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Workers and Politics in the Immigrant City in the Early Twentieth-Century United States

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A consideration of workers and politics in the early twentieth-century United States must take into account a variety of changes that confronted the working class in this era: the fashioning of a new national state role, the remaking of politics, and finally the remaking of the working class itself. Analysis of American politics in this particular era has been dominated by the paradigm of “The System of 1896” and the model of urban “machine politics.” These two concepts represent a widely accepted framework of analysis that demonstrates the integration of the working class into the political system and the consequent muting of class concerns within that system. Our task is to investigate these concepts to measure their usefulness in explaining working-class consciousness and its impact on politics. Specifically, the investigation must examine the dynamics of local-level politics, where working-people’s activities had their greatest strength and resonance. This essay will examine these ideas and suggest an alternative understanding of the politics of workers, and especially of immigrants, in this era.

At the turn of the century, the United States had recovered from the economic and political turmoil of the 1890s depression and entered three decades of political stability known as the “System of 1896.” This system emerged after the 1896 defeat of the Democratic–Populist fusion by the Republican party. As defined by E. E. Schattschneider and Walter Dean Burnham, it was characterized by the national hegemony of the Republican party (outside the Democratic “Solid South”); the narrowing of political debate; and a diminished party vitality, which was replaced by an expanding administrative state. In addition, as revealed in declining rates of turnout for national elections, the electoral system of 1896–1928 was one of demobilization of an alarmingly large portion of the potential electorate in the United States.1

This shrinking of the American electorate has been attributed to a combination of an extreme one-party dominance in both the North and South and the cumulative impact of institutional change and changes in the rules of the game for voters. Republican hegemony in the North and Democratic hegemony in the South went hand in hand with what Burnham has called “the decomposition of political parties as action instrumentalities.”2 One-party rule deprived voters of meaningful choices, thus leading to a decline in voter turnout. Moreover, as Burnham argued, interest groups had taken over the political functions of bringing issues to bear on the

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state, so the political parties themselves no longer generated issues of concern to voters. Concurrently, a wave of electoral reforms, such as the direct primary, the reform trilogy of initiative–referendum–recall, the Australian ballot, nonpartisan elections, and antifusion legislation had weakened the partisan nature of politics. In addition, these reforms hampered third-party challenges. The result was a decline in competition in the electoral arena and indifference on the part of the electorate.3

Moreover, changes in the rules governing access to the ballot had a deliberate antidemocratic thrust. Personal registration laws, extended residency requirements, literacy tests, and, in the South, poll taxes were intended to make voting more difficult for immigrants, African Americans, and lower-class citizens generally.4 By 1920, a new pattern of class and age stratification in turnout appeared, with upper-class and older voters the more active participants. The turnout also had a gender bias after the granting of women’s suffrage in 1920, though women’s lesser participation was not enough to explain away the overall lowered turnout. By the 1920s, an entire generation, including waves of new immigrants, had grown up under a system of lessening involvement in electoral politics.

However, this description of the “System of 1896” belies the political tumult of the Progressive Era, the range of issues brought to the electoral arena, and the persistent and sometimes successful (on the local level) challenge by third parties like the Socialist party. This would suggest that, while Burnham’s theory about the reshaping of the “political universe” can be useful, it may hamper rather than help our investigation of working-class politics. In particular, it does little to explain the shaping of working-class party loyalties.

This was a time when leaders of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) were accepting the framework of corporate capitalism and attempting to cement their position within the state through alliance with the Democratic party and with cooperative employers through the National Civic Federation.5 Native-born American workers, Yankee as well as “old-stock” ethnic, were already deeply involved in politics, both on the national and local level. Moderate craft unionists had acquiesced to patronage politics, and the AFL’s “voluntarism” was aimed at a pragmatic accommodation to gain favors from whatever party promised to attend to labor’s political agenda. While middle-class Progressive Era reformers were attempting to limit working-class political participation and to reform municipal government to run the city like a business, reform allies of the working class were pressing ahead with social and labor legislation. This “urban liberalism” agenda linked “old-stock” workingmen to the Democratic, or sometimes the Republican, urban political organizations.6

