



“The Art of Practical Politics in Local Affairs”

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, Grassy Point, New York, a small, mostly Irish American settlement, tucked away in the far north-east corner of Rockland County, consisted of little more than a wide bend in the road between the towns of Haverstraw and Stony Point. On one side of the road stood a scattering of fifty or so houses; on the other were a river beach, an oil plant, and a few more groups of houses. Into this unassuming town on the banks of the Hudson River, thirty-five miles or so from New York City, one of the great party politicians of the twentieth century, Jim Farley, was born, on May 30, 1888.¹

James Aloysius Farley was the grandson of Irish immigrants. Jim’s paternal grandparents, John and Margaret Farrelly, left their home in Castletown, county Meath, in 1847. John was thirty years of age, Margaret twenty-two. Together, they walked the fifteen miles from their home to the port of Drogheda, where they took a boat over the Irish Sea to Liverpool. From Liverpool, they boarded a ship for New York, crossing the Atlantic in steerage. When they arrived at Ellis Island, they were informed by immigration officials that they would from now on be called by the name *Farley*, not *Farrelly*. Jim’s mother’s parents, John and Rose Goldrick, departed in either the same year or the next. All four of Jim’s grandparents settled in the lower Hudson Valley. Jim’s father, James Sr., was born in Verplanck’s Point in Westchester County; his mother, Ellen, in Haverstraw, Rockland County, across the Hudson.²

The world Jim Farley’s parents grew up in was changing fast. Farming and the way of life associated with it were increasingly giving way to new

economic and social forces. Agriculture was still important to the economy of the lower Hudson Valley, but so too were extraction and manufacturing industries, such as mining, quarrying, and, most of all, brick-making.³ Brickmaking was especially important to the Farleys. Brick had been manufactured in Haverstraw since 1771, when a Dutchman, Jacob Van Dyke, began making bricks by hand, ingeniously exploiting the rich yellow and blue clay deposits that lined the Hudson shore. By the 1880s, the industry was close to its peak: there were forty brickyards in Haverstraw, making three hundred million bricks a year. Every day, at first light, schooners were loaded up at Haverstraw Bay, each vessel carrying between seventy and ninety thousand bricks. With a fair wind, they would arrive the following morning at Manhattan, Queens, or Brooklyn, where their cargo was deposited. In later life, Jim recalled the wonder and excitement he had felt as a ten-year-old boy when he rode down the Hudson on his uncle's ship, the *William H. Barnes*. Jim's father, James, was part owner of three schooners and also ran two small yards.⁴

Farley's upbringing in Grassy Point was, in his own words, "poor but honest." He wrote in his autobiography, *Behind the Ballots*, that he was lucky to be "spared the grinding poverty which had visited other and less fortunate families in the neighborhood." There was no shortage of "good wholesome food, warm clothing, a comfortable house, . . . and some things classed as luxuries." But Farley was not lucky in every respect.⁵

In January 1898, James Farley Sr. was kicked in the ribs while hitching up the family's carriage horse in preparation for the funeral of a neighbor's child. Jim, who was not yet ten years old, remembered seeing his father stagger into the family home having just sustained the blow, fighting for breath, fatally injured. The first Jim knew of his father's death, a few days later, was waking up to see the undertaker's wagon outside the house.⁶

James Farley Sr.'s unexpected death left Ellen Farley with the task of providing for her five sons—John, Jim, Phil, Tom, and Bill—from the relatively modest proceeds of her husband's estate, which by then consisted of part ownership of two schooners and three thousand dollars in life insurance. In these newly straitened circumstances, Jim and his brothers—none of them old enough to work full-time without

sacrificing their education—took on odd jobs to supplement the family income. Each summer, from the age of twelve or thirteen, Jim worked in the local brickyards—first earning ninety-two cents a day as a “machine-boy,” ferrying sand from the kilns and keeping the yards free of dust, and then, later, as a painter and handyman—or at driving the horses that hoisted lumber from barges at the Bannon and Sutherland Shipyard.⁷

But it was not enough: in 1900, two years after Farley’s father’s death, with the proceeds of his estate eroding, Ellen was forced to turn to an alternative and not entirely respectable source of income. With the fifteen hundred dollars that remained from James Sr.’s insurance policy, she bought a combination grocery store and saloon from a neighbor. Young Jim, who had pledged at his confirmation that he would not drink alcohol until he was twenty-one, helped out behind the bar, where he listened to local gossip, learning what he later considered to be a valuable political lesson—that alcohol and indiscretion were intimate bed-fellows and that the former was therefore best avoided. When his pledge expired, Farley was already deeply immersed in local politics and had more than half an eye on building a business career. Ambitious and craving respectability, Jim recognized that abstinence was an asset to an Irishman on the make.⁸

