

Societies, Gangs, and Parties: How Sociopolitical Societies Influenced Early American Politics

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Abstract

Though a young nation, the United States was founded by people with involvement in centuries old institutions and societies, like the Freemasons. Furthermore, groups that initially imitated the notorious secret society but incorporated more public involvement evolved into political machines. Tammany Hall exemplifies such an organization that compiled aspects of secret societies and public groups to influence the American government and political outcomes. Tammany Hall was officially founded in 1793, flourishing and maturing alongside the young American government. Figures widely recognized in American history, like Thomas Jefferson, Aaron Burr, and James Madison cooperated with the Tammany Society—among other sociopolitical groups—to varying degrees of involvement for their desired political outcomes. Furthermore, Tammany Hall relied on notable people from across professions as a tactic to achieve balanced connections in different industries and politics. Politicians, businessmen, and gangsters served the Tammany Society’s agenda, expecting eventual compensation or favors for their efforts. Because Tammany Hall and the United States government shared leading membership and the society was geographically placed in the highly political and connected New York City, the society became an influential force in the politics of its time and contributed to a surviving structure that profits from wealth and clout.

Emerging from a tumultuous war fueled by decades of resentment towards Britain, the United States of America hosted an aggregation of diverse players who designed the nation’s governmental structure and culture. New groups broke away from established institutions as religious and governmental reform consumed the colonies leading into the War for Independence. The British colonies in North America provided refuge to persons seeking religious freedom or escape from poverty across the Atlantic. Thus, the conditions for secret societies and political groups were set before America won its independence from Britain. Likeminded members of elite orders, like Tammany Hall and the Freemasons, were prominent figures who designed the American government. Within sociopolitical groups, members exchanged ideas, values, and favors.

While George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Andrew Jackson were Freemasons, others like Thomas Jefferson, Aaron Burr, and Martin Van Buren relied on Tammany Hall as a source for professional connections. During America’s early national period, the governmental system underwent highly contested changes, evolving into a more recognizable nation. Among the contested approaches to government, political parties as a form of classifying ideals and grouping people provoked many debates. Numerous politicians from the late eighteenth to the early nineteenth century opposed political parties or factions.

Regardless, these men congregated in Masonic Hall and Tammany Hall, where many activities were concealed – chiefly concerning Freemasonry – or their activities became so openly political – in Tammany’s case – that the group became the political machine that effectively infiltrated American politics. As America matured and its governmental structure was cemented, so

did sociopolitical societies. Over time, Masonic Hall hosted the Whigs and their many gatherings, while Tammany Hall and the Democratic Party became almost synonymous with one another. In addition to these societies functioning like political parties, membership mirrored those permitted civic engagement through their status as land-owning white males, perpetuating hierarchical politics and exclusivity. The private component to the Tammany Society's constitution nurtures exclusivity and elitism as it requires an initiation fee, "The initiation fee shall never exceed eight hundred cents, nor less than two hundred. Every member shall pay a quarterage of twenty-five cents and subscribe the constitution at the time of initiation or as soon thereafter as may be."¹ Paying membership dues contributed to the organization's wealth needed for orchestrating its functions, and ensured the members were affluent enough to spare the amount requested. Maintaining wealthy membership also guaranteed a compilation of acquaintances who were likely convenient allies in future political or business ventures.

Working in conjunction with policies that limited governmental representation, the Tammany Society endorsed using money to achieve political goals through its own corruption. Although the Freemasons were far more secretive, masonic members quietly manufactured political outcomes through the group's estimable connections. Despite Tammany's involvement in the public sphere, the group maintained its own element of secrecy. For example, Tammany Hall adhered to two different constitutions. One constitution was drafted for public view, while the other was only accessible to members. The internal constitution, titled *Constitution Private*, underlines the society's hierarchy, operational roles, criterium for membership, and celebratory dates.² Procedure for secret plots and manufacturing scandals were not outlined in this document; nevertheless, its concealment furthers Tammany's reputation as a duplicitous institution.

Although the Tammany Society and the Freemasons diverge in many ways, the societies also share several similarities. Extending from the groups' shared exclusivity, they each maintained certain aspects of the organizations for member access only. In addition to Tammany creating a private section of its constitution, the group provided services that were only available to members and their families, including a widows and orphan's benevolent society. Tammany Hall and the Freemasons both organized resources for their member's widows and orphans. This displays the two groups' efforts to provide for their own and contributes to the incentives for joining either society. Young men seeking self-improvement might be hesitant to take risks for a group they recently joined; however, with a security network for themselves and their families, new members more confidently served Tammany's agenda. Precarious undertakings that many members or their associates executed, comprised such tasks as inciting riots – like the Astor Place and New York City Draft riots – or committing voter fraud. Decades before Tammany was most heavily involved in riots, it organized the widows and orphans benevolent fund in 1805, "incorporating it as a benevolent and charitable body 'for the purpose of affording relief to the indigent and distressed members of said association, their widows and orphans and others who may be proper objects of their charity.'"³ Similarly, the Freemasons organized an equivalent infrastructure for their members' families in the late nineteenth century, "A Charter of Corporation was issued, known as the Masonic

¹ "Constitution and Roll of Members, 1817," online images, Manuscripts and Archives Division, *Society of Tammany, or the Columbian Order Records, 1791-1898* (<https://archives.nysl.org/mss/2946#detailed>), p. 50; citing MSS 2946, New York Public Library, New York.

² "Constitution and Roll of Members," *Society of Tammany*, 47-51.

³ Gustavus Myers, *The History of Tammany Hall 1917*, 2nd ed. (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1917), 20. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/53115/53115-h/53115-h.htm.pdf>.

