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Reawakening the “Rip Van Winkle Upstate Democracy”

Tammany Hall boss Richard Croker once declared, “Up-State Democrats! Up-State Democrats! I didn’t know there was any up-State Democrats.” That was in the 1880s, when Croker and Tammany Hall were in rude health. In those days, there was little incentive for a New York City boss to concern himself with upstate affairs. Croker died in 1922 and never met Jim Farley, but we can assume that if he had, he would have been mightily surprised: not only was Farley living proof that there was at least one upstate Democrat, he was also the man who would show that, given the right candidate, conducive circumstances, effective campaigning, and a lot of hard work, sufficient upstate Democrats could be found—or made—to sweep the upstate counties, thus utterly transforming the politics of New York State.¹

Farley’s role in the revival of the upstate party in the 1920s has been mentioned by historians and biographers of the Roosevelt era, notably Frank Freidel and James MacGregor Burns. But it has not been explored in any great depth. This chapter examines the organizational drive conducted by Farley, Roosevelt, and his advisors—its rationale, impact, and consequences—with a view to clarifying Farley’s role in the emergence of Franklin D. Roosevelt as a genuine presidential contender.²

By the late 1920s, Roosevelt had been talked about as a presidential possibility for a long time. He had picked up experience as Woodrow Wilson’s secretary for the navy, a post that his cousin Theodore had also occupied on his way to the White House; he had gained national exposure as a vice presidential candidate in 1920; he had been an active

Democrat through the mid-1920s, maintaining a high profile even as he struggled to come to terms with polio; and after 1928, he had exercised executive authority as governor of New York. But it was the manner of Roosevelt's reelection as governor of New York in 1930, winning by a 725,001 margin and taking forty-two of the fifty-seven upstate counties, that thrust him to the head of the pack in the race for the 1932 presidential nomination. This second gubernatorial victory helped make Roosevelt's already famous name, but it made Farley's name, too. Roosevelt's 1930 gubernatorial victory cemented Farley's reputation as a coming force in national politics. It established one of the most effective political partnerships in American political history, one that ranks alongside those of William McKinley and Mark Hanna, Woodrow Wilson and Joseph Tumulty, George W. Bush and Karl Rove.

To understand the scale of Farley and Roosevelt's achievements in New York State politics, it is necessary to grasp just how formidable were the barriers—political, cultural, and historical—that stood in their way. The outstanding feature of the politics of New York State is the prominence of the division between upstate and downstate, a split running, in the words of one writer, “like a massive geological fault” between the two sections. The legendary Tammany sachem George Washington Plunkitt was exaggerating when he claimed that “the feeling between the city and the hayseeds . . . is every bit as bitter as the feelin’ between the North and South before the [Civil] war,” but there were deep political divisions between the sections. Upstate New York has been overwhelmingly Republican since 1856, while New York City has been strongly Democratic since 1800.³

Democrats had difficulty making major inroads into the Republican vote even at the best of times. In 1932, for example, with New York's Democrats on the crest of a wave on the eve of Roosevelt's emphatic presidential election victory, 53.8 percent of New York's enrolled voters were Democrats, and 44.9 percent were Republicans; but these figures masked wide disparities in sectional allegiances. In New York City, 77.2 percent of enrolled voters were Democrats, and 21 percent were Republicans; outside of New York City, however, only 32.4 percent were Democrats, and 66.6 percent were Republicans.⁴

When Farley came into politics, the two major parties in his home state were fairly evenly split. Ernest Cuneo, the New Deal labor lawyer and journalist who, in the 1970s, wrote a manuscript based partly on face-to-face meetings and partly on Farley’s daily memoranda, noted that “Upstate Democrats had a high leverage in the Democratic party, because they would provide the margin of victory in state-wide elections. The Upstate counties surrounding New York City were the natural fulcrums for the Upstate leverage Downstate . . . Rockland County was of course one of the Fulcrum Counties.” Perhaps Cuneo was going too far here—as Farley’s biographer, he had a special interest in making Farley’s Rockland County seem to be the hinge on which New York State’s politics swung—but the point was sound in a broad sense. Upstate Democrats (not just those around Rockland County) did have the power to tip the electoral balance. A more important point, though, had less to do with Farley’s origins in the lower Hudson Valley and more to do with his belief that there was, in general, tremendous untapped potential in the Democratic vote upstate and that he, with his skills as an organizer and salesman, had the ability to exploit it.⁵

In seeking to improve the Democrats’ standing upstate, Farley was faced not only with the traditional Republican preferences of upstate voters but also with three systematic obstacles built into the fabric of New York State politics. First among these was the fact that New York’s upstate cities tended to be markedly less Democratic than major cities in other states, which was partly due to upstate voters’ desire to have a counterweight against the overwhelming Democratic majorities in New York City. A second factor was that the task of upstate Democrats was made more difficult by the apportionment of seats in the state legislature. Apportionment was calculated by a complex formula that systematically favored the Republican Party. Made law in 1894, the formula was devised by a group of upstate Republicans led by Elihu Root, the brilliant administrator who would go on to serve Presidents McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt as secretary of war and secretary of state. The formula was a response to fears that the growth of New York City’s immigrant population would lead to Democratic dominance of state affairs. The strength of antiurban sentiment is illustrated by the words of one

delegate who stated that “the average citizen in the rural district is superior in intelligence, superior in morality, superior in self-government, to the average citizen in the great cities.”⁶

The consequence of malapportionment was that the less populated rural districts were overrepresented and almost always voted Republican, whereas the more populated urban districts were underrepresented and almost always elected Democrats. Between 1920 and 1964, Democrats won majority control of the state assembly only once, in 1934; in 1932, 1936, and 1940, a minority of Republican votes generated a majority of Republican legislators in both the assembly and the state senate.⁷