Farley graduated from high school in June 1905, having attended Stony Point High. His favorite subjects were history and mathematics. He was bright but—unlike many of the New Dealers with whom he would later make his name—not an outstanding student. In *Behind the Ballots*, which was published in 1938 (just as Farley’s relationship with Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal was beginning to sour), he recalled how the New York State Board of Regents had deprived him of his high school certificate, downgrading his English paper from the passing mark of seventy-five to seventy-two or seventy-three. Even at the age of fifty and despite having been one of America’s most powerful politicians for the best part of a decade, Jim’s lack of educational credentials still rankled with him. That he felt it necessary to dwell in this way on his high school performance, even going so far as to defend himself by pointing out that he scored 98 percent in algebra, hints at an insecurity—partly intellectual, partly social—that people who worked with Farley also observed. Among those who noted it were Thomas Corcoran—the bril-

liant Irish American lawyer and political operator who would for a time become Roosevelt's right-hand man—and Eleanor Roosevelt. In his second, embittered autobiography, *Jim Farley's Story*, Farley quoted Eleanor Roosevelt's observation that "Franklin finds it hard to relax with people who aren't his social equals." Farley was convinced that this comment was aimed directly at him.⁹

Despite his professed liking for algebra, Farley did not have an affinity for abstract thought. Indeed, his inclination to view the world in practical terms, rather than abstract or theoretical terms, was one of his outstanding traits. Consequently, he was never going to be the sort of politician who would be invited to join Roosevelt's Brains Trust, the group of intellectual advisors who helped frame early New Deal policy. His cast of mind and approach to politics was very different from that of, say, Adolf Berle, the Brains Trustee who had bachelor's and master's degrees from Harvard by the time he was nineteen and whom Raymond Moley described as "an infant prodigy who continued to be an infant long after he ceased to be a prodigy." Moley, the Columbia academic who convened the Brains Trust, had great respect for Farley, even naming him as one of his "twenty-seven masters of politics." But Moley was adamant that the roles of the intellectual and the practical politician were quite separate. The intellectuals took care of policy and programs; the practical politicians kept the party organizations in line.¹⁰

When he finished high school in 1905, Farley enrolled in a bookkeeping course at the Packard Commercial School in New York City. On completing his studies there in the spring of 1906, he took a job as a bookkeeper at the Merlin Keiholz Paper Company on West Broadway. Dissatisfied with the meager salary of eight dollars a week, he moved in 1908 to the United States Gypsum Company, where, for the next fourteen years, he worked successively as a bookkeeper, company correspondent, and salesman, honing skills that would prove vital to his success as a party chairman and campaign manager. Farley was a meticulous administrator and indefatigable letter writer and had a flair for salesmanship. It was in these years that he grew accustomed to a grueling work schedule, typically catching the train from Grassy Point to New York City at seven in the morning and arriving back home for dinner

twelve hours later, then heading straight to the Stony Point town hall to confer with local politicians.¹¹

Farley never saw the two consuming passions of his professional life—business and politics—as separate. To him, these were mutually reinforcing spheres of interest. They were also, of course, highly effective means for attaining social and economic advancement. He pursued them in tandem and with tremendous zeal. As far as he was concerned, business and politics required the same skills. If ever there was a problem, whether over a business transaction, a patronage post, or a party platform, common sense and straight talk between honest brokers would, he thought, take care of it.

One reason that Farley had such faith in this kind of approach was that he was good at it himself. He was an open, gregarious, eager-to-please, even-tempered man with a warm, confident manner. He had a “marvelous gift with people,” Eleanor Roosevelt said. This interpersonal intelligence, combined with his “prodigious” capacity for work, enabled him very quickly to establish and cultivate the network of friends and acquaintances that laid the foundations for his political career.¹²

The roots of the Farley network were planted firmly in Rockland County, around Farley’s Grassy Point base, but they soon spread through state and nation. Eventually, they would span the globe. It started with the baseball fans who watched “Stretch” Farley play first base for the Grassy Point Alphas and with the high school classmates who helped elect him to local office. It continued with the aid of the building contractors he met through work, with his fraternal activities as a member of the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, and then, as his political career blossomed, with the postal workers, party regulars, local politicians, newspapermen, congressmen, presidents, celebrities, religious leaders, and international statesmen and stateswomen with whom he met and corresponded throughout his long and extraordinarily well-connected life.¹³

Farley’s rapid rise through the ranks of the New York State Democratic Party was no accident. It was fueled less by good fortune—though he did have a knack for being in the right place at the right time—than by his perfection of skills that made him an exceptionally able organizer,

administrator, negotiator, and networker. These qualities would eventually make Farley a priceless asset to both the Democratic Party and Franklin Roosevelt. Indeed, they were qualities that would have made him an asset to any political or business organization capable of winning his loyalty.