Widows and Orphans Home Fund. The home was designed to offer refuge to Masonic Widows and their children.”⁴ Ensuring the orders’ associated families were cared for after tragedy kept them from ruin and instilled loyalty in the families that might produce children who could one day become committed members themselves.

Additionally, the Tammany Society inserted itself in public view and the organization’s influence mounted. Wealth and prominence share a mutualist bond that flourished within these social and political fraternities of the early national period. Groups with networks that boasted the greatest wealth and contacts emerged as political machines, such as Tammany Hall. However, the provenance shared between Freemasonry and Tammany Hall is their establishment as exclusive fraternities. Despite the Freemasons acutely predating Tammany Hall and their significantly contrasting interactions with the public, both are examples of sociopolitical societies that shaped the American political system by establishing a format to which political parties would adhere and promoting methods of political influence that rely on money and connections.

Freemasonry’s beginnings are foreign to America, while the Tammany Society originates with deep American ties, including connections with Indigenous figures and customs, the young republic’s reverence for Christopher Columbus, and shared political agendas with many of the nation’s prominent politicians. Freemasonry’s precise beginning is debated but it decidedly has medieval origins. Alternately, Tammany Hall shared the same parentage as the American government. The minds that compiled the nation’s defining documents, like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, were the same who recognized advantages in social societies from the Freemasons to the Tammany Society. However, politicians and businessmen of the time introduced a political element to Tammany Hall because the organization’s official founding, in 1789,⁵ coincided with the United States’ early national period – saturated in politicism as the government underwent formative processes. Tammany’s duality in purpose and function is represented in its full title, The Society of St. Tammany, or the Columbian Order. The name, Tammany, originates from, Chief Tamenend, who colonists and eventually Americans revered as a peaceful Indigenous leader. William Penn recorded in 1683 that Tamenend was a Lenni Lenape chief who cooperated with Penn in the “Great Treaty.”⁶ Although omitted over time, the second component to the society’s name, The Columbian Order, was derived from Christopher Columbus.⁷ The full official name was adopted in 1792, after the New York branch celebrated the three-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ landing in the Caribbean.⁸ The order’s title reveres two influential figures from the colonial period who were instrumental in creating the United States, but represent opposite perspectives. The Tammany Society became a group that employed resources from all strata of society, from gang members to wealthy politicians. The society’s purpose largely served the wealthiest individuals, but employed resources from anywhere necessary, much like the range of perspectives represented in the group’s original name.

Throughout Tammany Hall’s duration, the group used an oppressed community’s language and traditions to serve the imposing population. The Tammany Society originated as a collection of

⁴ “Widows and Orphans,” The Grand Lodge of Tennessee: Free and Accepted Masons, accessed November 10, 2021, <http://www.grandlodge-tn.org/main/GLTN-page.asp?p=50>.

⁵ Oliver E. Allen, *The Tiger: The Rise and Fall of Tammany Hall* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1993), 5.

⁶ Martin W. Walsh, “May Games and Noble Savages: The Native American in Early Celebrations of the Tammany Society,” *Folklore* 108 (1997): 84.

⁷ Terry Golway, *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation a Division of W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 5.

⁸ Golway, *Machine Made*, 5.

fraternal sects existing around the country to host social gatherings that were appropriations of Native American rituals combined with European holidays. The Tammany Society created its own micro culture through piecing together traditions from across continents and selecting certain dates important for the North American colonies. May Day, or Maytide, the central holiday that was most widely celebrated among early members, greatly depicts the group's cultic and appropriative practices: "They were part of a wider celebration of a distinct holiday fraternity, the 'Sons of St. Tammany,' specifically oriented to Maytide, and incorporating many Woodland Indian features."⁹ Nonetheless, Tammany Hall was not formally consolidated until 1789, when the New York City branch surfaced as the most renowned.¹⁰ Tammany's extremities declined as the society became the political machine, Tammany Hall, with William Mooney initiating its successful beginnings as a sociopolitical order.

The nascent Tammany Society established the principles, rituals, and even vocabulary that guided the group as it evolved into a political machine. For example, the group's leaders were called Sachems, while their meeting places, before and after Tammany Hall¹¹ was built, were called Wigwams. Furthermore, Tammany calling its leaders Sachems¹² is another example of creating an internal vernacular that promotes exclusivity among their fraternal sociopolitical group. A meeting on November 8, 1802, was recorded by the group's scribe and includes "Present, Sachem Mooney father of the Council pro tempore."¹³ William Mooney, a Sachem of the Tammany Society, was recorded as a presiding member at many of the meetings through the order's minutes. This exemplifies the appropriation of Indigenous culture in the Tammany Society's founding. Creating its own microculture, Tammany Hall fostered the exclusivity that compounded with its elitist practices concerning member admittance to produce a society that imitated the Freemasons' structure and contributed to the impressionable American political system.

Civic engagement in the United States was dictated by standards nearly identical to the Tammany Society's membership criterion. The essential requirements for voting in American elections and for Tammany Hall membership were that one must be an American, financially stable, white, male. While the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution did not explicitly state who could vote, the Constitution allowed states the discretion for deciding requirements for voting. Most states followed the same guidelines as expressed in the New York state constitution, "possessing a freehold of the value of twenty pounds, within the said county, or have rented a tenement therein of the yearly value of forty shillings. . . shall be entitled to vote."¹⁴ Although New York's constitution does not limit suffrage explicitly to landowners, it does require proof of a degree of wealth and contribution to the community as a taxpayer. Demanding evidence of assets or liquid wealth was common across the United States and contributed to the elitism limiting political participation. The document predating the Constitution, The Articles of Confederation, explicitly excluded an entire class of people from not only political participation, but claiming the same freedoms as more wealthy or positioned Americans: "free inhabitants of each of these states, (paupers, vagabonds, and fugitives from justice, excepted) shall be entitled to all privileges and immunities of free citizens."¹⁵

⁹ Walsh, "May Games and Noble Savages," 84.