The third factor Farley and his fellow Democrats had to contend with if they were to challenge Republican hegemony upstate was the supervisor system. This system dictated that each of the fifty-seven counties outside New York City was governed by a board made up of town supervisors; each supervisor was not only their town’s executive officer but also their town’s representative on the county governing board. In Rockland County, Farley prospered through the supervisor system, but it hurt the Democrats in urban settings, where there were almost always larger concentrations of Democrats. Buffalo, for example, which accounted for 70 percent of the Erie County population in 1930, had only twenty-seven representatives on the county board, which was just 46 percent of the board membership.⁸

The desire of upstate city dwellers to check the strength of the down-state Democrats, the malapportionment of seats in the state legislature, and the antiurban bias of the supervisor system all militated against the establishment of a more permanent Democratic presence in upstate New York. But working together, between 1928 and 1930, Farley and Roosevelt demonstrated that if the circumstances were right, these obstacles could be overcome. They were spectacularly successful both in securing large Democratic majorities in the state as a whole and in spreading the base of the Democratic Party to areas previously regarded as Republican strongholds.

This achievement was not just a case of capitalizing ruthlessly on the circumstances of the Depression: that would explain neither the size nor the permanence of the shift in the Democrats’ fortunes in the state. Rather, it was the product of brilliantly executed political strategy that combined Farley’s drive to build a new and permanent Democratic

Party organization throughout the state with Roosevelt’s personal appeal and progressive politics. It was a recipe for a politics of reform that proved equally potent when applied to the national arena.

It is hardly surprising that, as a Dutchess County man, Franklin D. Roosevelt was very much more concerned with the strength of the upstate Democratic Party than was Alfred E. Smith, scion of the Fulton fish market. In both gubernatorial and presidential contests, Smith relied on massive downstate majorities to prevail, sometimes narrowly, in statewide contests. Herbert Lehman, Roosevelt’s successor as governor of New York and the man who had directed Smith’s gubernatorial campaign in 1926, pointed to Smith’s lack of commitment to rural upstate counties in his oral reminiscences. Referring to the 1928 presidential campaign, he recalled:

I know at that time, when he [Smith] campaigned, he confined his campaigning to the New York Central mainline. He would go to Buffalo and then he would go to Rochester and Syracuse and Albany, and maybe to Schenectady and Poughkeepsie, and New York. A few intermediate stops at industrial centers. But he would never do what Roosevelt did that same year—tour the country districts.⁹

Unlike Roosevelt, Smith never made a concerted effort to convert or mobilize upstate voters to his cause, nor did he ever succeed in creating new organizational structures in previously forgotten counties.

In Smith’s defense, it should be noted that unifying the New York State Democratic Party and putting its upstate presence on a more permanent footing would have been an enormously difficult task for a politician so intimately associated with Tammany Hall and New York City’s immigrant populations, especially as Smith reached his prime at a time of relative prosperity and Republican domination of national politics. It did not help, either, that even by the standards of American states, New York’s politics was highly decentralized; its county chairmen, who were elected by committeemen from each election district, were like feudal barons in the degree of independent decision-making power they enjoyed and in the tremendous influence over nominations and patronage decisions that rested in their hands.¹⁰

Smith might easily have suffered far more than he actually did for his relative lack of upstate support. When he ran for governor in 1918, for instance, he was fortunate that the usual large Republican upstate majorities did not materialize for his opponent: without the low voter turnout caused by the combined effects of that year's influenza epidemic and the apathy and sense of disillusionment brought on by the news of mounting casualties from the war in Europe, Smith would probably have lost. In 1920, Smith did well not to be more comprehensively buried by the Republican avalanche, losing the gubernatorial race by the respectable margin of 74,066 votes and earning over a million more New York votes than James M. Cox, the Ohio newspaperman who headed the national Democratic ticket for the presidency. Two years later, Smith almost failed to stave off a challenge for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination from another man of the press, William Randolph Hearst.¹¹

Realizing that the upstate power vacuum was a big problem for Smith, Hearst attempted to create a fledgling political machine of his own in some upstate counties, sending his agents around to drum up support. In *Behind the Ballots*, Farley alleged that one of these agents, W. J. "Fingy" Connors, a flamboyant former stevedore from Buffalo, arranged a New York meeting with Farley at the Hotel McAlpin on Broadway with the intention of bribing him into backing Hearst. Farley, on seeing Connors pull from his pocket "a fat roll of bills, bigger than anything of its kind I had ever seen," told him that he was firmly committed to Smith.¹²

Hearst's attempt to build a shadow organization in 1922 failed, and that year represented a breakthrough of sorts for Al Smith. He was elected by the largest plurality a gubernatorial candidate had ever received. He benefited from the fact that unemployment was still high (the state had yet to recover from the 1921 recession) and won the major upstate cities of Buffalo, Rochester, Albany, and Syracuse. He took thirteen upstate counties in the process, which was thirteen more than he had won in his 1920 defeat and eleven more than he had taken in 1918.