Urban politics was an area of decisive importance for working-class political identity and mobilization, as well as ideological formation, since much direct confrontation between workers and the state occurred on the local level. Through most of the nineteenth century, workers attempted to
gain a measure of political power at the municipal level for instrumental purposes—in order to punish the existing office-holders who had not adhered to prolabor policies, to curtail local or state police repression of labor activities, to achieve prolabor legislation—or to enhance the quality of life for workers and their neighborhoods by providing services and protection from the ravages of the laissez-faire marketplace. Sometimes working-class politics aimed at larger ideological purposes such as challenging corporate control over government and handing government back to “the people” or “the producing classes.” This took the form of either promoting worker candidates within the two major parties or, as was often the case in the nineteenth century, forming independent parties.7

But these attempts were short-lived (whether successful or not) and workers fell back on their reliance on the two-party arrangement and its local embodiment, the political machine. Indeed, historically oriented political scientists such as Amy Bridges and Martin Shefter, both using New York City in different eras in the nineteenth century as their test case, argue that the political machine was the solution to class crisis, defusing class tensions by building an accommodation among the various social and economic groups in the city. Moreover, party solicitation of working-class loyalty, while playing on class sensibilities and rewarding workers with labor legislation, shaped the consciousness of workers through appeals to ethnicity and community and thus turned workers away from strictly class-based politics. The creation of partisan identification among American workers has been seen as a distinctively American trait, and machine politics likewise has been viewed as a component of American exceptionalism.8

However, as Richard Oestreicher has pointed out, the seeming dominance of ethnocultural, rather than class-based, political preferences in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries may have had more to do with the structure of American politics than with any measure of political consciousness among working people, or, as Ira Katznelson has argued, separate spheres of consciousness at home and at work. Three structural facts defined the American political system—an entrenched two-party system, winner-take-all elections, and relative fragmentation of power in the layers of local, state, and national government—and all contributed to the limited ability of class-based issues and organizations to make their impact on the polity.9

An additional theory regarding working-class integration into the two-party system early in the history of the Republic was the “free gift of the ballot.” This, too, is part of a larger American exceptionalism argument, which, along with such factors as American ideological disposition, the lack of a feudal past, relative prosperity, and chances for social mobility, has explained the “lack” of class consciousness and a viable socialist party in the United States.10 This “free ballot” formulation has to be qualified by the fact that paupers and the foreign-born were often disfranchised and
residency and registration rules and poll taxes often impeded other working-class white men from exercising their franchise. These barriers grew more formidable after the 1890s. African-American men had difficulty after receiving the vote in 1870, even before the regime of the New South succeeded in disfranchising them by the 1890s. Working-class women, of course, did not receive the vote in most states until 1920. Moreover, as Richard L. McCormick notes, the new immigrants of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were not as completely mobilized into the dominant political structure as were the Irish and German immigrants of an earlier era; thus they were less assimilated into the political parties of the Progressive Era. It was only in the 1930s that the white working class as a whole overcame the impediments to its exercise of the franchise, including its own internal splits. We thus need to examine the structures of voter mobilization before we can assess working-class ideas about citizenship.

It has been assumed that urban machine politics manipulated and absorbed workers into a consensual, nonoppositional political order. But while “machine politics” is an appealing shorthand for the complex task of ideological development and voter mobilization in the nineteenth century, the concept assumes what needs to be proved. “Machine politics” neither predicts nor reveals the dynamics of decision-making and patterns of power in the city, nor does it reveal—indeed, it denies—the ideological motivations for voting. “Patronage democracy” is a much more apt, and less deterministic, term for the nineteenth-century pattern of party politics.

While patronage democracy became a hegemonic model for urban politics, radical and socialist organizations saw their political task as one of weaning workers away from this model. The commodification of politics was repeatedly challenged in the nineteenth century by class-based politics. The Knights of Labor, Greenback–Labor party, and finally the Socialist party attempted to gain a foothold in the electoral arena. The Socialist party was successful in the short term and had its greatest strength in areas of working-class home ownership and union power.

