allen, 33). This was largely a function of Tammany's rapid alignment with Van Buren's Bucktail faction of the Democratic-Republican Party, which opposed DeWitt Clinton and would eventually grow into the Regency (Allen 1993). Furthermore, banking and economics in general were uniquely divisive within the new Democratic Party. Van Buren was notoriously noncommittal on economic matters, and it would often take him years to develop a formal policy position (Cole 1984, 272–75). This meant that the Regency would often alter and adjust its economic positions based on the needs of the times, which, while favorable to the landed and working classes, had a tendency to alienate otherwise sympathetic New York City bankers, who, fearful of uncertainty, desired a stable economic policy paradigm. This also made Van Buren's calm and deliberative approach to economic matters somewhat unpopular among party elites.

Moreover, Tammany Hall was not able to obtain power independently of the Regency until the latter's downfall in 1838 (Baida 1986). The Albany Regency was a statewide operation, and municipal affiliates like Tammany were clearly subordinate to statewide officials—dissent, especially in public, would not be tolerated (Remini 1958, 344–47, 352; Allen 1993, 33). At the state level, Van Buren was the undisputed leader and most if not all decisions went through him in some capacity. “Van Buren . . . was the absolute chief of the Regency and his position was never questioned. . . . His name was synonymous with it, and the other leaders of the Bucktail party conceded their own weakness without him” (Remini, 352). Van Buren was content to allow his trusted friends and allies to manage day-to-day affairs while he was in Washington, offering opinions or suggestions on local affairs when asked; but during a gubernatorial or presidential election, Van Buren would be in command, and “no action would be taken at all until he gave the word” (352).

Therefore, Tammany Hall's decision to mobilize Irish immigrants in 1828 could not have been made without the Regency's knowledge, and as 1828 was a presidential election year, that decision would almost certainly have come from Van Buren himself. Dissent stemming from the bank war would not occur for several years. Furthermore, Van Buren's incorporation of New York's Irish community did not occur in a vacuum. Although self-interest undoubtedly played a part in Van Buren's decision-making, he was also motivated by a conscious desire to integrate the

Irish community through political engagement. Again, he saw them as good democrats and members of the proper working and landed classes that would enhance the prospects of New York and the United States more broadly. This viewpoint was supported by myriad pro-Regency newspapers (Duncan 2020), which Tammany would undoubtedly have known of and been in contact with.

The literature on Tammany Hall's normative considerations remains rather light. As mentioned previously, only Golway (2014) has delved into the normative side of Tammany's political engagements, and he rooted those values in the starvation and political isolation experienced by Irish immigrants well after Van Buren's presidency. However, though Golway's account is far from inaccurate, it does not explain what tied Tammany Hall to the Democratic Party in the first place. Indeed, Tammany had always embraced the democratic cause. It was Tammany men who formed the nucleus of Van Buren's Bucktail faction, which would eventually develop into the Regency (Shepard 1899). Later on, Tammany embraced the Jacksonian synthesis of Jeffersonian democratic politics and American nationalism with gusto. The nomination of Jackson, himself the son of poor Scots-Irish immigrants, as the Democratic candidate for the presidency was met with songs, cheers, and the planting of a hickory tree to represent "Old Hickory" (*New-York Enquirer* 1828). And the celebration was not due to Jackson's personal charisma alone. Jackson was said to have uniquely understood the "issues of the new age," including the "sale of public lands, hard money and the national bank, [and] the tariff and nullification," all of which were intensely practical problems that the Regency and its allies prioritized (Thompson 1948, 224; Cole 1984, 174–75). Jackson was no fool, but he was able to communicate his positions to the broader masses effectively only because of Van Buren's assistance (Shepard 1899; Cole 1984, 177; Widmer 2005, 69–71).

Furthermore, Tammany began as an organization rooted in principle, not patronage—patronage was an evolution of the Regency's tactics and organization rather than its theory (Baida 1986). Although its commitment to democracy began with Aaron Burr, Tammany's commitment to civic integration was driven by Van Buren's desire for a prosperous, patriotic, and productive republic rooted in the landed and working classes. Since the Democratic Party was built on the Regency's structure and organization, the new local parties and newspapers began to reflect Van Buren's ideas (Watson 1990). New York City was no exception.