Shortly after the 1922 election, Franklin Roosevelt wrote Smith a revealing congratulatory letter. Smith's victory, Roosevelt claimed, was evidence of the "reawakening of the Rip Van Winkle upstate Democracy." It would be wrong, Roosevelt said, for Smith to rest on his laurels, because Democratic Party organizations in many upstate counties were

feeble. In too many cases, Roosevelt continued, “the leadership is either antiquated or of the type which is controlled by the Republican machine.” This was not Roosevelt’s first effort to persuade Smith of the parlous state of some upstate counties. In late July 1922, he had written a letter stating, “There is no danger about this County [Dutchess] or any other County that has an effective organization, but, as you know, there are some dreadfully weak sisters upstate.”¹³

In fact, just as Roosevelt feared, the 1922 result was a flash in the pan so far as Smith’s performance north of the Bronx line was concerned. Unlike Roosevelt in 1928, Smith failed to capitalize on the opportunity presented by his 1922 victory. In 1924, he managed to win only one upstate county; in 1926, only four. Roosevelt won only three upstate counties in 1928 but an extraordinary forty-two in 1930.¹⁴

The conviction that the weakness of the upstate Democratic Party need not be a permanent feature of the historical landscape in New York State was the foundation of the political partnership between Franklin D. Roosevelt and Jim Farley. Their political styles and objectives meshed easily. To Roosevelt, Farley’s encyclopedic knowledge of the upstate organizations was a godsend, especially as that knowledge was harnessed to a personality—outgoing, enthusiastic, energetic—ideally suited to proselytizing work. What is more, Farley was an extremely conscientious administrator who seemed to revel in the execution of apparently mundane party business. He was friendly, hardworking, and eager to please, and it helped that he combined these qualities with a highly developed sense of rectitude that manifested itself in his unimpeachable private life and in the attention to detail that characterized his work. Farley’s Catholicism added strength to the Roosevelt ticket, and although he had become a good friend of New York City’s scandal-prone mayor Jimmy Walker by the late 1920s, his Rockland County roots afforded him some protection from the tainted reputation of the metropolis. Roosevelt would explain to Frances Perkins during the 1930 gubernatorial campaign: “Well of course, Jim is in a different position. He’s never been a part of New York City. He’s strictly a Rockland County boy. He’s never had to be in these things and I guess he is clear of them. He’s kind of innocent in that phase. All of which is very good.”¹⁵

To Farley, Roosevelt represented a supreme opportunity. The Roo-

sevelt name alone carried considerable weight in terms of vote-winning potential, but it was Roosevelt's commitment to revivifying the upstate party—a commitment lacking in Al Smith—that presented Farley with his greatest opportunity. Further, whereas Farley was consistently frustrated in his attempts to gain access to Smith's inner circle of advisors or to establish a clearly defined role beyond that of upstate errand boy in Smith's campaigns, he was warmly welcomed into Roosevelt's larger, more loosely structured advisory team.

Above all, there was a logical rationale for Farley's presence. Roosevelt and Louis Howe—the disheveled, oddly gnomelike aide who had helped guide Roosevelt through polio and his early campaigns in the 1910s and would continue to advise on tactical matters until his death in 1936—needed a man who understood the upstate scene. Farley was the obvious candidate.¹⁶

Farley and Roosevelt first met at a reception held at the National Democratic Club headquarters in New York City in 1920, when Roosevelt was a vice presidential candidate. But that meeting did not progress beyond a handshake. They began to get to know one another on a personal basis in inauspicious circumstances, at the 1924 Democratic National Convention in Madison Square Garden. That convention was their party's nadir, a nightmarish occasion marked by bitter struggles—over culture, region, and religion—that threatened to tear the party apart. Famously, it took seventeen days and 103 rounds of voting before the two initial favorites for the nomination, New York's Al Smith and California's William Gibbs McAdoo, were forced to make way for John W. Davis—the conservative Clarksburg lawyer who would later make his name by successfully defending the steel industry against government seizure during the Korean War and unsuccessfully arguing South Carolina's case for school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. For his part, in the 1924 convention Farley was a humble district delegate for Stony Point, helping out on the convention floor while Franklin Roosevelt led the Smith campaign, placing the governor's nomination for the presidency and raising the roof with his "Happy Warrior" speech.¹⁷

This was Roosevelt's first address of national importance since 1920, when he had been on the vice-presidential campaign trail. When,

toward the end of the speech, he described Smith as “the happy warrior of the political battlefield,” the phrase immediately captured the imagination of the convention delegates (whose cheers drowned out the climactic sentences of the speech) and of journalists such as Walter Lippmann, who described Roosevelt’s performance as “moving and distinguished.” The Happy Warrior speech maintained Roosevelt’s profile as a leading Democrat, enhanced his reputation as an orator, and dispelled any notion that he might harbor anti-Catholic prejudice. It also attracted the attention of up-and-coming politicians, Jim Farley among them. When Farley heard of Roosevelt’s appointment as Smith’s manager, he wrote enthusiastic, congratulatory letters to both men. These letters and others that Farley sent to Roosevelt in the first two weeks of May 1924 amply demonstrate Farley’s ambition to operate on the broadest possible canvas. He was not satisfied with confining himself to upstate New York. He referred to his “activity in the Grand Lodge of the B.P.O. Elks . . . all over the country” and offered to use those connections so that Smith might get “a line on the situation” in Connecticut. He gave Roosevelt a copy of a letter he had received from a fellow Stony Point resident, Martin A. Driscoll, who had made influential friends while wintering in Florida and had offered to do some “missionary work” for Smith among the Florida delegates. Roosevelt gratefully wrote back asking Farley to send Driscoll to his New York office for a talk, explaining, “Any man who personally knows a delegate is of very valuable help to us just at present.”¹⁸

In the 1920s, Farley and Roosevelt’s fledgling relationship hinged on their mutual interest in the upstate Democratic Party and on Farley’s desire to impress on Roosevelt the breadth and utility of his contacts. The relationship’s potential could never be realized, however, until Al Smith’s influence on state politics began to wane. This happened in 1928, when Smith won the presidential nomination and was forced to focus on the national campaign. By a happy coincidence—at least for Farley—both the chairman of the Democratic State Committee, Edwin Corning, and the secretary, Hugh Reilly, fell ill. Until this time, Farley had been forced to mute his political ambitions in favor of his business interests and his position on the New York State Athletic Commission, because Smith was not interested in promoting Farley to a position of real

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influence. Now the path was left clear for Farley and Roosevelt to make their move and to begin the process of taking over the Democratic Party machinery in New York State.

