

Introduction

Speaking to supporters two days after his reelection as president in November 2004, George W. Bush hailed his campaign manager, Karl Rove, as “the architect” of victory. The scene and the statement were not unprecedented. Almost three-quarters of a century earlier, on election night in 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt announced to reporters that his campaign manager, Jim Farley, “that splendid American,” was one of the two men most responsible for securing the presidency. Farley, like Rove in 2000, was fast making a reputation as a political mastermind.¹

Today, Rove is seen as a peculiarly powerful presidential aide—and with good reason. He is arguably the most influential policy adviser in the White House, where, unusually, he has his own office. But for how long and for what will this modern-day Machiavelli be remembered?

Historians rarely deem campaign managers or other behind-the-scenes operators worthy of more than passing attention. Even the subject of this book, Jim Farley, who enjoyed unparalleled power as a party chairman and unprecedented success as a campaign manager in the New Deal years, has been largely overlooked by historians. Unlike Rove, who presided over an extremely tight election victory in 2000 and a relatively narrow one in 2004, Farley managed campaigns that saw Franklin D. Roosevelt triumph by crushing margins, winning forty-two states in 1932 and forty-six in 1936. More important, Farley—again unlike Rove—was involved in the creation of a new majority in American politics, as the emergence of the New Deal coalition transformed the political landscape for decades to come. Should Rove now fail to entrench a more per-

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manent Republican majority, it is likely that his long-term historical reputation will suffer. He might even slide into relative obscurity. Who will remember “the architect” if the house does not stand?

This book was written not just because Jim Farley is a fascinating and unduly neglected figure but also because an understanding of his career advances our knowledge of how, why, and with what consequences the character of the Democratic Party and American politics changed in the age of the New Deal.

There are multiple biographies of all the major and many of the minor figures who served Roosevelt during his presidency, but with the exception of Farley’s two autobiographies—*Behind the Ballots* (1938) and *Jim Farley’s Story* (1948)—this is the first published book-length study of the twentieth century’s most successful national party boss. The autobiographical works, both ghostwritten, provide a fascinating insider’s perspective on the politics of patronage, party management, and campaigning in Roosevelt’s America, but neither book presents a convincing analysis. Both works are, in different ways, self-serving and misleading. *Behind the Ballots* is a rather simplistic celebration of the art of the practical politician. It does not provide a sense of the complexity and historical significance of the tensions—between the Democratic Party and the New Deal—that in so many ways dominated and determined the course of Farley’s career. *Jim Farley’s Story* offers insights into the embittered world of Roosevelt’s critics within the Democratic Party, but it is constantly undermined by the weight of its self-righteous indignation.²

As well as presenting a narrative of Farley’s life, this book uses the arc of his career to analyze the fraught and fluctuating relationship between the Democratic Party and the New Deal. Whereas previous historians, most notably Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., have portrayed Farley as a passive victim of political change, a baffled bystander in the heady, ideological swirl of the New Deal, I argue that he actively helped to bring about shifts in the political environment associated with the New Deal. He was not always fully aware of it, but he was in effect a Trojan horse for the politics of the post–New Deal era. The great irony of his extraordinary career is that Farley himself—schooled in the localized, face-to-face politics of upstate New York in the pre–New Deal era—was not able to function in this new environment he had helped create.³

The first two chapters of this book sketch Farley's boyhood and background in the lower Hudson Valley and his rapid rise through the ranks of the New York State Democratic Party in the 1920s. He entered politics as a means of gaining social recognition and economic advancement. As a consequence, he thrived in the localized and largely nonideological politics he encountered in and around the lower Hudson Valley. An Irish American and a Roman Catholic, he was born into a Democratic family in a Republican region. By carefully cultivating a local political network—exploiting ties made through high school, his baseball team, and his fraternal and business contacts—he soon established a reputation as a force in Rockland County politics. He came to political prominence for three reasons: first, he quickly learned how to build and maintain a strong, local political base; second, he was flexible enough to transfer his skills to New York City (thirty-five miles downriver from his Grassy Point home) and ambitious enough to court Governor Alfred E. Smith; and third, in the late 1920s, he swiftly and effectively forged a political partnership with Franklin D. Roosevelt, who, with Louis Howe, recognized the political value of Farley's combination of Irish roots and upstate knowledge.