From 1880 to 1920, the working class itself was being remade by the waves of new immigrants, mostly from Eastern and Southern Europe, who came to the United States in search of work. While this free-flowing immigration kept the class in flux until restriction legislation after World War I, immigrant workers began to make their presence known in attempts to unionize in such industries as coal mining, meatpacking, textiles, and garments, in radical organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and in the nationality federations of the Socialist party. Contacts between native-born workers from “old-stock” groups (British, Irish, German, and Scandinavian) and the new immigrants complicated the process of class formation. To create a successful movement, the working-class culture of “old-stock” ethnics, who had already established their unions and built links to politics, had to accommodate the emerging class culture of
new immigrants, who had their own labor and political traditions. The migration of African Americans and Mexicans into industrial regions during and after World War I added to the complexity. While this process could lead to “Americanization from the bottom up,” it also bred nativism and racism among native-born workers. This turmoil was reflected in union debates over inclusion of new workers, whether by race, gender, or skill categories, in political debates over the role of unions in politics, and in the stance the AFL should take on immigration restriction.15

The effort to secure the cohesiveness and influence of immigrant communities within this political structure was shaped by their own internal class dynamics. We need to historicize the social construction of ethnicity in the early twentieth-century United States in order to comprehend how immigrant workers saw themselves in American society and how they “fit” into an emerging American citizenship.16 The patterns of ethnic identity-building and their relation to American society have quite different elements before and after World War I. World War I is a watershed both because immigration was restricted after the war and because the war heightened coercive American patriotism at the same time as nationalist aspirations for European immigrants were being realized. We will examine each era in turn.

Immigrant group leaders—in the early period usually community pioneers and economic notables who were committed to long-term residence in this era of “birds-of-passage”—presided over the myriad fraternal and welfare-oriented organizations and raised the banner of community self-help. The web of organizations created by immigrant pioneers prior to 1914 served the collective survival needs of immigrants and preserved family and community cohesion in the New World. Drawing on Old World organizational traditions, people built on the kinship- and village-based chain migration from Eastern and Southern Europe to create the mutual benefit organizations, Landsmanschaften, societas di mutuo soccorso, religious communities, parish councils, ladies’ sodalities, and athletic and singing societies that dotted immigrant colonies. In the absence of national government social-welfare programs, these provided sickness and accident insurance and death benefits. They also promoted recreational and social activities, embodied the moral ideals of the community, and often monitored the conduct of community members. At this level of organization, associations were based on shared identities of kinship, customs, dialect, and often religion. These organizations mirrored the regional and religious differences within immigrants’ homelands, thus reinforcing small-scale community cohesion. Group life in the personal worlds of family and community generated organizations and leaders whose primary focus was inward.17

The public world of opinion formation, group representation, and politics in the larger American society generated a distinct level of leadership, that of “brokers” or mediators who “Janus-like . . . face in two direc-
tions at once,” as the anthropologist Eric Wolf has observed.18 The points of contact between the immigrant and American worlds bristled with cultural and political conflict and thus required the services of ethnic spokes-
persons as buffers or intermediaries. The brokers walked a fine line be-
tween doing their job of integration so well that the particularistic needs of
their community disappeared or so poorly that they were unable to func-
tion as bridges. This was a task fraught with contradictions, as working-
class disputes threatened the delicately managed relations between immi-
grant elites and American local elites, as working-class immigrants often
rebelled against the leadership of their “betters,” and as the insistent pull
of nationalism raised questions about immigrants’ loyalty to the United
States.

All these issues directly affected the intersecting and overlapping rela-
tionships among immigrant workers, immigrant elites, American workers,
and American elites. Here the tensions inherent in being ethnic and be-
coming American reveal themselves. The contradiction between the collec-
tivist mores of the immigrant community and the individualist ideals of the
American world confronted all ethnics during the adaptation process. No
one more fully embodied this contradiction than the ethnic leader. The
business success of this ethnic middle class—merchants, saloonkeepers,
imigrant bankers, some fraternal officers, and a new group of profession-
als (including clergy)—was due, of course, to the ready consumer market
the immigrant community represented, a fact that kept this middle class
bound to these communities. But leadership of one’s ethnic group de-
pended not only on one’s financial standing and perceived links to the
American world but also on a community judgment about how one re-
spected and lived the immigrant culture. The success of these men required
that they express both their loyalty to their community and their agreement
with the basic aims of the American mainstream.19