¹⁰ Allen, *The Tiger*, 5.

¹¹ Tammany Hall was one of the society's names and the name of their central meeting place.

¹² A Sachem is a Native American word for chief.

¹³ New York City, New York, "Society of Tammany or Columbian Order's Minutes [1802 - 1819]," p. 16, 8 November 1802; New York Public Library Digital Collections.

¹⁴ New York Constitution, art. VII, § 1.

¹⁵ U.S. Congress, United States Code: Articles of Confederation, art. IV.

The Articles of Confederation were recognized as a failed document for governing America, but the sentiment of establishing a privileged class of people who could contribute to running the nation persisted in the Constitution.

Among the privileged class boasting suffrage and access to elite societies, were politicians. While Freemasonry was as a steady constant in America's political and social consciousness, Tammany Hall explosively materialized with figures like Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr acknowledging the organization's prominence and utility. George Washington, James Monroe, and Benjamin Franklin were and are some of the most renowned Freemasons. Conversely, Aaron Burr, George Clinton, and Martin Van Buren were not Freemasons, but relied on Tammany Hall throughout their political careers. Tammany Hall was a resource for expanding social connections and gaining clout for future political endeavors, especially for those who were not Freemasons. Thomas Jefferson was not a Tammany member, but he cooperated with the group in recognition of their aligned political goals and shared acquaintances. For instance, Jefferson wrote a letter addressed to the Tammany Society in 1808 that depicts amiability and agreement in the political arena, "I doubt not your aid and that of every real and faithful citizen. . . enforcing the sacred principle that in opposing foreign wrong, mine must be but one mind."¹⁶ Throughout the letter, Jefferson implies that the society's earlier letter wished him good fortune and stated political goals that coincided with the group and Jefferson's ideals.

Thomas Jefferson, Tammany Hall, and De Witt Clinton supported the burgeoning Democratic-Republican Party's values. However, Clinton distrusted political factions and the equally tribal sociopolitical societies. In an 1801 letter to Jefferson, Clinton defames political parties, describing them as, "governed by no principle but is solely devoted to the aggrandizement of an individual. . . it's [*sic*] strength is founded on the secrecy of it's [*sic*] plans, the art and rapid movements of its leader."¹⁷ In this letter, Clinton lists thirty counties "suspected of being under an undue bias,"¹⁸ concerning involvement and favorability with political parties of any political leaning. Thus, he was highly motivated to discourage factions' proliferation in American politics. Furthermore, Clinton's language creates parallels between political parties and sociopolitical societies – both institutions that De Witt Clinton detested, as evidenced in his correspondences. The emotionally charged language employed in this letter, including terms like "secrecy," "prevalent," and "contagion" highlight a common theme present throughout his many correspondences regarding political parties and Tammany Hall specifically.¹⁹

While Clinton was in the minority among the political elite regarding association with Tammany Hall, he reflected the more common perspective among Americans who were less likely to participate in politics or who were not yet granted suffrage. For example, an edition of New York's *Morning Herald* details a chaotic election in 1837 and quotes bystanders' perspectives on the people and groups involved in the discourse: "The Whig party at Masonic Hall is a pack of asses – veritable jackasses,"²⁰ and "It is true the government party, Van Buren's *clique* of charlatans [Tammany Hall] in this city, are with us, but we are only using them up to knock them into infamy."²¹ Although these statements do not represent every American's sentiments, this article

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson to the Tammany Society, 29 February 1808, in *The Thomas Jefferson Papers* at the Library of Congress.

¹⁷ De Witt Clinton to Thomas Jefferson, 10 December 1801, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), *Founders Online*, National Archives.

¹⁸ De Witt Clinton to Thomas Jefferson, 10 December 1801, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*.

¹⁹ De Witt Clinton to Thomas Jefferson, 10 December 1801, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*.

²⁰ *Morning Herald*, (New York NY), November 7, 1837. <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn83030312/1837-11-07/ed-1/>.

²¹ *Morning Herald*, (New York NY), November 7, 1837.

reveals how numerous citizens responded to a chaotic scene caused by politicians and sociopolitical societies attempting to influence an election without considering the implications for the community they sought to represent.

Resentment for Tammany Hall did not originate in contrasting political ideals. Indeed, De Witt Clinton and Tammany each aligned with Democratic-Republican values. However, Clinton's uncle, George Clinton, endured a tumultuous relationship with Aaron Burr who badgered him into running for state legislature. Despite winning election to the New York state legislature, Clinton soon returned to his previous post as governor, and the Clintons' relations with Burr declined.²² Hence, De Witt Clinton entered the political stage with predetermined distaste for Burr and Tammany Hall – the organization through which Burr manipulated many of his political schemes. Continuing the feud, Tammany interfered with De Witt Clinton's rise in the political sphere by ousting him from New York City's mayoral office.²³ This persistent conflict between Clinton and Tammany Hall continued until Clinton's death and Tammany's influence only mounted.