The breakthrough came in a summer conference of the Democratic State Committee held in Albany, where Smith (with some reluctance, according to Farley) agreed that Farley be made secretary. Writing about the occasion in the early 1970s, Farley's friend Ernest Cuneo stated that Smith prevaricated for an hour—"in the hope that somebody besides Farley might float through the window"—before finally acceding to the will of the majority. Smith said that he did not want to appoint anyone who also held a state job. This was a requirement that, in Smith's view (though not Farley's), included Farley's commission post: while it was neither a paid position nor statewide in scope, it was still a political appointment. The problem with Smith's position, though, was that it precluded almost all the alternative candidates: Dave Fitzgerald of Glens Falls was on the Hudson River Regulatory Board, Bill Dinneen of Ogdensburg was a deputy motor vehicle commissioner, and George Van Namee, Smith's former personal secretary, was a public service commissioner.¹⁹

Farley never fully explained precisely why Smith was so unwilling to endorse his promotion to secretary of the state committee in the summer of 1928. He was most likely reluctant to promote a Roosevelt loyalist openly, as this would inevitably loosen his hold on the reins of the state party. If this was the case, his fears were justified. By this time, Farley was firmly in the Roosevelt camp. In the early 1970s, looking back to the period just after Smith's defeat in the 1928 presidential election, Farley, with his collaborator Ernest Cuneo, recalled:

Al Smith felt crushed enough to issue a statement that he would withdraw from politics. I took him at his word and I started as Secretary of the State Committee practically the next day to consolidate the F.D.R. victory. But even if Smith hadn't so declared, I would have supported F.D.R. gains[ayin]g him, as I did in their eventual split, because when F.D.R. won the Governorship, he also won the rightful position of head of the Party and he was entitled to keep it. Those are the rules of the game.²⁰

It was convenient for Farley to make out that the transition of his loyalty from Smith to Roosevelt coincided with the November 1928 election, when Roosevelt became governor, but that was a fiction. By the middle of 1928 at the very latest, Farley realized that Roosevelt, not Smith, presented him with the opportunities he craved. This had nothing to do with “the rules of the game” and everything to do with the prospect of power.

As James MacGregor Burns has pointed out, the New York State electorate dealt a cruel blow to Al Smith in 1928. In New York City, Smith won thirty-three thousand more votes running for president than Franklin D. Roosevelt won running for governor. Upstate, though, it was a different story: Smith won seventy-three thousand votes less than Roosevelt. In other words, a few thousand electors voted against Smith but for Roosevelt, which meant that though Smith remained the titular head of the party, he conceded true leadership in the state to Roosevelt.²¹

One other aspect of the 1928 presidential campaign had a bearing on Farley. Smith’s crushing defeat at the hands of Herbert Hoover and Roosevelt’s emergence as New York State’s top Democrat presented Farley with manifold new opportunities, but the manner of Smith’s defeat also sounded a warning. The frightening anti-Catholic hostility that Smith and his entourage encountered in parts of the South during the campaign served notice to Farley, a devout Roman Catholic, that if ever he were to bid for electoral office in his own right, his faith might well be an issue.

Farley’s role in Roosevelt’s first gubernatorial election was relatively modest. It was his work between November 1928 and November 1930 that really made a difference. Roosevelt’s biographer Frank Freidel wrote that in 1928, Farley “threw his time and energy magnificently into the state campaign in an effort to bring moribund upstate Democratic organizations back to life.” However, as Freidel himself later noted (following an interview he conducted with Farley in 1954), in the few months between the time when Farley took the state secretary’s job in the summer of 1928 and the gubernatorial election in November, there was little that Farley could do substantially to alter the politics of New York State. “There was not much time,” Freidel wrote, “to do much building, and for the most part Farley had to carry on with what he already had.”²²

What Farley did do, however, was to embark on a formidable letter-writing campaign, in which he combined intelligence gathering, information distribution, words of encouragement, and an attempt to establish an accurate record of party membership, on the one hand, with an effort to browbeat lazy county chairmen into action, on the other. The fact that these letters were sent only to county chairmen and committee members reflects the constricted time frame in which Farley was working. After this campaign, Farley's strategy was targeted directly at rank-and-file party workers, because he often wanted to appeal over the heads of county chairman, many of whom, being jealous of their local power bases, were reluctant to cooperate with state-oriented campaigns.

Three letters that Farley sent on September 22, 1928—two of them to county chairmen, one to county committee members—illustrate Farley's technique. First, he asked the chairmen to send him a list of the names and addresses of every schoolteacher in their county. Teachers had been some of Al Smith's strongest supporters, so Farley sought to target them in the campaign. In a second letter, he asked that, “to avoid any duplication and misunderstandings,” the chairmen each send a full list of party members in their county. Later, he asked that the chairmen reply to each of his letters separately, even if several arrived on the same day, so that he could file the replies under different subject headings.²³

Record keeping under Farley's predecessors had been erratic to say the least, so much of Farley's early secretarial work consisted of accumulating and interpreting the data supplied by replies to letters like these. In this way, Farley began to build up a more realistic picture of the party's strength and membership throughout the state. This administrative overhaul was long overdue; when Farley began work as secretary, there was not even a correct list of county chairmen. The third letter Farley sent was a rallying cry to committee members throughout the state, in which Farley signaled his intention to galvanize the party into action and to motivate its members for the coming campaign: “We want to prove, this fall, that there is a real, live, active Up-state Democratic organization fully capable of carrying on and advancing the interests of the Democratic party, and I know you are quite anxious to do your share.”²⁴