In addition to these skills and personal attributes, Farley possessed a fierce and enduring passion for politics. He took it up at an early age and never managed to kick the habit. Jim's first memory of political involvement was of an 1896 parade in which he, at eight years old, carried a torch for William Jennings Bryan. In 1976, the year of Farley's death, he was still politically active, dispensing wisdom on the state of the nation and ruminating on his party's prospects before journalists who gathered for his customary birthday press conference. Farley was born into a Democratic family, his father and uncles were Democrats, as were most of the people in his home hamlet of Grassy Point, but the neighboring township of Stony Point was a Republican stronghold. He was reared in a region dominated by the GOP. Finding a way of changing the fortunes of the upstate Democrats became the defining challenge of Farley's early career.¹⁴

Upstate New York, a vast area to the north and northwest of metropolitan New York, covers almost fifty thousand square miles of remarkably diverse landscapes, from the harsh terrain of the Adirondacks to the more subtle charms of the Hudson Valley and the burgeoning urban development of the Albany-Buffalo corridor. In the early twentieth century, the region's geographical contrasts were mirrored by the heterogeneity of the upstate population. Before 1950, a majority of city dwellers in upstate New York were either foreign-born or the children of immigrants. There were significant concentrations of Swedes in Jamestown, Poles in Buffalo, Italians in Utica and Rochester, Irish in Albany, and Czechs in Binghamton. Similarly, rural New York boasted French Canadians in the north country, German Mennonites in the Black River valley, Welsh farmers in the center of the state, and Italian truck farmers around Rome and Canastota. Upstate New York was monolithic in neither geography nor ethnic composition, yet Farley came to command this area to a degree that was unprecedented for a Democratic politician. How Farley achieved this position of dominance—by building up a

party organization capable of accommodating both the dependably Democratic politics of metropolitan New York and the more conservative, disparate, and rurally oriented politics of the fifty-seven upstate counties—is part of the story of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s rise to the presidency. It also relates, therefore, some of the origins both of New Deal party politics and of the politics of reform with which it was—and still is—so intimately associated.¹⁵

There were three distinct phases to Farley’s rise through the ranks of the New York State Democratic Party. The first, from 1908 to 1918, was a period when Farley focused on making contacts and building a reservoir of political strength at a local level in Rockland County. These were the years in which Farley devoted himself, as he put it so aptly in *Behind the Ballots*, to learning the “art of practical politics in local affairs.” The second phase, between 1918 and 1928, saw Farley drawn toward the dynamic figure of Alfred E. Smith, who in that time was elected governor of New York State four times, in 1918, 1922, 1924, and 1926. Through Smith, Farley gained valuable access to the labyrinthine world of New York City politics, accumulated experience in state and national electoral campaigns, and made the transition from seeking electoral office for himself to helping others achieve their electoral ambitions. The third phase, between 1928 to 1932, in which Farley joined forces with Franklin D. Roosevelt to transform the upstate Democratic Party and helped to propel Roosevelt toward the presidency, is the subject of chapter 2.¹⁶

Farley was a strapping young man. He was six feet and two and a half inches tall, weighed about 220 pounds, and was prematurely bald. He was long-limbed but walked in quick, short, purposeful steps. His physique was imposing, but it was his energy and geniality that most struck those who watched him closely. In his twenties, he was, in his own words, “burning with ambition for political preferment.” He threw himself into the local political arena with an enthusiasm that overwhelmed allies and adversaries alike. In 1908, he helped Alex Sutherland (son of the half owner of the shipyard where Farley had worked as a boy during summer vacations) in his unsuccessful campaign for town clerk. He followed this with more electioneering work and was voted onto the county committee when he was just twenty-one, before he had even cast

his first ballot. Then, in 1910, against the advice of his mother and some of his closest friends, he decided to run for town clerk. Remarkably, he won.¹⁷