Moreover, instead of cooperating with parties and other groups, Clinton relied on his many influential connections within American politics provided through familial and professional prevalence in the field – especially within New York politics. Clinton did not employ a party's or a society's resources to serve his own agenda. However, he relied on the same instrument valued by parties, societies, and individuals alike: a social network. In another letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1801, Clinton wrote to suggest that James Nicholson Esquire replace the resigning loan officer, claiming, "His connection with the Secretary of the Treasury will I hope excuse my addressing this letter immediately to yourself. . . [he is] of high consideration with the friends of the republican interest."²⁴ Though he distrusted political parties and sociopolitical orders, Clinton understood how valuable connections were in achieving political goals. De Witt Clinton attempted to cull political parties' and sociopolitical societies' prominence in the American government, while indulging the same tactics that maintained these groups' membership. Men seeking improved social standing or ambitiously pursuing government offices consistently joined or at least associated with sociopolitical societies, like the Freemasons and Tammany Hall, to cultivate their network of potentially useful acquaintances and allies.

Like De Witt Clinton, many of America's early framers resisted parties, but continued indulging diverse and numerous societies. James Madison was one of America's politicians who most adamantly denounced political parties, although he aged with the nation and grew to accept their utility in the government. Madison's well studied "Federalist Number Ten" is regarded as a document written in opposition to factions. However, Madison wrote, "Liberty is to faction what air is to fire, an aliment without which it instantly expires. . . As long as the reason of man continues fallible, and he is at liberty to exercise it, different opinions will be formed."²⁵ Here he asserts the innateness of categorizing one's opinions and values especially through liberty. Thus, Madison implies early in his career that parties or factions arise despite efforts to halt their progress and that it is necessary to cooperate with factions while regulating them. Disregarding Madison's dislike for

²² Allen, *The Tiger*, 17.

²³ Allen, *The Tiger*, 24.

²⁴ De Witt Clinton to Thomas Jefferson, 14 September 1801, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), *Founders Online*, National Archives.

²⁵ James Madison, "Federalist No. 10," *The Federalist Papers*, Library of Congress, Accessed October 20, 2021, <https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/text-1-10>.

parties, he communicated with a predecessor, or at least sibling of political parties, the Tammany Society.

One may argue that simply maintaining polite correspondences with Tammany Hall does not indicate that James Madison and Thomas Jefferson cooperated with the group in any meaningful manner. However, influential figures, who eventually became presidents, dedicating time to compose letters to the Tammany Society illustrates the organization's status among politicians. An instance in which Madison displayed propriety with Tammany Hall was his letter written in 1811, concluding politely with, "The approbation which the Society bestows on the share I have had in the public transactions, and its confidence in my further efforts for the public good, are entitled to my thankful acknowledgments."²⁶ Madison's letter implies that Tammany Hall leaders wrote to him in support of his past political endeavors, revealing alignment between Tammany and Madison. Through these men's correspondences with the society, historians observe that Tammany's status was great enough to prioritize maintaining a civilized rapport. Similarly, a leader might diplomatically cooperate with opposing parties because making enemies of their counterparts is an unproductive method for governing.

Some politicians tolerated or coexisted with groups such as Tammany Hall and the Freemasons, while others invested in the organizations for their own benefit. Aaron Burr is an example of a politician who employed the Tammany Society's resources to serve his own machinations, while contributing to the society's growth. Burr recognized the potential for great political manipulation in Tammany Hall. Burr was never officially a Tammany member, but the institution and the politician formulated a mutually beneficial relationship. Oliver E. Allen highlights this cooperation in his book, *The Tiger: The Rise and Fall of Tammany Hall*, "the Society was simply one of a number of tools he used to further his purposes. But some of the techniques he employed. . . would eventually become central to Tammany's way of operating."²⁷ Winning the 1800 presidential election was central to Burr's scheme as he entered his association with Tammany Hall. His cooperation with Tammany Hall was no secret, but remaining a non-member granted Burr a degree of separation from the society that allowed him to avoid accusations of showing favor to one group.

Although Aaron Burr's reliance on Tammany Hall was public information, it was omitted when a different image was more convenient for Burr and his associates. For example, a longtime cohort, Mathew L. Davis, wrote a memoir on Burr when he passed in 1836 titled, *Memoirs of Aaron Burr: with Miscellaneous Selections from his Correspondence*. In the sections covering the election of 1800 – in which Aaron Burr employed Tammany Hall's resources and connections in his failed efforts to become president – Davis neglects mentioning Tammany. Davis was a Tammany member and, by this time, was among the group's leadership. Thus, Davis's advertised ties to Tammany Hall were far greater than that of Aaron Burr. Burr's alternate decision to remain an outsider, at least officially, served his greater political goals. Davis recognized the strategy behind Burr's position with the Tammany Society and maintained that façade in his 1836 memoir. The media attacked Burr during his term as vice president for the rumors involving multiple schemes he allegedly orchestrated while campaigning. Davis wrote in the memoir refuting these claims and included correspondences from men accused of plotting with Burr. Among these letters and excerpts that Davis uses to clear Burr of these accusations, he never mentions Tammany Hall or Burr's association with the society.

²⁶ James Madison to the Grand Sachem of the Tammany Society of Chillicothe, 23 June 1811, in *The Papers of James Madison*, ed. J.C.A. Stagg, Jeanne Kerr Cross, and Susan Holbrook, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996), *Founders Online*, National Archives.

²⁷ Allen, *The Tiger*, 11.

However, he does include letters from men belonging to prominent families within the Tammany Hall membership. The Livingstons were among the leading families in Tammany Hall during Burr's vice presidency. One letter from Edward Livingston expresses, "you did not, in any verbal or written communication to me, during the late presidential election, express any sentiment. . . evincing any desire that the vote of the state should be transferred from Mr. Jefferson to yourself."²⁸ The narrative of Tammany working with Burr in the 1800 election would have hampered the group's progress as it rapidly approached its status as a political machine. Likewise, discussing this relationship between Burr and Tammany in the memoir would have further tarnished his memory.