At the end of October, just a week before the election, Farley exerted further pressure on the county chairman by sending each one a letter

including a county-by-county breakdown of votes in the 1922, 1924, and 1926 gubernatorial elections. He made the obvious, but nevertheless pointed, remark that “the Governor’s vote increased with each succeeding election in some of the counties, whereas, in other counties it was reduced in each succeeding election.” He urged that they establish the reason for any losses and told them both to maximize the Democratic vote—“One vote lost in every district in this State means a loss of about 9,500 votes”—and to use “every legitimate means to corral the independent voters.”²⁵

Roosevelt’s 1928 victory was by no means spectacular: he won by only 25,564 votes and triumphed in only three upstate counties, one less than Al Smith in 1926. However, the fact that Roosevelt had won in an overwhelmingly Republican year and that Farley had run Roosevelt’s campaign headquarters in New York City meant that Farley now occupied a position of authority from which to launch his rebuilding efforts upstate. Over the next two years, Farley set about overhauling the state party—touring the state repeatedly; visiting every one of the fifty-seven upstate counties; seeking to eradicate the influence of old or inefficient chairmen; and establishing full county committees, with two precinct workers in every district. He wrote thousands of letters and made hundreds of speeches to party workers and potential voters.

It was no accident that the New York State Democratic Party organization was in good shape by 1932 and that it was probably the strongest it had ever been north of the Bronx line by 1936. Contemporary observers, some of whom had been watching the politics of New York State for more than a generation, were struck by Farley’s achievement. One of these was John R. Earl of Lockport, New York. In October 1931, Earl, writing in an unsteady script that betrayed his advanced age, wrote that he had “taken an active interest in Democratic politics . . . for nearly 50 years past.” He touted Farley as “the only chairman we have had in years that has got the Democrats on their toes up state.” It was the sort of compliment that Farley, ever the friend of the loyal party worker, would have cherished.²⁶

The Farley-Roosevelt drive to energize the upstate party began in earnest in 1929, when Farley toured the counties to collect information, meet party workers, and assess the political lie of the land. This was not

a haphazard process but, rather, part of a coordinated plan. The fruits of Farley's efforts are evident in a ten-page report that he compiled for Roosevelt in October 1929, as elections for the New York State Assembly beckoned. This report provided the basis of the Roosevelt team's knowledge of the political situation upstate, and it helped to frame their approach to the 1930 campaign. It complemented other elements of Roosevelt's attempts to consolidate his support and strengthen the party throughout the state, including an effort to create a more favorable distribution of newspapers to upstate counties whose press had an anti-Democratic bias, as well as efforts (carried out by Maurice Bloch and others) to coach assembly candidates on campaign issues.²⁷

Farley's 1929 report is revealing not just for what it tells us about the politics of the upstate counties but also for what it reveals about how Farley operated. He began by explaining that the information he garnered derived from a series of informal talks and conferences and was part of a wider consultation process involving instructions that Farley had been sending to county chairman throughout the year. He set out, in straightforward fashion, the technical and legal problems that he expected to encounter. Electoral registers, particularly in the upstate counties, were full of the names of people who had either moved away or died. Election inspectors were few and far between. Where there were sufficient inspectors, Farley wished to prevent ill feeling by discouraging committeemen or their family members from monopolizing these positions. In the 1928 elections, Republican Party organizations had made illegitimate use of affidavits for absentee ballots in some counties; Farley wanted to ensure that, if this happened again, such ballots would be denied by alert local Democratic organizations. Jim attended to every detail and prepared for all eventualities, believing that these kinds of problems, like almost all others, could be cleared up by better organization.²⁸

The general comments Farley made in the first part of his report covered two other themes that were central to his views on political organization. The first was his belief in the organizational abilities of women. The second was the concept of "proper consideration," an idea that was one of the keystones of Farley's politics. The two themes merged when Farley reported that he had urged the county chairmen to "give their

women members . . . proper consideration.” He maintained, “In many of the counties where the Democratic organization is weak you will find that neither co-operation nor consideration is extended to the women committee members and leaders.”²⁹

In his report on a conference of party leaders held at Salamanca in Cattaraugus County, he singled out Allegheny County as one of the worst offenders. He cited the “considerable friction between the men and women in the organization up there.” He went on to say that Steuben County was at fault for the same reason.³⁰

Farley’s views on women in politics merit further attention. He believed that women had a peculiar aptitude for political organization, and this is why he wanted to involve them in party work, but he also thought that women’s contribution to politics should be confined to particular tasks. In *Behind the Ballots*, Farley put the improved performance of the party in rural Republican counties in 1928 down to the work of Eleanor Roosevelt and other women, because they “helped to organize the feminine vote”—the implication being that women should be used to get other women’s votes.³¹

Part of the reason for this rather narrow view is that Farley’s experience of working with women in party politics was limited to New York State, where, at the top, the women’s organization was dominated by a group of well-to-do women who had come to the Democratic Party through their commitment to progressive causes—women like Eleanor Roosevelt, Frances Perkins, and Molly Dewson. Their focus and interests set a limit on his understanding of the roles women could perform. He thought, for instance, that it was the “humane policies” of the Roosevelt administration that caused “women all over the country” to join the 1936 campaign.³²

In seeing women as especially attracted to what were termed humanitarian issues—protective legislation for women and children in industry, the eradication of the sweatshop, the introduction of more stringent inspection laws for factories—Farley’s thinking was in some respects in tune with the most progressive elements within the Democratic Party. The assumptions about the role of women in politics that framed Farley’s thought were widely accepted, not least among progressive women themselves. Many such women, even Molly Dewson, whose party work

was primarily organizational, were adamant that there was a clear dividing line between organization aimed at furthering progressive causes, which was something that women (and some enlightened men) did, and organization as an end in itself, which was solely a male preserve, associated with boss-controlled machine politics. In her unpublished memoirs, Dewson argued that women were more or less immune to the glad-handing techniques of the likes of Farley. She stated with confidence, “By and large, even when boss-controlled, women, I found, were far more concerned with the dreadful conditions existing in the early thirties than the men I met.”³³