Later Tammanyites, at least at first, did not radically depart from these original ideas; they only adapted the model to the needs of the times (Allen 1993, 50). For instance, when the Irish potato famine struck, the Irish immigrants that began pouring into New York City en masse were far different from those who had come before. They were much poorer (Tager 2019; Hirota 2021), less likely to be literate (Collins and Zimran 2019), and overwhelmingly Catholic (Alzughabi 2015). Most had been farm workers or servants, and fewer than 10 percent knew a trade (Golway 2014, 45). Whereas the Ulster Protestants had revolted against a rival nation and were therefore

more palatable to the American sensibilities of the time, the newcomers were considerably less well received. Hundreds of job advertisements in the *New York Times* specifically excluded Irish Catholics, with some being as blunt as saying “No Irish” (Bulik 2015). But the new generation of Irish felt that the famine had not been an act of God, but the result of the British Empire’s cruelty (Golway 2014, 46–47). Food and politics were two sides of the same coin, and their political strategy in their new home would reflect that understanding.

As a result, the Irish “made it clear through their votes and their actions that they regarded those who provided jobs and influence as their friends and those who offered disdain and moral uplift as their enemies” (Golway, 43). No longer would the provision of political rights in and of themselves be sufficient for political satisfaction. Thus, merely including the Irish in politics as Van Buren did, while still necessary, was no longer sufficient. Tammany could have maintained a nativist facade, but, following Van Buren,¹¹ they adapted their principles to the changing times as opposed to compromising them. After all, both Irish Catholics and the Democratic Party resented the economic priorities of mercantile elites on both sides of the Atlantic (Van Buren 1867; Golway 2014). The original alliance of the landed and working classes remained firm—it was only the composition of the respective classes that changed.

In addition, Tammany solidified Van Buren’s strategies of patronage and centralization (Allen 1993, 50). Although Van Buren would not have favored Tammany’s more forceful methods,¹² those methods were a logical extension of Van Buren’s beliefs (Mintz 1949, 444). The Irish were given good jobs within the civil service and recognized as fully integrated patriots by their Democratic counterparts (Vaz 2021). In exchange, they were expected, in both conscience and action, to remain loyal to the Democratic Party (Vaz 2021) and to act as foot soldiers in organized voter intimidation efforts (Allen 1993; Golway 2014). This was not only to play politics—many Democrats genuinely believed in the virtues and sympathized with the struggles of the Irish.

But beyond these changes in approach among Tammany and the Irish community alike, there is evidence that Van Buren and his successors succeeded in convincing Irish immigrants of Jeffersonian liberalism’s merits. The Democratic Party—particularly in New York—was a stronger and more enduring force than the political entities that preceded it, and this development would not have occurred without the Irish explicitly championing the democratic experiment (Rorabaugh 1976). Although the Irish had, through their previous affiliations with monarchical Roman Catholicism as well as

11. Van Buren hired numerous Irish women fleeing the famine to his household staff. See West (1992), Richards et al. (2006), and Montaya (2021) for more information.

12. Van Buren acknowledged that politics was messy, and that at least some level of violence was inexorably linked therein. However, he preferred to win thoughts and minds—not physically coerce voters into supporting his candidates.

the Jacobite movement in England, generally opposed liberal democracy prior to their arrival in the nascent United States, they soon became loyal and committed Democrats (Doyle 2002, 31), and not simply because their interests converged. Simply put, Van Buren and the New York Democrats cultivated a unique liberal spirit in Irish immigrants by offering the Irish opportunities for moral and economic enrichment that most industries denied them (Cochran 1996, 594–95, 601). This enrichment was done not only through a given political machine’s traditional patronage network, but, perhaps most remarkably, also through a thorough introduction to journalism. For many Irish immigrants and their descendants, the American pen was their first opportunity to enter the public square on their own behalf.