Additionally, by catering to the middle-class Tammany members who attempted numerous loopholes to qualify for voting rights, often called tonites, Burr curried favor among this sizeable voting block within Tammany Hall and across middle class voters in New York.²⁹ This endeavor highlights the collective pursuit of social mobility. Politicians and sociopolitical societies recognized the movement and manipulated the population's aspirations for suffrage to gain votes, further dominating the political scene. Nonetheless, Burr lost the 1800 presidential election to Thomas Jefferson. Throughout Aaron Burr's conspiratorial effort to win the election by capitalizing on Tammany's resources, Tammany Hall maintained friendly relations with Jefferson and Burr – two politicians with whom the society openly shared political objectives. Thus, the Tammany Society was ensured its favor with the president through support and involvement in two of the choice candidates' campaigns.

Just as Aaron Burr influenced the Tammany Society's operational structure, he set a new tone for plotting elaborate schemes to achieve political goals. In addition to politicians, Tammany Hall later turned to a few nefarious individuals with ties to gangs and criminal activities for addressing its own private agendas. The American government and political parties perpetuated this pattern of networking by accumulating favors and relationships with diverse individuals and groups – blending with sociopolitical societies for personal and political gain. Continuing further down the institutional hierarchy, Tammany Hall and other sociopolitical societies and machines associated with their counterparts in the American underworld: gangs. Herbert Asbury contributes to the argument for gangs assisting political machines and the American government in his book, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld*, "The political geniuses of Tammany Hall were quick to see the practical value of gangsters. . . that their favor might be curried, and their peculiar talents employed on election day to assure government of, by, and for Tammany."³⁰ Asbury highlights Tammany's ability to balance the realms of politicians and gangsters. The Tammany Society's versatility enabled its longevity within American politics and success in manipulating political outcomes.

Tammany Hall's gang involvement began in the 1830s when its status as a sociopolitical society dramatically metastasized into a political machine. Asbury discusses the men who enabled gang participation in politics as he introduces the Tammany Society's cooperation with gangs, "The underworld thus became an important factor in politics, and under the manipulation of the worthy statemen the gangs of the Bowery and Five Points participated in the great series of riots which

²⁸ Edward Livingston, "Letter to Aaron Burr," in *Memoirs of Aaron Burr: With Miscellaneous Selections from His Correspondence*, by Matthew L. Davis, 97, <https://go-gale-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/ps/i.do?p=SABN&u=colosprings&id=GALE%7CCY0105180448&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon>.

²⁹ Allen, *The Tiger*, 12.

³⁰ Herbert Asbury, *The Gangs of New York: An Informal History of the Underworld*, 2nd ed. (New York: Vintage Books, A Division of Random House, Inc, 2008), 34.

began with the spring election disturbances of 1834.”³¹ This contributed to the corruption that many politicians and Americans attributed to both parties and sociopolitical societies. Tammany had established its reputation as an influential institution with possible methods for manipulating political outcomes, but the gang associations of the following decades solidified the community’s certainty that Tammany Hall perpetuated political duplicity within New York and national politics.

The methods of meeting certain political goals, like winning elections, were similar across the three institutions political parties, sociopolitical societies, and gangs. Political party operators, the politicians, were those who faced the public and openly sought specific ambitions. Sociopolitical societies existed between the widely accepted political parties – widely accepted nearing the end of the early national period as the skeptical framers begrudgingly accepted factions – and the less reputable and secretly involved gangs. Regardless, the gangs completed the equation for creating a network of fabricated political gain because each level of this hierarchy played a role in exchanging favors and fostering vital connections between politicians, parties, societies, and gangs.

Preceding the rise of gangs in Tammany’s affairs was Martin Van Buren’s debut to the political stage. Van Buren, another notable opponent of De Witt Clinton, joined Tammany Hall in about 1802.³² With Van Buren’s entrance to the scene, new political divisions emerged because he rapidly gained a devoted following of his own during the 1820s and 1830s. Van Buren took great efforts to ensure Andrew Jackson’s successful campaign in the election of 1827.³³ Displaying keen sophistication in conducting political action through society and party connections, Van Buren secured Jackson’s presidency. Van Buren’s tactics in this election further influenced Tammany Hall’s future political campaigns and contributed to the nation’s approach to campaigning. Allen highlights Tammany’s introduction to fraudulent practices through Van Buren’s determination to win the election for Jackson, “the 1827 election was the first in which Tammany resorted to outright fraud on a large scale. It induced. . . recent arrivals [immigrants] and other interlopers to vote illegally.”³⁴ In addition to relying on voter fraud, Van Buren promoted the campaign through “every tactic on the national scale that had ever worked locally in the past – parades, buttons, campaign songs, banners, press releases, handshaking tours.”³⁵ Voter fraud is an affliction that often plagues elections, especially when institutions – like societies and corporations – become invested in the outcomes. Furthermore, the campaign strategies that Allen lists in *The Tiger* persist in modern political campaigns.

During Andrew Jackson’s campaign for president, the Anti-Masonic party arose. This was the public’s response to the Morgan Affair and other accusations of the Freemasons’ interference with politics. The Morgan Affair involved a member of the Freemasons, William Morgan, who was accused of selling information on the group or writing a book on it himself. His true intentions were never confirmed, but his body was found in Lake Ontario.³⁶ Meanwhile, the Tammany Society was permitted relatively unbridled access to the mechanisms for manipulating political outcomes. The Anti-Masonic party’s emergence highlights how sociopolitical societies indirectly or unintentionally

³¹ Asbury, *The Gangs of New York*, 34.

³² Allen, *The Tiger*, 30.

³³ Allen, *The Tiger*, 33.

³⁴ Allen, *The Tiger*, 34.