Concern for their community’s well-being could lead to ethnic elites’
awareness of working-class issues, especially in heavily blue-collar cities
and towns. “My people do not live in America, they live underneath Amer-
ica,” a Ruthenian Greek Catholic priest in Yonkers told social worker
Emily Greene Balch. “America does not begin till a man . . . is earning
two dollars a day. A laborer cannot afford to be an American.”20 Finding
work and negotiating with the American legal system were two areas where
immigrants needed assistance. Padrones and other labor brokers were of-
ten able to use entrepreneurial skill, economic defense of the community,
and contact with Americans to reach an esteemed position among their
own. Clergy and fraternal leaders could be rallied through community
pressure to the cause of workers’ self-advancement, but it was more often
the case that elites provided a moderating influence on their community.

In the immigrant years, ethnic notables often encouraged ethnic–
nationalist identity in their people to overcome localism and rally their
communities, using American political ideals like independence and citi-
citizenship. Ethnicity in the American context, rather than being a defense mechanism against a hostile host community, was an assertive awareness of connections among immigrants and was related to the rising tide of nationalism in Europe, especially among minority peoples. The “imagined community” of the nation was a new force that expressed itself in the United States as “new-ethnic” federations rallied around the goal of carving independent nations in their homelands from the existing empires. These federations, merging existing local fraternal societies into a national organization, often combined both the socioeconomic aspirations of their proletarian members and a new political awareness both of the United States and the Old Country. They also became organizational weapons with which ethnic elites could both confirm the “ethnic” unities of their communities and represent those ethnicities to the American host society even as they retained ties to the homeland.  

The histories and cultures of the regions of Europe gave a distinct spin to each nationalist vision and created divisions within these communities. It is a serious mistake to assume that these communities were monolithic, either in class or in definitions of ethnicity, or that they all made similar uses of American political ideals. We can discern three main types of nationalist impulses in the American immigrant case: (1) a pluralist nationalism that appealed to common geographic origins and history irrespective of religion or even mother tongue; (2) an integral nationalism that demanded language or religious unity; and (3) a socialist nationalism that explicitly tied nationalist aspirations to class goals. These different nationalist models were reflected in the ethnic federations set up in the United States between the 1880s and World War I.

For example, the Polish Roman Catholic Union (PRCU), which was founded in 1873 and dominated by priests who tied Polishness to Catholicism, represented an integral nationalism. In opposition, other Polish community leaders gathered in Chicago in 1880 to found the Polish National Alliance (PNA), which saw the American Polish immigrant communities (“Polonia”) as the “Fourth Province of Poland.” The Fourth Province’s mission was to combine with the three partitioned parts of historic Poland to fight for a free and unified homeland. In this pluralist–nationalist model, the PNA was secular and nondiscriminatory, even allowing Jews to join (though doubtless few did). The PNA was the more popular organization in Polonia; after 1896 the PNA always had a significantly larger membership than the PRCU. Further complications in the Polish case stemmed from religious differences: An independent Catholic movement, the Polish National Catholic Church, split from Rome and contended that Polish Roman Catholics were not nationalist or democratic enough. With a founder who espoused a democratic creed and a peasant–populist rhetoric, the Polish National Church had its greatest support in the coal-mining region of eastern Pennsylvania; little is known, however, about its relationship to the budding union movement there. The Polish Socialist Alliance
(PSA), admittedly a small segment of Polonia, dreamed of a future of political and economic reconstruction of an independent Poland. “In view of our weak direct participation in the political life of this country [the United States],” the PSA argued that its members should prepare themselves for their place in the new Poland.22

How to create American citizens of these masses was the nub of the problem in pre–World War I immigrant communities for both American officials and ethnic elites. The dilemma for ethnic elites was whether to encourage settlement and American citizenship, which would enhance their influence in American politics, or to focus on homeland issues. Political parties approached ethnic elites in order to encourage and absorb new voters. Here was the famous urban machine at work, and yet it met with only limited success in this era. First, the already-mobilized voters in the mainstream parties were reluctant to make room for the newcomers; both prejudice and a limit to patronage bounty were the key factors here. Second, ethnic elites found it difficult to mobilize their own people in this migrant era. Moreover, they also tended to involve only those who could be trusted to vote “the right way.”