One of these journalists was William Cassidy, the grandson of an Irish immigrant who had arrived in Albany in 1790 (Howell and Tenney 1886, 357). Cassidy studied law under Martin Van Buren’s son, John—who would remain a powerful but often embarrassing political ally in the coming years—before turning his attention to journalism. In the early 1840s, he became connected with the *Albany Atlas*, a paper that had emerged as the Van Buren Barnburner faction’s primary standard bearer within New York’s Democratic Party. Through political maneuvering and sheer competence, Cassidy eventually managed to take control of both the *Atlas* and the *Argus*, becoming president of the Argus Company (a new joint stock association) in 1865. Cassidy’s role, much in the model of Van Buren’s argument that political parties and associations should serve as a mediator between the masses and the government, was to “make and unmake men” (Howell and Tenney 1886, 357). Cassidy, an unabashed liberal and Tammanyite, was to cultivate—through both opportunity and charity—a network of writers and thinkers capable of elevating the liberal message to the masses, many of whom, like Cassidy himself, were either Irish immigrants or their descendants (Strum 2006, 58–62). Cassidy’s protégés would include Daniel Manning, another scion of the Irish diaspora, who took over the *Argus* after Cassidy’s death in 1873 (Hess 2023, para. 18).

It is clear that Martin Van Buren, prior to his death in 1862, had at least some involvement in Cassidy’s efforts. Not only did Van Buren’s son assist in introducing Cassidy to New York’s political scene, but Van Buren is also known to have exchanged letters with Cassidy (Van Buren and West 1910, 643), and Van Buren may have been responsible for placing Cassidy as both state librarian and editor of the *Albany Atlas* (Roseberry 1970, 15). In any case, Cassidy was widely recognized as an influential journalist, a worthy thought leader, and someone firmly within the Van Buren political nexus. It was arguably the latter connection that led to Cassidy’s being introduced to a certain William Tweed who, at least in the mid- to late 1860s, seems to have been Cassidy’s ideological and political ally, as well as his financial benefactor (Shore 2019, para. 6–9).

Later in the century, however, Tammany Hall’s normative commitments began to vanish. Some historians argue that the Civil War fundamentally altered

the nation's economic trajectory, and war-fostered innovations in industry, corporate consolidation, communication, and transportation “brought with [them] the spoils-men in politics and the exploiters in economic life who were quite willing to work hand in glove in taking the American people for a ride” (Roche 1972, 114).¹³ Led by Tweed, Tammany began to disregard Van Buren's lessons regarding free enterprise, limited government, and the moral case for civic integration. They remembered only the spoils system, and a flurry of “land grants, tariffs, mail contracts, subsidies, mining claims, [and] pensions” reinforced a new system built entirely on self-interest (Roche, 114). Van Buren would not have supported an urban welfare state, but his argument for civic integration was nonetheless used to justify New York's generous welfare program, since welfare was what voters desired (Mintz 1949, 426; Allen 1993). Because many of its Democratic leaders were now Irish or of Irish descent, Tammany also increased its interest in solidifying the role of civic integration by adding ethnic solidarity to the existing economic solidarity (Allen 1993, 35–36; Golway 2014, 48–52). Thus, Van Buren's normative commitments, though vital in Tammany Hall's early development, faded in favor of his political techniques, which were fundamentally rooted in self-interested behavior.

Van Buren's Legacy in American Politics

Tammany Hall was not the only Democratic institution to implement Van Buren's methods—most political machines in the mid-nineteenth century, which were also dealing with a large influx of Irish immigrants, incorporated his strategies to at least some extent. And although later politicians did not recognize that they were applying Van Buren's strategies, they did understand that they were emulating Tammany Hall (Dinnerstein 1961; Dorsett 1977; Golway 2014; Allen 1993; Vaz 2021). Mass mobilization, faith in democracy, the spoils system, and civic integration through political participation—all staples Tammany Hall learned at Van Buren's feet—endured and have continued to endure as mainstays within American party politics.¹⁴ Indeed, as the ethnic groups arriving in the United States began to diversify, political parties offered numerous, slightly variable mechanisms for political participation.

For example, when Italians, primarily poor workers from southern Italy, began immigrating to the United States in the late 1800s, they encountered obstacles the Irish had not. There was no tradition of democratic political participation in Italy,¹⁵

13. Many contemporary economic historians rightfully disagree with this assessment of the post-Civil War U.S. economy, but this is how political machines understood and processed these new economic developments.