³⁵ Allen, *The Tiger*, 35.

³⁶ “The Morgan Affair” in *Niles’ Weekly Register* 9, no. 11, November 10, 1827:161, <https://web-s-ebSCOhost-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/ehost/archiveviewer/archive>.

affected politics as well. Enough people disliked the Freemasons – or at least their alleged actions – and formed a substantial, though short-lived, party through their mutual distrust of the society.

The transformative period that Tammany underwent following Burr's death involved further amalgamation of the society's members, politicians, and gangsters. This period saw Tammany Hall transform from sociopolitical society to political machine. As Tammany Hall's influence grew, so did its need for a web of actors bound by the processes of *quid pro quo*. Captain Isaiah Rynders was a figure who epitomizes social mobility through political and gang related means. In *Machine Made: Tammany Hall and the Creation of Modern American Politics*, Terry Golway references Rynder's utility in manufacturing desired results for Tammany and many politicians through extralegal means that, "inspired Tammany to bring on a tough former riverboat gambler named Isaiah Ryders [*sic*] to recruit gang members who could match Walsh's muscle on Election Day."³⁷ Originally from Waterford, New York, Rynders dabbled in a slew of diverse occupations, from captaining a sloop on the Hudson River to gambling throughout the southern states. Rynders finally settled in New York City in 1837, presently joining Tammany Hall and founding the Empire Club.³⁸ Along his extensive travels, Rynders accumulated principles that aligned with those of the Democrats. Upon returning to New York, his Democratic ideals and status as an ambitious young man, already demonstrating capability in business, enabled the connections he fostered in Tammany Hall, the Empire Club, and eventually the less reputable Five Points gangs.³⁹

Rynders represents a man of this period engaging with each of these institutions to ascend political ranks, America's ultimate hierarchy. For example, Rynders was determined to impede the Whigs' meetings and political goals; thus, "Whenever a Whig meeting was announced Capt. Rynders or some other officer of the Empire Club was present with a gang of ruffians at his back. . . practically to prohibit the right to free speech to all but Tammany orators."⁴⁰ This evidences that the Empire Club largely existed as an apparatus for Tammany and the Democratic Party. By serving Tammany's and the Democratic Party's ambitions, Rynders earned trust and higher positions within the political sphere. Meanwhile, he also maintained credit among politicians' obscured partners, the Five Points gangs. Concerning reciprocity for Rynders' efforts, he earned several public offices, furthering his political career. Rynders was credited for his efforts in James Polk's successful campaign for president and was consequently made Weigher in the Customs House: "He [Polk] recognized that this State [*sic*] was secured for him by Rynders as well as the Tammany Democrats. . . of his first cares after inauguration was to reward the President of the infamous Empire Club for his effective work in suppression of Whig meetings."⁴¹ Following Polk's term as president, Rynders continued his career holding numerous public offices, including United States Marshal, and as mediator between syndicates of varying repute.

The names listed as prominent figures involved in Tammany Hall are those depicted as great men of grand accomplishments. Historians and laymen alike fetishize the largescale accomplishments attributed to men like Aaron Burr, Thomas Jefferson, and Captain Isaiah Rynders. Their stories composed American lore, boasting pursuits of liberty and justice. However, the instruments for such endeavors are often neglected in the mainstream narrative of American history.

³⁷ Golway, *Machine Made*, 8-9.

³⁸ "The Empire Club Chief: Romantic career of a Democratic Politician, Death of Captain Isaiah Rynders – His Varied and Remarkable Life – Boatman, Duelest, Officeholder, Farmer," *New York Times*, January 14, 1885, 1. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/94294322/pageviewPDF/D515DEE65B842CEPQ/1?accountid=25388>.

³⁹ "The Empire Club Chief," 1.

⁴⁰ "The Empire Club Chief," 2.

⁴¹ "The Empire Club Chief," 2.

Tammany Hall and the gangs with which politicians associated to accomplish certain goals are immortalized through the oral histories and anecdotes that the public perpetuated in their communities. While some events portrayed in anecdotal retellings are not entirely factual, messages indicating public opinion on these groups are embedded in the stories.

Edgar Allan Poe is a figure renowned for his captivating writing as well as his vices. Unlike Rynders, who accumulated considerable wealth through gambling, Poe impoverished himself and died an indebted drunkard. Poe's last week is the subject of numerous debates regarding the events that led to his death in 1849.⁴² According to the legend that shrouds Poe's death, association with Tammany and other groups steeped in conspiracy theories, was his downfall. Conversely, his counterpart, Captain Rynders, used these fatal devices to ascend social and political hierarchies. The specific phenomenon that allegedly occupied Poe in his last days was the cooping method of conducting voter fraud. Groups employing cooping coerced individuals into committing voter fraud by casting multiple false ballots. The story claims that an inebriated Poe was wheel-barrowed from poll to poll until he was deemed useless and soon died of apparent "brain congestion."⁴³ Nonetheless, plenty of theories seek to fill the mysterious five days Poe spent on his own in Baltimore before dying. While there is no proof that Poe was the victim of cooping, it is known that Tammany and other political groups orchestrated such efforts in their attempts to curate their desired outcomes. Gustavus Myers explains in *The History of Tammany Hall* that, "It would be dishonest to pretend for a moment that Tammany has been alone in its evil-doing; it has been simply the most ingenious and the most pretentious; and its practices have a historic continuity and persistence not shared by any of its rivals."⁴⁴ The assumptions made of sociopolitical societies that accumulated as years passed imply the controversial issues weighing on America's collective consciousness. Poe's rumored scandal reveals the schemes in which the population believed Tammany Hall was involved.