The key to his victory in 1910 was the complacency of his opponent, which was in some ways merited: Farley was only twenty-two years old, and there had not been a Democrat as town clerk since 1894. But by making the fullest possible use of his contacts from Stony Point High and from his time as a semiprofessional baseball player for the Grassy Point Alphas and other local teams, he managed to win by a twenty-vote margin. It was a minor first step on the political ladder, but it taught him the value of having a wide range of friends and sympathetic acquaintances. Farley firmly believed that the reason he won was that he made a determined effort to get to know each individual voter in the township on a personal basis. In every election in which he was involved thereafter, even those conducted on a national scale, he applied this same method.¹⁸

Farley served four two-year terms as Stony Point town clerk between 1910 and 1918, using the position, which was unsalaried, to make himself widely known in the local area. The township paid Farley for attendance at board meetings, but, cannily, he chose to waive his right to collect fees of between ten cents and a dollar from individual citizens in need of licenses to hunt, fish, or marry. In this way, he obtained what he called the "good-will" of the electorate, and within two years of taking up the post, he had extended his initial twenty-vote majority to 288 out of only 680 votes cast.¹⁹

In this period, Farley joined the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, the fraternal organization with which he maintained a close association for the rest of his life. The young Farley was astute in recognizing that such gatherings of businessmen and local potentates were fertile ground for making connections and gaining political intelligence. These connections undoubtedly helped him progress in his early career and may have played a role in his rapid rise to the chairmanship of the Rockland County Democratic Party in 1918, though Farley's autobiographies and other accounts are silent on this matter. In any case, for three terms, from 1915 to 1918, he was Exalted Ruler of the Haverstraw Lodge. He went on to become District Deputy Grand Exalted Leader of the Eastern

District of New York, before being elected in 1924 to a one-year term as president of the New York State Elks Association.²⁰

Although becoming Stony Point’s town clerk was a notable achievement for a Catholic Irish American in a Republican town, it was, of course, a very minor position in the context of New York State politics as a whole. But on becoming Democratic county chairman for Rockland County early in 1918, Farley’s political career entered a new phase. As county chairman, he now had the opportunity to travel the state in an official political capacity, not just as a businessman or Elk. His new role also brought him into the orbit of Governor Alfred E. Smith, the first in a line of three Democratic governors of New York (the other two being Franklin D. Roosevelt and Herbert H. Lehman) with whom Farley worked, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, for almost a quarter of a century.²¹

In *Behind the Ballots*, Farley stated that when he took the job as county chairman, he intended to “build the county organization into a stronger force than it ever had been before and to make it a real factor in New York State politics.” He soon achieved both objectives. Shortly after taking up the chairmanship, Farley stepped in to resolve a festering dispute over the appointment of a state committeeman following the death of the previous incumbent. With no alternative candidate available, Farley took the position himself, albeit only on an acting basis. The state committee, perhaps influenced by their knowledge of Farley’s ties to Governor Smith, chose not to meet for almost two years, thus allowing Farley to serve out his term without appointment.²²

Farley had known Al Smith since 1918, when Farley had gone down to New York City to encourage Smith to run for governor. What Farley was really doing, of course, was putting himself forward as *the* man who understood the upstate scene. Farley told Smith that the time Smith had spent in the state legislature had endeared him to upstate voters, Republican and Democrat alike. Smith, however, was not impressed with Farley, the upstate upstart, and referred him on to Tammany Hall boss Charles F. Murphy.²³

In telling this story in his autobiography, Farley implied that his subsequent chat with Murphy had some impact on Smith’s gubernatorial nomination, a notion that is more than a little far-fetched. Smith’s biog-

raphers make no mention of Farley's role, and as both Murphy and Smith very probably realized, Farley's idea that Smith would do well upstate was fanciful. In fact, Smith only triumphed in the 1918 gubernatorial election by the slender margin of less than fifteen thousand votes. He won Manhattan and Brooklyn by an extraordinary 186,000 votes but was more or less trounced elsewhere. He did well among ethnic voters in the upstate cities, but essentially, in 1918, Al Smith was the candidate of immigrants and city dwellers, and that fact—as he discovered to his cost in 1928, when he ran for the presidency against Herbert Hoover—was his great weakness as well as his great strength.²⁴

The 1918 Smith story tells us that Jim Farley was an extremely determined and ambitious politician who strove to make himself indispensable to powerful men. His efforts worked only to a limited extent with Al Smith. But with Smith's successor as governor of New York State, Franklin D. Roosevelt, they worked beautifully.