14. It is worth noting that Van Buren's characteristic honesty did not survive this transition. However, considering political history prior to, during, and after his life, he was the exception, not the rule. Furthermore, his political theory does not require honesty. See Mintz (1949) for more information.

15. Male suffrage was not introduced until 1912, while women achieved suffrage only in 1946.

and most immigrants spoke little to no English (Luconi 2015a). Many newcomers believed that they would eventually return to Italy, stemming from “a sojourner mentality [that] discouraged many Italian migrants from applying for the citizenship of their adoptive countries” (Luconi 2015b, 4). In the meantime, many Italians would send money to family members back home, and their thoughts rested with the home country.

However, that did not stop Italian immigrants from becoming politically involved in the United States. The St. Louis Democratic machine was caught forging naturalization papers for Italian immigrants in 1902 with the intent of integrating them into the party (Mormino 1986; Luconi 2015a). Although the primary motivation for this scheme was voter manipulation, St. Louis’s Democrats had already, much like Van Buren, come to view sociopolitical divides as the result of class rather than race (Luconi 2006; 2015a).¹⁶ They had a normative interest in including Italian immigrants in American society more broadly, based on those class relations. By the 1920s, Italian communities in the St. Louis area were Democratic strongholds, and while Irishmen remained in leadership positions, Italians had fully integrated into St. Louis’s political fabric (Luconi 2006).

Political machine involvement in the civic integration of Italians continued well into the twentieth century. The prominence of political machines is often thought to have declined in the aftermath of the New Deal, as the federal government began to provide social services that had originally been offered by party bosses (Reid and Kurth 1992, 442–44), but many elements of Van Buren’s political theory held firm in American politics even without the presence of a boss. This was particularly true within local Democratic Parties. For example, in post–New Deal Pennsylvania, Democratic Party boss John Torquato became a beloved figure among Italian immigrants, as for decades he facilitated Italian representation with the local and state bureaucracy (Luconi 1999). Torquato did so by employing Van Buren’s methods, as interpreted by Tammany Hall: he gave qualified Italians jobs within the civil service, he defended the interests of the working class, and he ensured party loyalty by any means necessary.¹⁷ Although it is clear that Torquato was primarily concerned with maintaining his own authority, it seems he held political participation and civic integration in high regard. His support for civic integration and New Deal policies was genuine, began at an early age, and was likely fueled by a commitment to democratic ideals (Luconi 1999).

Similarly to how Van Buren incorporated the *Albany Argus* into the broader Democratic Party framework, twentieth-century Republicans made inroads with Italian immigrants during this period as well, often with Italian-language newspapers

16. Again, this is only in the context of white immigrant groups. St. Louis imposed numerous oppressive restrictions on African Americans.

17. Torquato served twenty months in prison on federal corruption charges after it was revealed he squeezed money out of state transportation contractors.

that were widely disseminated within Italian enclaves in American cities. Luconi (1999) noted that

these Italian-language newspapers shared the common object of stimulating their Italian-American readers to play an active role in politics by casting their ballots on election day. They published detailed instructions about voting registration procedures, warned about impending registration deadlines, and reprimanded Italian-American eligible voters whenever turnout was lower than expected in their communities. They also suggested that electoral participation was not only a duty of good U.S. citizens but also a powerful means by which Italian Americans could empower their own ethnic minority. (1036–37)

Much of the Republican Party had comparatively less interest in civic integration at this point in time, but they recognized that incorporating elements of it was electorally successful. Simply put, civic integration was smart politics. Even if their motives were not normative in the same manner that Van Buren's were, Republican strategy was still rooted in Van Buren's political thought.

Furthermore, Van Buren's methods are not artifacts of the mass immigration era. Contemporaneously, political engagement remains one of the primary methods of integrating Hispanic immigrants. Like the Irish and Italians before them, Hispanics are predominantly members of the working class: 24 percent are employed in service occupations, and 18 percent are employed in construction, agriculture/mining, and maintenance, compared with 17 percent and 9 percent of the general population, respectively (Pérez-Nievas et al. 2021, 1137).