In these early years, Farley learned how to operate in a political world in which it was assumed that politicians played by what he called "the rules of the game." By this, he meant that he adhered to an unwritten, but nevertheless rigid, code of political conduct, constructed around the idea of party regularity, loyalty to one's colleagues, absolute honesty, and the understanding that party work would be rewarded in due course, usually in the form of patronage. Throughout his career, Farley persisted in interpreting political affairs through the prism of "the rules of the game," even as the form of politics in which these rules made sense was being largely obviated by the political changes fostered by the New Deal.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the 1932 presidential campaign and Farley's work as Democratic Party chairman, both in New York State and nationally, in the first two years of the New Deal. In 1932, Roosevelt and Farley replicated on a national scale the strategy they had adopted to win gubernatorial elections in New York State in 1928 and 1930. Unlike Karl Rove, Farley was not directly involved in policymaking; rather, he concentrated on applying to the national political arena the political style and techniques he had learned in upstate New York. In the process, he

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built up an immense and powerful network of contacts in state and local party organizations. Later, when he split from Roosevelt and, in 1940, challenged for the presidential nomination, this network became his prime constituency of support.

During Roosevelt's first term, Farley's most important task was to act as a bridge between Democratic Party organizations at the state and local level, on the one hand, and the New Deal administration in Washington, on the other. This book draws attention to the extent to which, long before the pace of New Deal reform slowed in the late 1930s, the demands of party regulars repeatedly clashed and conflicted with the reformist thrust of the New Deal. This was most apparent in Farley's frequent disputes over patronage with such non-Democratic agency chiefs as Harold Ickes and Harry Hopkins, both of whom were hostile to traditional party bosses and more interested in New Deal programs than in the welfare of the Democratic Party apparatus.

Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the 1936 presidential election, analyzing how the emergence of the New Deal coalition changed the Democratic Party and American politics by consolidating the influence of extraparty interest groups and issue-based organizations, at the expense of traditional party organizations and the old-school broker politicians who worked through them. The two-thirds rule, which had given southern party organizations a disproportionate influence over the choice of Democratic presidential nominees, was abolished. Democratic Party special divisions were created (or expanded) to cater for women, organized labor, and African Americans, thus more deeply embedding within the party's internal structure the presence of programmatically inspired interest groups whose goals and political assumptions conflicted with those of traditional party bosses. Further, the New Deal administration forged new kinds of relationships with city machines, making them more dependent on public funds provided by federal agencies and less reliant on the standard forms of patronage that old-style broker politicians offered.

These chapters contest Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.'s argument that Farley was an anachronistic figure who was entirely oblivious to the changes happening around him. Farley was relatively open to the inclusion of women, the recruitment of African American voters, and the use of

national interest groups (rather than local machines) as the building blocks of party strength, even if he underestimated what the long-term consequences of this openness might be. What is more, he was a key figure in the move to abolish the two-thirds rule at the 1936 Democratic National Convention. Far from being the passive figure that Schlesinger described, Farley participated in the New Deal's transformation of American politics, shepherding his party into a new era that, ironically, was hostile to the kind of broker politics in which he excelled.

Chapters 7 and 8 constitute perhaps the most important part of this book. They set out to describe and explain the split between Farley and President Roosevelt during the latter's second term, showing how the break was intimately related to the increasingly awkward relationship between Democratic Party organizations in the states, their congressional supporters, and the New Deal administration. Previous accounts of the Farley-Roosevelt split have placed excessive emphasis on personal, emotional factors, thus failing to identify its underlying political causes.