By the early 1920s, Farley's twin careers in business and politics were beginning to blossom, as was the family he was starting with his wife, Bess, whom he married in April 1920. Before the decade was out, they had three children, Betty (b. 1922), Ann (b. 1925), and Jimmy (b. 1928). In 1922, with this new set of responsibilities in mind, Farley joined the Nobles Gypsum Company, consolidating his profile in the building trade. In the same year, he made a successful run for the New York State Assembly. This was the last elected post of any significance Farley sought until his ill-fated bid for the presidency in 1940.²⁵

Farley was not especially keen to spend a year in Albany. In *Behind the Ballots*, he claimed that he had no particular desire to be an assemblyman and only put himself forward for the position because he could not find anyone else suitable. While this may be true, Farley's year in Albany gave him valuable legislative experience and, most important, allowed him to further extend the range and depth of his knowledge of upstate politics. This knowledge and the ties Farley established with upstate Democratic leaders were two ingredients that later made him so useful to Franklin Roosevelt.

After riding to victory on the back of a Democratic tide created by high levels of unemployment and other economic repercussions of the

1921 recession, Farley, rather surprisingly, became an unusually zealous legislator. In his single term in office, he introduced thirty-three bills, nineteen of which passed. The bills he sponsored were local and nonpartisan in nature, covering such subjects as motor vehicle registration, the regulation of real estate brokers, and the termination of the open season on squirrel hunting. Almost all the bills were specifically concerned with Farley's home patch, Rockland County. He pandered to the hunting community by backing a bill in relation to the taking of deer. This had the effect of irritating the Rockland County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, but Farley's bills were unlikely to make him many enemies: for the most part, they were consistent with his general strategy of making and consolidating support among influential individuals and groups. He did not strike out for any especially progressive causes.²⁶

Despite Farley's best efforts, however, he was unable to win the backing of some Democratic factions in his own county, a fact that most likely contributed to his heavy defeat when he sought reelection to the assembly in November 1923. According to the *Rockland County Times* (which at this time was sympathetic to Farley), “an element” in Stony Point “ruthlessly gave him the political stiletto.” The *Times* reported that in the town of Ramapo, Farley was “harpooned, because of his charges as a supervisor and town clerk.”²⁷

Farley's defeat in 1923 merits close attention because there are discrepancies between Farley's account in *Behind the Ballots* and what other sources reveal. Farley argued in his autobiography that he was swept out office by a statewide Republican surge, exacerbated by his decision to vote for repeal of the Mullan-Gage Act, a state act enforcing prohibition. The repeal bill passed by only one vote, giving Farley's opponents the opportunity to dwell on his ties to Al Smith and other leading wets with whom Farley was already well acquainted, such as Tammany boss Charles F. Murphy and Jimmy Walker, the latter of whom would soon become one of New York's most popular—and scandal-prone—mayors. This was an election in which no Republican assemblyman who voted against repeal of the Mullan-Gage Act was defeated and in which no candidate of any party who voted against repeal was defeated by a wet of any party. Democratic wets were defeated by Republican dries in Oneida, Rensselaer, Erie, and Schuyler counties, as well as in Rockland.

It is significant, however, that Farley's opponent, William S. Gedney, a lawyer from Nyack who was strongly supported by the Rockland County Fireman's Association, said that prohibition was not an issue in the election. In *Behind the Ballots*, Farley wrote that the Mullan-Gage vote "retired me to private life without delay," but local newspaper reports suggest that there were other factors at play, going some way toward substantiating Gedney's view.²⁸

Campaign documents in Farley's papers show that the principal issue of the campaign was the moral corruption of politics. Prohibition fit neatly into this narrative, but so too did other issues that hurt Farley, such as his closeness to Tammany Hall. From Farley's perspective, the Tammany connection was always going to be a bad issue for the campaign to center on. It permitted the Republicans to make hay with his links to Al Smith and Charles F. Murphy, and it gave local Democratic organizations, in a predominantly rural county, the chance to accuse him subtly of disloyalty to his roots, by linking him with the supposedly nefarious politics of the metropolis. In one campaign poster, the Republicans combined their anti-Tammany attack with an appeal to racial prejudice, by printing a letter of support for Farley from Henri W. Shields, "THE ONE COLORED ASSEMBLYMAN." The letter stated that Farley and Shields enjoyed a "warm friendship," that they talked on a daily basis, and that Shields would regard it as a "personal favor" if voters supported Farley. Under the letter was the caption, "KEEP TAMMANY OUT OF ROCKLAND COUNTY." Farley's rather lame response was to point out, with the help of "a few INDEPENDENT THINKERS and Friends of Hon. James A. Farley," that his efforts to replace fees with salaries for town officials showed that he aimed to eradicate graft. He asserted, "THE REAL ISSUE IS ROCKLAND TAMMANY," suggesting that local satraps were jealous because Farley was "the first man sent from here to do anything."²⁹