The second theme running through Farley’s 1929 report, that of “proper consideration,” was integral to his politics. The concept was a reflection of the view that the successful organization of a political party was akin to that of any large club or association. Farley himself was notoriously clubbable: he joined the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks, the Improved Order of Red Men, and the Fraternal Order of Eagles, as well as numerous civic, charitable, and philanthropic organizations, including the Little League Foundation, the Boys Clubs of America, the Catholic Youth Organization, the Freedoms Foundation at Valley Forge, and the American Heritage Foundation. He thought that party workers deserved to be rewarded for good service and that patronage was both necessary and beneficial.³⁴

On the subject of “proper consideration,” Farley used his 1929 report to vent his frustration at the state of highway patronage. Under the watchful eye of Colonel Frederick Stuart Greene, superintendent of public works, Democratic county leaders were, according to Farley, repeatedly denied patronage that was rightfully theirs. Farley was well aware that Colonel Greene—a determined advocate of the merit system—represented a cul-de-sac. But Farley suspected that there were other, more accessible sources to be plundered and that those sources would make a substantial difference to the party’s fortunes. In 1929, as he would always be, Farley was a passionate promoter of the politics of patronage.

I am convinced that there are a lot of sincere Democrats who have not received any encouragement for a great many years and have merely gone through their duties in a perfunctory sort of way, and that if

these Democrats are made to feel that their efforts are appreciated and needed we can make considerable headway in our Up-state organization. From what I gathered, Governor, it would not take much to satisfy them. They have never received anything and don't really expect very much, and if now and then we could do something to make them feel that they belonged—before long in many of the counties where we are really weak we would have flourishing organizations.³⁵

A third theme Farley stressed was the need to focus on urban areas. He believed, quite rightly, that the towns and cities represented the Democrats' best hope for improving their electoral performance. He recommended, for instance, that the two large villages of Barton and Owego in Tioga County be targeted, and he wanted any patronage for Niagara County to be directed toward its urban settlements. He was also eager to make personal connections with the key leader, or “the real active fellow,” in each county and to have the most important communications channeled through that person—or, better still, to have that person made county chairman.³⁶

In Saratoga County, for instance, he wanted James J. Glavin recognized. Failing that, he wanted to get Glavin in some other position, such as the Hudson River Regulating District Commission. He thought that Lewis County and Ontario County both needed “young blood.” In Ontario County, the chairman, John P. Sheehan, had been in charge for more than twenty-five years.³⁷

The tone of Farley's 1929 report was optimistic—perhaps naively so. He assumed that with a little hard work on the party organization, the party's problems would begin to dissolve. This reflected his view, also evident in his autobiographical accounts, that the natural state of human relations is one of consensus. Farley assumed that major conflicts arose only when people were denied “proper consideration” or when some individual or organization failed to play by “the rules of the game.” As one would expect of a man with these views, Farley was an effective mediator, because he found it very hard to believe that individuals, groups, or sets of ideas could be inherently antagonistic or irreconcilable, particularly when the arena for conflicts was the Democratic Party. Farley's consensual worldview was not always helpful; he tended to

underestimate the potential for political conflict, and that would cause him serious problems, particularly in the late New Deal era.

If, in late 1929, Farley was optimistic about the upstate situation, Roosevelt's aide, Louis Howe, was, as usual, far less sanguine. Early in 1930, Howe, who was preparing Roosevelt's reelection bid, wrote a short "Summary of the Situation." In it, he outlined his plans for the coming campaign.³⁸

Farley had suggested in 1929 that the outlook was promising and that the party was "in good shape for the next Campaign." But Howe, perhaps betraying a tendency toward the melodramatic, declared, "There is no such thing as a Democratic Organization Up-State." Howe was particularly concerned with bemoaning the lack of any "State consciousness," writing that "each county stands by itself and has little knowledge and less interest as to what even its neighboring Counties are doing." His twofold solution was to oust "incompetent or lukewarm leaders" and replace them with "young aggressive Democrats who feel that they represent a powerful State Party and not merely a local minority" and to reduce the sense of isolation and fragmentation of Democratic voters by introducing teamwork between candidates and voters in different districts.³⁹

Although Farley's report did point to the need to inject "young blood" in some counties, he never gave the impression that a radical overhaul was required. Howe, in contrast, asserted that once the 1930 campaign was over, the Democrats should "attempt to clean house before the next State Election," since they would then have "two years in which to get things straightened out." Howe suggested that, given the lack of time before the 1930 election, there was "nothing to do but to leave the State Committee in its present moribund condition and wipe it out as possible machinery for the next campaign." He proposed that the subsequent strategy should be one of bypassing the recalcitrant state chairmen altogether by setting up "Local Democratic Clubs." He argued that these units could "on a weeks [sic] notice . . . be transformed into active and militant Campaign Clubs" and that "almost all of the duties now neglected by the County Chairmen" could "be taken up by them during the campaign."⁴⁰

By 1930, Farley was becoming expert at the kind of approach Howe was advocating. He was happy to bypass local leaders by making direct appeals to voters and party workers. In tone, the two men’s reports were poles apart—Farley’s was calm, forward-looking, pragmatic; Howe’s anxious, agitated, and just a little paranoid—but they agreed on the fundamentals. There was too much dead wood in the party, and where it could not be got rid of, it would have to be bypassed.