Aaron Burr, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and De Witt Clinton are examples of prominent figures in early American politics who indulged sociopolitical societies, like the Tammany Society. Regardless of their varying levels of appreciation or resentment for these organizations, cooperating with or speaking against the Tammany Society promoted the organization's publicity. The public would not have understood Tammany Hall's influence if people like De Witt Clinton had not publicly denounced the society. Likewise, the Tammany Society and the gangs with which it cooperated gained clout because those who favored the institution's political beliefs accepted its place within American politics. The early national period was a time that enabled groups like Tammany Hall to prosper and grow while the government was in an impressionable point of its development. Thus, political parties and sociopolitical societies comingled and affected one another's evolution. Consequently, the United States government, existing in such close proximity to political parties, was also influenced as it matured.

Much like the immediate influence politicians and businessmen had on sociopolitical societies and gangs and their roles in governmental functions, the scholars who preserved these multifaceted orders in history determine the population's lasting perceptions. Common language used across the literature discussing Tammany Hall, the Freemasons, and nineteenth century gangs

⁴² John Moncure Daniel, "Obituary of Edgar A. Poe," in *Crimes of the Centuries: Notorious Crimes, Criminals, and Criminal Trials in American History*, ed. Steven Chermak and Frankie Bailey, (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2016), 892.

<https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uccs/reader.action?docID=4332330&ppg=1#>.

⁴³ Daniel, "Obituary of Edgar A. Poe," in *Crimes of the Centuries*, 893.

⁴⁴ Myers, *History of Tammany Hall*, ix.

includes coinciding phrases, such as “clout,” “graft,” “influential,” and “corruption,” that synchronously generate an encompassing impression of deceit and manipulation. Journalists and authors of generations spanning the organizations’ height in the nineteenth century, the period of their subsequent decline in the early twentieth century, and present day only witnessing the groups’ memorialization through institutional affects, evidence generationally consistent portrayals. These secondary sources each posture sociopolitical societies and gangs in public memory as politicians’ implements for dishonestly affecting the developing nation’s governmental structure.

Correspondingly, Terrence J. McDonald’s introduction for *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* includes a sentence that essentially lists the common adjectives used when discussing Tammany Hall, “*Plunkitt of Tammany Hall* has given generations of journalists, teachers, and students a passport into the world of controversy, conflict, corruption, and color that surrounded the political machines at their zenith.”⁴⁵ Moreover, Gustavus Myers addresses Tammany’s influence on campaigns and voting procedure, while exhibiting the shared language employed throughout the scholarship, “though the effect tended somewhat to the temporary heightening of political standards, a reaction followed, which again brought in a long period of fraud and corruption.”⁴⁶ This juxtaposition of sources draws parallels between the anecdotes from Tammany’s early days and the political events that coincided with the period to show how people automatically associated the aforesaid groups with political schemes and unscrupulous dealings. The ways sociopolitical societies were documented, especially through the subjective vocabulary, generates contributions to the folklore of sociopolitical societies cooperating with politicians and gangs in fabricating political outcomes. Emphasizing the American public’s perspective on the issue, such tales ascertain that a fraction of the truth must exist behind such assumptions.

Contrary to widespread public knowledge of societies and suspicion of their activities, their chronically blatant and direct involvement diminished. While political machines outwardly seem to have disappeared, they essentially evolved into more widely accepted institutions that are even more embedded in national politics. For example, Tammany Hall hosted the Democratic National Convention at its central meeting place in New York City in the mid-nineteenth century, “In the new Wigwam, on July 4, 1868, the Democratic national convention was held. . . Gaining its point on the nomination, Tammany magnanimously allowed the Southern men to dictate the declaration in the platform that the reconstruction acts were ‘unconstitutional, revolutionary and void.’”⁴⁷ This event depicts Tammany selecting those who became the voices of the Democratic Party, resulting in Tammany Hall guiding the party’s trajectory in future policies and values. Tammany peaked during Boss Tweed’s tenure as Grand Sachem and mob boss, though the society did not necessarily decline from there. Rather, the group transferred its connections and resources wholly to the Democratic Party, leaving the Tammany Society a shell of its previous commanding presence within New York and national politics. During Tammany’s rise in the political realm, it quickly became an appendage of the Democratic Party because the two institutions were conceived in the same time and place, sharing overlapping membership – despite the rifts between politicians that excluded some Democrats, especially De Witt Clinton, from the order’s incredibly useful network.

The Tammany Society slowly faded and almost entirely disappeared from the American consciousness by the mid-twentieth century. However, the groups that materialized throughout

⁴⁵ Terrence J. McDonald, “Introduction” in *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*, by William L. Riordon, (Boston: Bedford Books, 1994), 1.

⁴⁶ Myers, *History of Tammany Hall*, ix.

⁴⁷ Myers, *History of Tammany Hall*, 216.

Tammany's existence continue to prevail in a less public sense, remaining part of the nation's tolerated elitist political hierarchy. Groups including Bohemian Grove and the Skull and Bones Society are considered aspects of politics that are as much a part of a politician's repertoire of qualifications as an Ivy League education and a tailored suit. In fact, Ivy League schools capitalize on prestige and circumscription fabricated by the close association between successful politicians and public figures attending such institutions. Meanwhile, Ivy League colleges require immense wealth and access to an outstanding early education for admittance. For the 2021-2022 school year, the average Ivy League tuition costs – compiled from the figures on each of the eight schools' tuition and fees webpages – equals \$56,158.25. Dramatically lower, the average tuition for a United States public university in the 2018-2019 school year was \$20,598.⁴⁸

If applicants have the needed funds and test scores for attending one among America's most elite association of colleges, they gain lifelong access to the most auspicious network of personal and professional connections. In addition to the prestige for simply attending one of these schools, many host exclusive groups that further narrow the pool of well positioned individuals. Yale's Skull and Bones Society is among the most renowned secret societies that boasts membership like William F. Buckley Jr., John Kerry, and presidents William H. Taft, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush. With the infrastructure for promoting elitism from disproportionately high tuition costs to exclusive clubs, Ivy League schools are conduits for the most well-connected graduates, who immediately enter the professional setting owing fealty to their fellow graduates and society members.