Between 1936 and 1940, Farley, as chairman of the Democratic National Committee, was compelled to manage the fallout from a series of crises—over the House speakership, the Senate leadership, the president's court plan, and the 1938 purge of anti-New Deal conservatives—which, by degrees, made untenable his role as a bridge between the administration and party regulars. A concurrent shift in the bias of American politics—away from the personalized, largely service-oriented form of politics that Farley practiced, toward the more issue-driven and ideologically motivated politics of the New Deal—was symbolized by the extent to which, from 1935 onward, Thomas Corcoran gradually usurped Farley as the administration's main political fixer. Farley's growing alienation from Roosevelt and his New Deal allies encouraged him to pursue the presidential nomination. His campaign for the nomination in 1940 is the best illustration of the argument that Farley represented an older conception of party politics, one that the New Deal in large part displaced. The argument is that, despite its futility, Farley's 1940 campaign issued a prescient warning in drawing attention to the damage that the erosion of the prerogatives of traditional party organizations might inflict on the future vitality of American politics.

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Farley's post–New Deal career is traced in chapters 9 and 10. Farley left the Roosevelt administration immediately after the 1940 presidential elections but stayed on as chairman of the New York State Democratic Party. From this position, he conducted a concerted campaign against what he saw as the unwarranted encroachments of the federal government on the autonomy of state and local party organizations. This campaign culminated in the months preceding the acrimonious 1942 New York State gubernatorial election, when Farley, with the backing of his state party, forced the nomination of party regular John J. Bennett against the wishes of the president and his liberal supporters. Bennett was easily defeated by Republican challenger Thomas Dewey, bringing to an end twenty years of unbroken Democratic gubernatorial rule in New York State.

Though Farley periodically tried to capture a post in one or another of the new government agencies created to administer the war effort, his energies were principally directed toward conspiring with his conservative allies to prevent a fourth term. He failed because he underestimated both the enormity of Roosevelt's vote-winning appeal and the extent to which it was increasingly dependent on new political constituencies and a new form of politics that had permanently altered both the Democratic Party and American politics. Farley's longevity—he lived until 1976—ensured that in addition to participating in the creation of the New Deal coalition, he also witnessed its unraveling. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, Farley worked as an international salesman for Coca-Cola (which he had joined in 1944), maintained his famously vast correspondence, and attended an annual press conference where reporters gathered to glean electoral predictions from the man who had now earned the sobriquet “Mr. Democrat.”

In addition to telling Farley's story and framing it within the broader political context of his times, I have also here made an argument about the changing character of national politics in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s—that the New Deal contributed to the further erosion of the more localized, patronage-based politics with which Farley grew up in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, replacing it with a more national, interest-group politics. I hope this argument will be of use to both historians and political scientists. This book also seeks to highlight

the ambivalence of the New Deal's long-term legacy for American party politics. I suggest that political historians might fruitfully pay more serious attention to the arguments of those, such as Farley, who contested and resisted the marginalization of traditional party organizations, and I here demonstrate that ostensibly nonideological politicians did play a role in shaping politics in the United States.

This book draws on research conducted in the private papers of politicians and journalists and in a mixture of official records, transcripts of oral history interviews, and microfilm copies of newspapers. Among these collections, the James A. Farley Papers, the National Committee of the Democratic Party Papers, and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers are huge, and the first is underexploited. The most precious source has been the memoranda Farley dictated throughout his public career. There are more or less daily entries for the New Deal era. The entries before 1932 and after 1944 are sporadic but still occasionally useful. For the patient New Deal historian, the Farley memoranda contain many gems. By no means have I found them all.

This book deals in large part with the life of a politician who—despite the memoranda, the diaries, and the memoirs of colleagues—conducted much of his business in private. For those interested in figures who were involved in the nuts and bolts of politics on a day-to-day basis, it is a frustrating, but unavoidable, fact that much of this essential work went unrecorded. For instance, Farley made between fifty and a hundred telephone calls a day, but with few exceptions, we know little of what he said or—equally important for understanding an operator of Farley's stripe—how he said it. In negotiating my way between the conflicting and contradictory accounts of the New Dealers and their foes, I have tried to be sensitive both to the fallibility of human memory and to the self-justificatory tendencies that almost always impinge on the process of *post facto* reconstruction. I have tried, to use Jim Farley's favorite phrase, to play by "the rules of the game."