Farley and Roosevelt moved a step closer to taking over the New York Democratic Party at the 1930 state party convention, which was held at Syracuse that September. There, Farley replaced William Bray as state chairman. In *Behind the Ballots*, Farley gives the misleading impression that Bray stood down voluntarily. Contemporary newspaper stories and later oral testimony make clear, however, that Bray, who had come to prominence after leading the Democrats of Utica and Oneida counties to victory in Al Smith’s 1926 gubernatorial campaign, was forced out after a bitter power struggle between pro-Roosevelt forces and Bray’s upstate supporters.⁴¹

Bray wanted to retain the position so that he could use it as a stepping-stone toward an appointment as attorney general. Roosevelt blocked the appointment. In an interview with Frank Freidel in 1954, Farley admitted that Bray had given up the chairmanship under protest and that Roosevelt had used Tammany boss John Curry and other city leaders to pressure Bray to resign. The removal of Bray from the state chairmanship was particularly strongly supported by Louis Howe, who was masterminding the 1930 campaign. Farley told Frank Freidel that while Bray was not openly disloyal to Roosevelt, he was never entirely trusted by either Roosevelt or Howe. Farley also reported that Howe frequently tried to undercut Bray.⁴²

Roosevelt and Howe knew that with Farley at the helm of the state party, they were in a position to dominate state politics. While pockets of Democratic power enjoyed a degree of independent strength—notably the O’Connell machine in Albany and, to a lesser extent, Tammany Hall, which was suffering a serious decline—the judicious use of patronage would keep them in check. In theory, Farley’s new post, that of state chairman, was a rather precarious position, and with one or two notable exceptions, previous incumbents had treated the job as if it were merely

honorary. This was partly because governors had much more control over party discipline than did the state chairman, who could be removed either by the will of the governor or by the state committee. Now, however, with Farley safely ensconced as state chairman, Roosevelt could survey the political landscape of New York State in the knowledge that he controlled not only the programmatic direction of state politics but also, through Farley, the party apparatus. This was an outcome Roosevelt would also engineer at the national level when he became president, placing Farley at the head of party organization, as chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and making him postmaster general and, as such, the chief dispenser of federal patronage.⁴³

As state chairman, Farley was now the most powerful figure after the governor in the New York State Democratic Party. But it was the 1930 gubernatorial campaign and its spectacular outcome that really made Farley's name and provided a platform for his career in national politics. There has been some disagreement about the mix of factors that contributed to Roosevelt's overwhelming win. It is not surprising that Farley, in *Behind the Ballots*, gave himself much of the credit. He acknowledged Roosevelt's extraordinary vote-winning potential, but the thrust of his argument was that his organizational and administrative work for the New York State Democratic Party was what catapulted Roosevelt toward the 1930 landslide, setting him on course for the presidency.⁴⁴

New York Times journalist Ernest Lindley, who wrote the best contemporary account of the campaign, had a more balanced view. Listing the factors that contributed to the margin of Roosevelt's win, Lindley mentioned the new upstate organization, but he also stressed "the popularity of [Roosevelt's] program, the record of his administration, his interest in the welfare of the farmer, his personality, his special appeal to the women voters, [and] his incessant proselytizing." Lindley was essentially correct to argue that the combination of Roosevelt's personal appeal, policies, and well-drilled organization, rather than any single factor alone, accounts for the size of his win. While Roosevelt won with 725,001 votes to spare, the Democrats failed yet again to secure control of the state legislature, winning none of the upstate congressional seats. In this sense, it was, as James MacGregor Burns has pointed out, "an executive, not a legislative—and thus not a party—victory."⁴⁵

Roosevelt campaigned against Herbert Hoover’s economic record but also on statewide issues—water power, agricultural reform, public works, utility regulation, prisons, hospitals—in a largely successful attempt to impose his agenda on the campaign. The governor almost completely ignored his opponent, Charles H. Tuttle, who focused primarily on Tammany corruption, hoping to benefit from the series of scandals that resulted in the Seabury investigations. To the dismay of his opponents, Roosevelt managed to profit from the two issues with most potential to hurt him, prohibition and Tammany corruption. Tuttle had risen to prominence exposing city judges who bought their judgeships from Tammany Hall; but his anticorruption campaign played poorly north of the Bronx line, not least because, in many upstate counties, corruption was most strongly associated with local Republican organizations. In addition, Roosevelt’s anti-Tammany reputation was sufficiently intact to shield him from the effects of a single-issue campaign. Some older voters would also have remembered that back in 1911, before the Seventeenth Amendment introduced direct election to the U.S. Senate, Roosevelt, who was then a twenty-nine-year-old member of the state legislature, had led the campaign to prevent Tammany Hall’s senatorial candidate, William F. (“Blue-eyed Billy”) Sheehan, from being sent to Capitol Hill.⁴⁶

Prohibition was even kinder to Roosevelt. The Republicans were so divided over the issue in New York State that some of the drys among them broke away in disgust at Tuttle’s support for repeal. They shifted their support to the candidacy of Robert Paris Carroll of Syracuse University, who was running on the Prohibition Party ticket. Carroll won 190,666 votes, 181,000 of them from upstate counties. Carroll’s candidacy must have played a large part in enabling Roosevelt to win forty-two of the upstate counties. In carrying upstate New York by 167,784, Roosevelt secured territory that had not been Democratic since before the Civil War.⁴⁷

Upstate, turnout was rather low, but as Lindley pointed out, the total vote cast in 1930 was standard for a nonpresidential year and in keeping with population growth since 1926, when the last off-year gubernatorial election was held. This was because the poor turnout upstate was offset by Tammany Hall, which, galvanized by its critics and spurred on by the demand for its services prompted by the economic crisis, responded by getting 91.1 percent of eligible voters to the polls in New York City.⁴⁸

Roosevelt's overall plurality of 725,001 was almost twice as high as Al Smith's best performance, in 1922. Roosevelt's plurality in New York City, 557,217, was 38,000 more than Smith had ever achieved. It was Farley's victory as well as Roosevelt's. Farley had put in the legwork that enabled Roosevelt to take maximum advantage of the propitious economic and political circumstances. In contrast to later years, when there was considerable conflict between Farley's party work and Roosevelt's reforming agenda, the politics of organization and the politics of reform advanced in tandem in 1930.