Most Eastern and Southern European immigrants did not expect to settle permanently in the United States. Indeed, estimated rates of return for these turn-of-the-century migrants to the United States ranged between 50 percent of southern Italians and 35 percent for Poles; even 20 percent of Eastern European Jews (the most likely to be permanent) returned between 1880 and 1900. Thus community turnover in U.S. cities was high.23 Moreover, naturalization rates lagged, even though growing nativist sentiment after the 1890s demanded that immigrants assimilate, and immigration was restricted in 1921. Of the adult foreign-born population in 1920, only 49 percent were naturalized; a decade later, at the beginning of the New Deal realignment, that figure had only risen to 57.6 percent.24

At this point, we must turn to evidence from one city to examine the particular dynamics of these immigrant communities as played out in politics. The case of Bridgeport, Connecticut, a midsized industrial city, provides a wealth of information on ethnic political activity in this era. An immigrant city, Bridgeport had a diversified economic base that emphasized metal-working. It was the foremost American munitions center during World War I, earning it the nickname “The Essen of America.” Its wartime prominence led to national concern over both its ethnic community activities and its labor disputes.25

Ethnic elites rose to prominence in Bridgeport new-immigrant communities through the usual paths of entrepreneurship, concern for their community’s well-being, and political savvy. For example, the padrone Louis Richards (Luigi Ricciardo as he advertised himself in the city’s Italian newspapers) turned a rivalry with a Boston padrone into a crusade on behalf of Bridgeport Italian workers and succeeded in getting state legislation passed that regulated padrones. He turned these contacts, plus
his court interpreting for immigrants, into a role in the local Republican party.

Similarly, but with more conservative consequences, three Hungarian community leaders resolved a labor dispute in 1907. One thousand Hungarian workers led by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) had struck the American Tube & Stamping Company (AT&S) in a dispute over wages and hours. The strike soon became a solid community cause. After a prolonged stalemate in which managers refused to meet with IWW organizers, three Hungarian businessmen volunteered to meet with AT&S management. They gained only the reinstatement of the strikers and a promise for arbitration on wages in the future. After intense debate and a slim majority vote, the strikers decided to return to work. The three notables, however, had demonstrated their mediating ability and their moderating influence. They all went on to roles in the local Republican party.26 Thus through business acumen, sensitivity to the economic survival needs of the group, and astute maneuvering within political-party spheres, immigrant leaders molded their community's structure and negotiated their members' relationships with the local state.

Ethnic notables were instrumental in maneuvering their compatriots through the legal process to become citizens. As Louis Richards, the "pappa" of the Bridgeport Italian community, explained:

When I started to take hold of matters of the Italians in this city I was able to push many of them through. There were times that I knew how hard it was for some of these to go through the strict [citizenship] test, but I also knew that these people would make darned good citizens even if they could not read and write well.27

Ethnic leaders had to urge their communities to pay attention to the positive effect of political clout. As one New York City Italian paper argued, "We must organize our forces as the Jews do, persist in exhausting that which constitutes gain for our race over the Anglo-Saxon race."28 Here we have evidence that the American system of patronage politics, with its emphasis on individual or group enhancement over that of the public good, had been learned well by these ethnic leaders.

But these efforts were insufficient in the immigrant era, because immigrants who decided to stay in the United States took an average of ten to twelve years from their arrival to make application for citizenship.29 The large numbers of sojourners among them made the immigrant era a difficult one for ethnic political clout. This does not mean that immigrant communities, or at least their notables, were devoid of American patriotism. Italian pioneers in Bridgeport were so taken with the United States's participation in the Spanish–American War that they named their new fraternal society—the first Italian one in the city in 1898—the George Dewey Sick Benefit Society. Similarly, the Polish Falcons national head-
quarters had to persuade their members not to join the American army in enthusiastic support of democratic goals in the Caribbean but rather to wait patiently for their opportunity to enlist in the democratic liberation of Poland. Here we cannot separate out intentions—either the goal of gaining instant American citizenship (available to anyone who completed his tour of duty), the enthusiasm for democracy that seems to have animated the Falcons’ membership, or the simple thrill of military adventure.  