The most striking fact about Farley's time as an assemblyman was that he ever got elected in the first place. Prohibition was only one of an array of issues that contributed to his 1923 defeat, helping to return the Republicans to their accustomed domination of Rockland County. Furthermore, while the issues did not play to Farley's advantage, the perennial weakness of the Democratic Party organization in Rockland County—

mirroring a problem that the party experienced in much of upstate New York—did not help either. What organization there was suffered as a result of factional backbiting.

As a mode of attack, the anti-Tammany rhetoric employed by Farley’s Republican opponents had much to recommend it, not just because it so effectively tapped into ethnic, religious, and antiurban sentiments and resentments, but also because there was enough truth in it for some of the charges to stick. Farley was indeed being drawn into the orbit of Tammany Hall—or at least of New York City politics. It did not help, for instance, that Farley took a sinecure as a port warden in New York City in 1918–19 and that he demonstrably supported Al Smith.³⁰

The year after his defeat in the state assembly elections, Farley’s opponents were in a sense vindicated by his acceptance of the “honorary” position of chairman of the New York State Athletic Commission, whose primary task was to regulate the sport of boxing. This was not a role calculated to endear Farley to Tammany’s foes. Critics could rightly point out that Farley was quite unqualified for the position. He was a fairly experienced administrator, but boxing was a sport about which, as he admitted in *Behind the Ballots*, he knew almost nothing.³¹

Before taking the job with the Athletic Commission, Farley was in the running for a position as deputy superintendent of canals under Colonel Frederick Stuart Greene, who was superintendent of public works. Farley declined the post (salaried at seventy-five hundred dollars a year) on the grounds that he did not want to spend another year in Albany, hundreds of miles away from New York City. The city had by now become the hub of his business and political life, and Tammany boss Charles F. Murphy, for whom Farley had a very high regard, had warned him away from an association with Greene, a man who was hostile to the patronage politics that made Tammany tick.³²

Farley found that work for the Athletic Commission mixed easily with his other political commitments. It also went well with the work that came with the building-supply business that he had set up in the mid-1920s with his brother-in-law, Harry B. Finnegan. His time at the commission was not without controversy, but it did bring publicity and ample opportunity to further refine his political skills.³³

Collectively, the Athletic Commission’s members—Farley, George F.

Brower, and William Muldoon—were known by the nation’s sports-writers as “the three dumb dukes,” because of the bumbling way in which they administered the sport. But Farley was the least dumb of the three. Brower was an unexceptional man, but Muldoon, an octogenarian, was a former wrestling champion. People called him “Professor” because he ran a health farm along “scientific” lines, including a smoking ban, which sports journalists regarded as eccentric in the extreme. It was not long before Farley had outmaneuvered both Brower and Muldoon to claim the chairmanship for himself. Farley was strongly placed to do this because he had the backing of Tammany boss Charles F. Murphy and of Jimmy Walker, with whom Farley was forging a close friendship.³⁴

At his first Athletic Commission meeting, Farley voted with Brower to make Brower chairman instead of Muldoon, who was a Republican appointee of long standing. When Muldoon threatened to resign, it was decided that the matter should be dealt with at the next meeting, in which Muldoon refused to participate. Muldoon’s absence ensured that Brower became chairman. After a year, Brower refused to allow Farley to move to vote for Brower’s reelection: Brower thought he was in line for appointment to a judgeship and was waiting for Governor Smith to send a letter (which never came) praising Brower’s work as chairman of the commission. Farley responded by joining with Muldoon to oust Brower and make himself the new chairman. Within eighteen months of his appointment, Farley had engineered his way to the chairmanship. He then held the position, which had previously been rotated at regular intervals, until February 28, 1933, when he left for Washington.³⁵