Though many Hispanics identify with the United States rather than their country of national origin, political apathy among new arrivals, at least initially, remains high (DeSipio 2006). Like the Italians but unlike the Irish, many Hispanic immigrants, especially outside the American Southwest, have a significant language barrier, making active political participation in their homeland a struggle (Pérez-Nievas et al. 2021). However, when Hispanics, particularly in California, are exposed to discrimination, they respond to the new threat toward the group via political mobilization (Gutierrez et al. 2019). Democrats, capitalizing on this response through mass mobilization techniques like canvassing and developing personal relationships, have traditionally earned Hispanic support (Lasala-Blanco et al. 2021).¹⁸ These are both methods Van Buren employed to great effect during the election of 1828 (Cole 1984, 170–76).

Conclusion

Altogether, the Jacksonian era is generally recognized to have laid the groundwork for mass political participation in the United States, as the elite, exclusive, and somewhat

18. This has begun to change since the 2020 election, though not as much in California, where this research was conducted.

nativist Democratic-Republican Party morphed into the disciplined, unified, and relatively inclusive Democratic Party. The electoral liberation of the “common man,” as well as the nineteenth century’s first large wave of Irish immigration, is often credited for this shift. These phenomena were doubtless critical to the development of American party politics, but much of the new mass participation was rooted in Martin Van Buren’s political theory as well. For arguably the first time in American history, there was a mature understanding of the role of immigration and civic integration in the interplay between economic class and democratic principles (Mintz 1949). The political machines that followed, like Tammany Hall, integrated new immigrants through patronage, employment, and social engagements in a comprehensive manner that would have horrified the old defenders of an “Anglo-Saxon” culture and polity.

As a Dutch speaker who came of age in the shadow of ostentatious wealth, Van Buren did not uphold the Anglo-Saxon vision of America (Widmer 2005, 6–7). He was far more interested in “Democracy,” and the unity of the landed and working classes that upheld that Democracy. Within his political theory, the Dutch farmer was equal to, and the friend of, the Irish laborer. Whether political machines engaged in civic integration because of some normative principle or out of pure political expediency, and whether there was any conscious awareness of Van Buren’s methods or not,¹⁹ it is evident that Van Buren’s political theory played and continues to play a crucial role in the seemingly inextricable link between civic integration and party politics. Political parties were a means to an end, but that end, as opposed to merely winning elections, was a vision of an agrarian society that would guide individuals toward virtue with prudence and moderation. Any analysis of nineteenth-century American politics and political theory therefore ought to include a nod to Van Buren. He was not merely the most effective representative of a new party system that emerged out of the ruins of the Era of Good Feelings—he created that system.

The historical conception of political machines as purely pragmatic entities that were interested only in the electoral fealty of immigrants is flawed in that it matches the entity’s outcome to its intention. Although that temptation is entirely understandable, limiting scholarship to that perspective detracts from investigations into the political perspectives, tactics, and philosophies of the men who initially created the machines. The investigation by Golway (2014) into Tammany Hall’s normative commitments was much needed, but it did not go back far enough in time. By grounding Tammany Hall, and thereby most subsequent political machines, in Martin Van Buren, it is possible to trace political machines’ ideological motivations back to Jeffersonian skepticism of the financial class, as well as to a persistent faith in the masses. These ideological motivations, however, eventually fell victim to self-interested behavior. Although Van Buren himself is and will remain an enigma to political theorists and historians of the Jacksonian era, his fingerprints in American political thought and custom are identifiable.

19. Tammany Hall, in particular, appears to have genuinely and consciously embraced Van Buren’s political theory.

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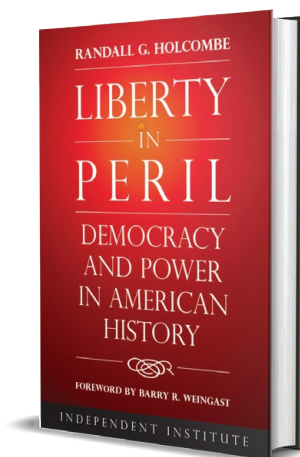
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