Group identification and organization, outsider status in America, domination of the majority proletarian community by middle-class notables, and a growing nationalist awareness were intensified and challenged during World War I. The nationalist impulse—which caused aliens to respond to call-ups from imperial armies or to volunteer for their homeland’s liberation armies, and moved their communities to raise money for European victims of the conflict—clashed with a coercive American patriotism that heightened nativism. Complicating the picture were the waves of strikes that involved hundreds of thousands of workers, both American and immigrant, skilled and unskilled. This situation panicked ethnic notables who tried to maneuver between the rocks of nativism and intolerance in American society and the shoals of class conflict.  

Ethnic notables worried that mounting class grievances within the immigrant working class threatened to mix with nationalist aspirations and possibly to supercede nationality issues entirely. Radical ethnic leaders appeared to lead during these times, and moderate middle-class leaders retreated. Unionizing workers used the rhetoric of democracy to assert themselves and their grievances, even before the United States entered the war and provided Americans with democratic rhetoric to use. Strikers mixed symbols of ethnic nationalism with Americanism. For example, in 1915 striking Italian workers marched through downtown Bridgeport carrying both Italian and American flags.  

Once the United States entered the war, immigrants whose homelands were U.S. allies had an easier time justifying their dual loyalty than those who were from the Central Powers. Ethnic leaders pressed the cause of homeland independence, influencing President Woodrow Wilson’s foreign policy. It should be noted that “old-stock” groups—Germans uniformly suspected of being traitors and the Irish caught between the U.S. alliance with Britain and their own hopes for an independent Ireland—were part of this process as well. All, however, were urged to proclaim loyalty to the United States alone. As one Bridgeport editorial proclaimed even before the United States entered the war, “If you are in America now, whether born here or not, stand by the American flag, the American people, or get out. . . . You can’t serve two countries. You must be either American or not American.” This was echoed in the “100% Americanism” drives sponsored by employers, many of whom announced that they would only employ United States citizens or those who had taken out “first papers.” The government’s Committee on Public Information, which managed the
propaganda effort for the war, had a less coercive approach but nonetheless encouraged Americanization.

At war’s end, debate over the Treaty of Versailles and the League of Nations, as well as immigrants’ concern for the fates of family in the Old Country, kept attention riveted on Europe. At the same time, both native-born and immigrant workers engaged in the largest strike wave to date to keep their wartime gains and to push for unionism in basic industry. Only with resolution of European issues and the defeat of the postwar strikes by a combination of the Red Scare and Open Shop Drive did the American working class settle into a (remarkably) quiescent era. The immigrant workers who had briefly found interethnic unity in the 1919 strikes were left to retreat to their separate nationalist tents.32

After World War I, middle-class ethnic leaders found it safer to concentrate on ethnicity and citizenship in the American setting since European affairs had changed drastically and since immigration was now restricted. The immigrant communities took on the task of Americanization themselves, while still attempting to retain their own ethnic identity. Rather than a simple dualism of ethnic versus American, the 1920s witnessed the redefinition of ethnicity as immigrant culture, heritage, and behaviors mingled with American expectations and emerging mass culture. On the most particularistic level, this redefinition of ethnicity meant that ethnics would pick and choose which aspects of immigrant culture to retain—whether to cook traditional or cook “American,” buy from a local grocer of one’s ethnic group or from an American store, or whether to merge regional/provincial sensibilities into an all-encompassing ethnic federation. On the broader level, they had the task of both justifying their ethnic heritage and claiming a permanent place in America. Finally, ethnic institutions had to create various ways of attracting the second generation.

In the 1920s this question of generating new values, ones that subtly moved away from the collectivist working-class value system of many members even as they appeared to uphold them, was contested terrain. On the plane of high politics, American hostility toward radicalism and American disillusionment with the results of the Versailles Treaty dovetailed with the concerns of ethnic elites over the political and ideological issues that had split communities prior to the war. Ethnic leaders now championed a safe middle-class nationalism that jibed well with mainstream American interests. Ethnic elites used a “fashionable nationalism” as a rallying call in their battles with opponents from within.33 The pre-war tensions, such as secular versus religious, nationalist versus assimilationist, support for American business or for trade unions, continued.