Two issues that arose from Farley’s time as boxing commissioner merit brief attention here for the light they shed on his *modus operandi*. The first of these was the controversy over a ruling—made by the commission before Farley joined it—that the world heavyweight champion Jack Dempsey should defend his title against African American boxer Harry Wills or be forced not to fight in New York State. Tex Rickard, a charismatic boxing promoter with whom Farley struggled to get along, was opposed to a Dempsey-Wills fight, perhaps fearing that such a match might spark racial conflict that would in turn bring his sport into further disrepute. Rumors of sharp practice by promoters and managers

were rife in the New York press. A powerful lobby at Albany was pushing for boxing to be banned altogether. Indeed, it is arguable that if Jimmy Walker had not succeeded a few years earlier in legislating a bill that placed it under the regulatory powers of the State Athletic Commission, boxing would have died as an official sport in New York State. Rickard wanted to stage a guaranteed money-spinning fight between Dempsey and the Irish American Gene Tunney of New York, and he persuaded William Muldoon that this was the best way forward. Farley, however, was determined to stand by the initial ruling, and his refusal to issue a license forced the Dempsey-Tunney fight to Philadelphia.³⁶

Farley's decision was unusual in the wider context of his career, because it upset a large portion of the media and the business community (especially retailers and hotel owners), who stood to benefit from the fight being staged at Madison Square Garden. Farley's sympathies and outlook throughout his life were generally favorable to business interests. But this was one issue on which Farley took an unpopular stand that brought him under a deluge of bad publicity. He did make some political capital from the affair, gaining popularity among some African Americans who interpreted Rickard's opposition to the Wills bout as evidence of racial discrimination. But it is probable that Farley took his stand less because he was outraged by its racial dimensions than because he was a stickler for what he liked to call “the rules of the game.”³⁷

In Farley's view, Harry Wills was next in line to fight Dempsey, and that was the end of it. To him, the Dempsey-Wills ruling made by his predecessors on the commission was sacred. It was simply wrong to go back on it. Farley had a tremendous respect for precedent and for playing by the rules, which essentially meant never lying and never going back on your word. His autobiographies repeatedly return to these precepts: he assumed that the world in which he operated was governed by a rigid, universally shared set of rules governing proper conduct and that everyone understood them in the same way. Later in his career, he found that this was not the case—that some of the best politicians, including Franklin D. Roosevelt, played by an entirely different, more mutable and complex set of rules.³⁸

A second interesting feature of Farley's days as boxing commissioner was the rumor that Farley used his position on the commission to dole out free passes to big fights in order to curry political favor. One story stated that he gave out free tickets to the tune of thirty thousand dollars for a championship fight. In *Behind the Ballots*, Farley denied this and accused Tex Rickard of spreading the rumor by placing prominent sportswriters on his payroll. Farley did, however, openly admit to buying tickets in bulk to give to his friends and business contacts. William V. Shannon wrote in his book *The American Irish* that "Rickard's published figures for the Dempsey-Sharkey fight in 1927 listed Farley as buying \$9,024 in tickets." That is an extraordinary sum, the equivalent in 2005 of about one hundred thousand dollars. Even if there was no foul play, Farley was using his position as commissioner very aggressively to expand his network of friends and acquaintances.³⁹

Allegations of foul play were an occupational hazard for a politician of Farley's kind. He had to ride out a series of scandals in his New Deal career, notably Huey Long's accusation that he was channeling contracts for public works to his building firm and a furor over his distribution, as postmaster general, of stamps as gifts. Perhaps it is plausible to suggest here that Farley's rigidly rule-bound worldview was a kind of defense against such onslaughts. He always strove to be scrupulously proper in his public and private conduct. He was always immaculately dressed, and he never drank or smoked. His only vice, he said, was that he chewed Wrigley's gum. As a political operator working in New York City and later as postmaster general in charge of vast amounts of patronage power, it was important for Farley to establish and then trade on his reputation for honesty. Like many an on-course bookmaker, Farley cultivated the sobriquet "Honest Jim" as a shield against the inevitable accusations of improper conduct to which his profession was subject.⁴⁰

By the mid-1920s, Jim Farley was a conspicuously successful businessman and politician. He was a well-liked and widely known figure in New York State politics, with contacts in New York City as well as upstate, and his post with the Athletic Commission guaranteed him a good deal of media exposure. But one major barrier prevented Farley from making substantial further progress in politics before 1928, and his name was Alfred E. Smith.