Connections in modern politics are just as vital to one's career as they were in the early national period. Thus, the devices for expanding one's network of acquaintances and allies remain nearly identical to those used at the time of Tammany's and the Democratic Party's inception. For instance, a group without links to academia, but oriented around its Northern California location in a redwood grove and elite membership, is Bohemian Grove. Resembling the Freemasons and the gangs with which Tammany Hall and many politicians interacted, Bohemian Grove prioritizes confidentiality. Bohemian Grove compares with the Tammany Society via its origin as a group of likeminded members who congregated to socialize and eventually evolved as a place for politicians and businessmen to form connections in their relevant fields.

In a document that is now stored in the United States' Central Intelligence Agency's online archive, written by psychologist and sociologist G. William Domhoff, PhD, *The Bohemian Grove and Other Retreats: A Study in Ruling-Class Cohesiveness*, Domhoff stresses, "[upper-class retreats] increase the social cohesiveness of America's rulers and provide private settings in which business and political problems can be discussed informally and off the record."⁴⁹ Bohemian Grove hosts events for entertaining and exchanging ideas relevant to the leading government and corporate authorities. A tradition since 1932, Bohemian Grove hosts "Lakeside Talks," tantamount to Tammany Hall's "Long Talks," during which members and nonmembers administer speeches to the society. Bohemian Grove's talks are given by figures like Dwight D. Eisenhower and Bobby Kennedy: "Cabinet officers, politicians, generals, governmental advisers are the rule rather than the exception for Lakeside Talks."⁵⁰ In this setting where knowledge and values from diverse industries or professions meld, partnerships abound. While listing the organization's guests, Domhoff includes,

⁴⁸ "Tuition Costs of Colleges and Universities," Institute of Education Sciences: National Center for Education Statistics. Accessed December 2, 2021. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=76>.

⁴⁹ G. William Domhoff, *The Bohemian Grove and Other Retreats: A Study in Ruling-Class Cohesiveness* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1975), 9. https://www.cia.gov/library/abbottabad-compound/FC/FC8AEB056C2C32F10AFC327BA91F4A45_The_Bohemian_Grove_and_Other_Retreats.rtf.pdf.

⁵⁰ Domhoff, *The Bohemian Grove and Other Retreats*, 14-15.

“Walter J. Hickel, Secretary of the Interior at the time, and deeply involved in negotiations concerning the Santa Barbara oil spill, was the guest of Fred L. Hartley, president of Union Oil, the company responsible for said oil spill.”⁵¹ Therefore, Bohemian Grove enables new connections, but also caters to those seeking favors from already established relations as members treat their guests to the establishment’s entertainment and amenities.

Bohemian Grove represents a surviving tradition of gathering among equally successful individuals with either shared ideologies or who present opportunities for reciprocation through aiding one another in political or corporate objectives. Reliance on sociopolitical societies in American politics originates in the young nation’s need for its own networking devices. In the United States’ separation from Britain, Americans lost access to the Aristocracy, an instrumental social and political resource. Organized for members possessing the necessary means and connections, sociopolitical societies imitated the European aristocratic structure that politicians and wealthy Americans employed for personal and professional gain. In his 1920 dissertation, *The Frontier in American History*, Frederick Jackson Turner acknowledges such an American phenomenon, “In the settlement of America we have to observe how European life entered the continent, and how America modified and developed that life and reacted on Europe.”⁵² American politics evolved with societies as a major platform for networking. Consequently, the governmental functions for electing officials and passing legislation have come to rely on the connections among fellow politicians as well as their donors and constituents.

Often considered a successful experiment in governance, the constitutional republic borne of the War for Independence from Britain addressed many of the violations that colonists deemed insufferable. Notwithstanding the numerous successes, America still grapples with the imbalance of power that politicians and corporations use to pass legislation that does not always benefit most citizens. The early national period witnessed political innovation that provided the United States the needed momentum for ascending to prominence on the international stage. Meanwhile, some of America’s greatest challenges arose in the same period. The artificial aristocracy of sociopolitical societies that Americans bought into through membership dues arose as political parties grew, against many early politicians’ protests. These institutions comingled and eventually formed partnerships for serving the parties or societies with which their platforms most aligned. Innately categorizing people based on recognizable moral characteristics, parties and sociopolitical societies permeated the formative processes that presently determined the nation’s government functions. Representatives quickly identified with factions that resembled their own values and worked to captivate their bases through unifying a specific group and othering those disagreeing with their political stances.

Tammany Hall and the Freemasons were sociopolitical societies used as mechanisms for uniting one party and vilifying the opposition. America’s modern duopoly between Republicans and Democrats results from centuries of catering to the overarching oligopoly of the rich and powerful employing their connections and owed favors to dictate legislation and elections. The complex web that Tammany Hall, the Freemasons, gangs, and lawmakers navigated from the early national period evolved into the highly partisan political structure in which politicians continue manipulating outcomes through dividing voters and maintaining connections with powerful organizations and individuals.

⁵¹ Domhoff, *The Bohemian Grove and Other Retreats*, 41-42.

⁵² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Hold and Company, 1921), 3. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/22994/22994-h/22994-h.htm.pdf>.

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