For most Eastern European community leaders, there was no choice but to take sides in the postwar political struggles in the homeland. To be on the “right” side was also to be in alignment with, or at least not in overt disagreement with, U.S. government foreign-policy positions. Thus they could express alarm over events in the homeland while urging their coun-
trymen to settle into their new home. For example, Polish-American leaders, dismayed over the politics of the “socialist” Pilsudski government in the 1920s, turned inward and focused on making their way in American society. “Wychodztwo dla wychodztwa,” “the emigrants for themselves,” became the dominant Polish-American slogan, wielded by Polish grocers and businessmen as an expression of their desire to keep their community close about them. It might usefully have served as well as a slogan for most East European ethnic elites in the 1920s. Similarly, the dispute over support for Poland became mixed with union agitation within the Polish National Alliance. Here, Polish socialists contended for national office against “the Polish bankers, lawyers, doctors, and businessmen” who ran the PNA and won one election in 1927. The Left–Right splits in the PNA continued until the early 1930s. Moreover, ethnic elites were also sorting themselves out into new groupings based on ethnicity and social status, highlighting class stratification within their communities. Ironically, ethnic leaders who were decidedly nondemocratic but of middle-class standing, even those who supported restored monarchies as in the Hungarian and Russian communities, were given great attention by the American press and politicians not because they championed democratic “American” values but because they represented an antiradical, antilabor bulwark.34

If the 1920s was the Golden Age of ethnicity, as the proliferation of ethnic organizations, newspapers, ad memberships indicates, it was also a time when ethnic leaders of Eastern and Southern European groups began making their presence known in American politics. Some ethnic politicians, including those of the up-and-coming second generation, sought further recognition from the traditional American parties by forming their own partisan clubs within the parties. Other community leaders formed general citizenship clubs as part of the Americanization process. For example, in a direct repudiation of patronage politics, the Chicago-based National Slovak Alliance, with the slogan “All for Good Citizenship,” aimed to educate “progressive citizens who place the general welfare before personal aggrandizement.” Similarly, the Bridgeport Hungarian Civic Club aimed to promote nonpartisan citizenship awareness. The Arctic Street Civic Club hoped to do the same in its Slovak neighborhood. Some groups rejected ethnic appeals; as one leader of a Bridgeport lodge of B’nai B’rith explained in 1925, “The Jews vote as American citizens only—and not as a class or religious body,” while the Bridgeport Swedish–American Association declared that “A plea to national pride or prejudice is un-American.” These statements reveal that ethnicities were particularly sensitive to being viewed as mere “interest groups,” even as ethnic interest in politics was rising and ethnic issues loomed large in the Tribal Twenties.35

Nonetheless, large numbers of immigrants remained unmobilized electorally, and a second generation was coming of age. The 1928 presidential campaign came at the right time to generate an upsurge in voter interest and voter registration. Support for the Democratic candidate, Al
Smith, was as much an effect as the cause of this new mobilization. As Allan Lichtman has discovered, religion alone, rather than a holistic ethnocultural worldview, correlated most strongly with the Smith vote, as did socioeconomic status. The large number of newly engaged foreign-stock voters who entered the electoral system still waited to be absorbed by the Democratic party after 1928, a task that proved difficult to do using a patronage model since local Irish Democrats were often unwilling to part with patronage rewards and the Great Depression intervened to make economic issues paramount.36

With the onset of economic difficulties, this new generation of citizens mixed their notions of the public good, “good citizenship,” and the antipatronage sensibility of working-class reform. Foreign-stock voters demanded government protection, free of partisan favoritism, from the disastrous effects of unemployment. At stake in the early depression was the “serviceability of organized government”37 in the face of upper-class demands for pared-down government and privatized relief. In Bridgeport, foreign-stock, working-class homeowners supported a Socialist party municipal ticket in their vision of a public good that included expanded work relief and other city services, fair taxation, support for unionization, and public accountability for elected representatives. The Bridgeport Socialist party won on these themes combined with an antipatronage message. This suggests the need for further investigation of the other examples of tax revolts and successful working-class municipal campaigns to see whether an alternative political culture of working-class citizenry was being shaped, which in turn helped to shape the emerging New Deal.38