It is important to emphasize that Farley was not merely Roosevelt's puppet. Such was Farley's influence on the state organizations that there was always potential for him to challenge Roosevelt, using his position as head of the party organization to effect a coup should Roosevelt ever falter. Lindley believed that Farley was probably "the nearest to a rival" that the governor had.⁴⁹

By the end of 1930, not all of the New York State Democratic Party's problems had been solved. Roosevelt's coattails were not especially strong, even in counties containing large cities, such as Onondaga (Syracuse) and Erie (Buffalo). Roosevelt won Onondaga, for instance, by 8,000 votes, but the congressional seat went Republican by 19,500. In Erie County, Roosevelt won by 34,000, but the Republicans still took the congressional seat by 7,000. Erie County, with its large urban and immigrant populations, ought to have been a happy hunting ground for New York State Democrats, but intraparty squabbling and effective Republican Party organization and tactics enabled the GOP to cling on.⁵⁰

These local difficulties should not be allowed to obscure the significance either of the scale of the 1930 victory or of Farley's role within it. Farley had done the frontline work with the organizations. Ernest K. Lindley reported that sixteen new county chairmen were introduced in 1930 alone. That represented a tremendous purge of men who, according to Lindley, had very often been cooperating with Republicans. Some were even officeholders under Republican leadership. The details of the purge are not well documented, but we do know that it continued unabated after the 1930 election, because Farley helped to place Oliver Cabana, a Buffalo banker, at the head of the Erie County organization the following year. Furthermore, a report in the *New York Times* in January 1931 stated

that Attorney General John J. Bennett had been instructed to withhold the sixty or so patronage positions at his disposal until changes had been made, so that some of them could be directed to counties where Democrats had previously been inadequately represented.⁵¹

Jim Farley played a pivotal role in the rise of the New York State Democratic Party. Perhaps other men could have executed the same tasks with equal skill, but something about the combination of Farley’s personality and versatile abilities marked him out as an exceptional talent. No one could question his commitment to the Democratic Party, especially to its rank and file. He was utterly devoted to the party organization at all levels. This devotion, as Franklin Roosevelt later found out, was more powerful, in politics at least, than any personal attachment. It stemmed from Farley’s apprenticeship in the highly localized, service-oriented, and largely nonideological politics with which he grew up in Rockland. Farley believed that a political party was a form of club, dependent for its survival on the loyal adherence of its members to an unwritten set of rules governing proper conduct.

There was opportunism in Farley, too. When Al Smith’s political star began to fade, Farley was quick to recognize that Roosevelt represented his main chance. He rose rapidly because he worked terrifically hard, knew how to cultivate influential friends, and was sharp enough to take his chances when they came.

It is true that Farley’s rise had a parasitical element, but that was true of most of the men and women who came to be associated with Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. Roosevelt’s long shadow should not be permitted to obscure Farley’s own place in history. From the late 1920s and for the next decade, Farley was invaluable to Roosevelt. His capacity to thrive in the highly decentralized political environment of New York State in the 1920s and 1930s made him a great asset. As long as Roosevelt’s politics were in some sort of harmony with Farley’s perception of the desires of the party regulars, they would walk together.

The potential for intraparty dissent was reduced by the fact that the party apparatus in New York State had either been largely created by the Roosevelt team or depended on it for jobs and by the lack of any serious alternative source of Democratic power, in Tammany Hall or in the state legislature. When combined with the fact that Roosevelt’s reforms at

state level were not as radical or innovative as they would prove to be at the national level, this state of affairs guaranteed that, for the time being at least, any tensions between Farley's role as party chief and Roosevelt's programmatic commitments were muted.

Assessing Farley's performance, a former New York State Democratic Party chairman, Herbert C. Pell, hit the mark in a letter he wrote to Farley just after the 1930 election. Pell congratulated Farley on "the extraordinary success of the organization this year." He then wrote: "I always believed that this could be done if a governor, loyal to his party, would be willing to co-operate with his organization. You have been fortunate in your opportunity but you have seized it and handled it well."⁵²

Franklin D. Roosevelt concurred with Pell's favorable assessment of Farley's contribution. Writing from Warm Springs shortly after the election, Roosevelt told Farley, in a letter that became one of Farley's prized possessions, that he "had done a wonderful piece of work." "No man since the days of David B. Hill," the governor said, "has such hearty backing and enthusiastic co-operation from the organizations as you have." Given the bitterness that surrounded the split between Roosevelt and Farley a decade later, Roosevelt's conclusion is poignant.

When I think of the difficulties of former State Chairmen with former Governors and vice versa (!), I have an idea that you and I make a combination which has not existed since Cleveland and Lamont—and that is so long ago that neither you nor I know anything about it except from history books.⁵³

For the immediate future, though, the pertinent question was whether Roosevelt and Farley could use the platform provided by the 1930 gubernatorial triumph to launch an assault on the national political scene. On the face of it, their chances did not look especially good. Despite occasional signs of life, of which Roosevelt's governorship of New York was one outstanding example, the national Democratic Party entered the fourth decade of the twentieth century at a low ebb. The party organization had been in a dilapidated state for more than a decade, and the national Democratic Party was an altogether more willful, unwieldy creature than its New York State counterpart.