Throughout his gubernatorial years, as he jockeyed for the prize of his party’s presidential nomination, Al Smith found that he had little use for Jim Farley. Much later, in the 1940s, after both men had been betrayed—at least in their minds—by Franklin Roosevelt, they became fast friends. In 1959, Farley cowrote a children’s book, *Governor Al Smith*, eulogizing Smith and presenting him as a model Catholic. But in the 1920s, Farley struggled to find a way of making his personal qualities and political skills relevant to Smith’s strategy.⁴¹

One reason Farley failed to break into Smith’s inner circle was that his timing was all wrong. Farley came to Smith’s attention in 1918, when Smith was about to become governor and already had an experienced and devoted team around him. In Joseph Proskauer, Abram Elkus, and Belle Moskowitz, Smith had a dedicated, highly skilled, and well-established team of speechwriters, publicists, and assistants. It is hard to see where Farley might have fitted in.

In Moskowitz, as Frances Perkins once pointed out, Smith already had a person who replicated many of Farley’s skills. Perkins, who would become the United States’ first female cabinet member as Franklin Roosevelt’s secretary of labor, worked closely with both Smith and Roosevelt and knew both Moskowitz and Farley well. They were, she said, “self-made,” publicly educated politicians with boundless energy. They knew how to manage campaigns, make and exploit contacts, and accurately assess the political lie of the land during their travels.⁴²

Despite these similarities, though, there was an important difference between Moskowitz and Farley, one that Perkins did not mention and that provides a further clue as to why Farley had to transfer his allegiance to Roosevelt to make a major name for himself in politics. The well-spring of Belle Moskowitz’s politics was her independent-minded progressivism. Farley was a different political animal altogether. For Farley, the business of political organization was an end in itself. The politics of reform was all very well, but without a smooth-running political apparatus to act as a vehicle for progressive sentiment, political change, however desirable, would be no more than a pipe dream.⁴³

Moskowitz’s innovations in campaign organization—such as the introduction of independent committees for professional groups of businessmen, lawyers, nurses, and social workers—were a direct extension of her political roots in progressive reform circles in New York City.

She wished to incorporate sympathetic extraparty groups and, in the process, provide an additional, less corruption-prone source of campaign financing. Farley oversaw the establishment of similar committees for Roosevelt in later campaigns, but he was not driven by the desire to bring independent professionals into the fold. His brand of politics was neither ideological—at least not consciously so—nor especially geared toward interest-group or issue-oriented politics (though he did make some concessions in this direction during the New Deal). Farley's natural constituency consisted of Democratic Party regulars, and his political energies were directed toward serving their needs at the local level, primarily through the judicious use of patronage. His reluctance to pander to independent progressives is suggested by a comment he made to Molly Dewson during the 1930 campaign. When Dewson mentioned that Frances Perkins wanted to set up a committee to attract the votes of "the intelligentsia," Farley replied, "If you want to bother with that one-and-a-half percent of voters, go ahead."⁴⁴

There were other ways in which Moskowitz and Farley's roles differed. Moskowitz played a key role in policymaking initiatives for Smith, something that Farley never did for Roosevelt. Moreover, Moskowitz's relationship with Smith was conditioned by her gender in ways that did not affect Farley's relationship with Roosevelt. Moskowitz was a pioneer in public relations and Smith's closest adviser, but she deliberately avoided the public spotlight, probably because she judged that the idea of a woman having such influence would not be widely accepted. Farley was also a shrewd advisor, but he adopted the opposite posture in relation to the press, positively seeking the limelight. He was every inch the manly politician, placing himself up front, where he could "take it on the chin" for Roosevelt, thus drawing the sting out of any criticism.

Belle Moskowitz's political know-how meant that Farley would have to find some other way to make himself appeal to Al Smith, but Smith's political strategy had no place for Farley. Farley's strongest suits—his knowledge of the Democratic Party in the upstate counties and his ability to make friends through the entire state, whether they be in Buffalo, Binghamton, or the Bronx—were not attractive to a man whose political base and style were so closely linked to New York City. Farley's Irish roots further compounded the problem. In political terms, Smith had

little to gain from adding another Irish American to his team. If anything, it was in Smith’s interests to play down his Irishness in order to maximize his vote-winning potential.

The opposite was true of Roosevelt, the Hyde Park aristocrat, Protestant progressive, and self-styled Tammany beater. Whereas Farley’s Irish background would add little of substance to a Smith ticket, it had the potential to broaden Roosevelt’s appeal. Roosevelt wanted and needed a canny upstate operator to galvanize the Democratic Party north of the Bronx line. The combination made perfect political sense. Ultimately, it was a partnership so potent that it effectively transformed the fortunes of the Democratic Party—first in New York State and then throughout the nation.