The rhetoric of industrial democracy that animated the labor legislation of the New Deal era, language that had its origins in the labor demands of World War I and in the repudiation of Hoover’s “rugged individualism,” had its counterpart in the call for expanded political democracy. Foreign-stock citizens demanded entry into the political process, resisted the call for removal of citizenship rights from people on relief (a throwback to the nineteenth-century practice), and demanded their rights in the workplace as well. As one observer of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) noted, “This new unionism does not stop at the formal lodge meeting. It sees the union as a way of life which involves the whole community.”39

If class-based voting emerged during the 1930s, it was in competition with traditional patronage politics, now expanded to include the new ethnics. The “machine” has received much attention (mostly asking whether it disappeared during the New Deal) but ethnic appeals to partisanship remained strong and were even enhanced in this era of foreign-stock mobilization. Patronage democracy was bolstered by the growing government welfare programs, which were deliberately used by local and state politicians to cement voter allegiance and to undercut independent parties.40

In addition, federal regulations forced the foreign-born who applied for relief to become citizens, thereby adding to the eligible electorate.
New-ethnic political muscle, first flexed during the 1928 presidential campaign, reordered local and state politics in the mid-1930s, at the same time as ethnic pride swept immigrant cities. Building on the ethnic political arrangements of the pre-war era and the 1920s, traditional ethnic leaders, who were being threatened with displacement by class politics and the assimilation of the second generation, now secured their links with the new political order.

A growing Americanism pervaded many ethnic communities during the early depression. In 1932, at a Pulaski Day celebration held by the Bridgeport branch of the Polish National Alliance, one leader proclaimed his pride that his countrymen Casimir Pulaski and Thaddeus Kosciusko had participated in the American Revolution,

and thereby carved on the foundation stones of our national structure the birthright of our countrymen to the enjoyment of the liberties and the opportunities which this nation and its vast territory offers to the various people of Europe, who have come here to develop and finally possess it.

He then went on to list the attributes that makes Poles “good citizens”: being part of the “great army of labor” that built America, building churches and schools, and contributing a growing number of business and professional men. Similarly that same fall, Hungarians, noting that two of their ancestors had taken part in the American Revolution, participated in the city’s George Washington Bicentennial Birthday parade. For their part, Slovaks combined the Washington bicentennial with the anniversary celebration of their Czecho-Slovakian Republic constitution.

The rhetoric of Americanism and democracy mixed with a concern to preserve the Polish language in the move by some to desert the Roman Catholic Polish parish in Bridgeport for the Polish National Catholic Church. Citing the practice of demanding money for religious services as well as the past alliance between the Polish Roman Catholic pastor and local Republicans, “the smarter people,” those “against all the hokus pokus [sic] of the Catholic religion,” and those “believe[ing] in greater democracy in the Church” moved to the National Catholic Church where the Mass was in Polish, not Latin.

A growing pluralism accompanied New Deal politics and local socialist politics in Bridgeport. The 1935 Connecticut Tercentenary in Bridgeport and the 1936 Bridgeport Centennial portrayed and celebrated ethnic diversity, with ethnic days and nationality parades mixed with Yankee colonial memorials. In subsequent years, various ethnicities continued their Annual Day as a way to celebrate their existence in America and to bridge the distances between the various organizations within their group. Politicians from all parties dutifully attended.

A variety of new ethnic veterans’ organizations sprang up—the Jewish War Veterans, Czecho-Slovak Legionnaires, American Veterans of Slovak
Extraction, Italian War Veterans, Lithuanian Legion of America—that celebrated their participation in either the U.S. military or the liberation army of their homelands to make the world “safe for democracy.” In 1934, Bridgeport Czecho-Slovakians celebrated the anniversary of the signing of the Czecho-Slovak constitution, praising “its success as the only democracy among neighboring dictatorships.” This observance is all the more meaningful and indicative of this community’s political values, since in the 1920s the Bridgeport Slovaks had been split between the Catholics who had wanted an autonomous Slovakia and the Protestants who supported the 1918 constitution.45

More problematic, however, was the Italian War Veterans’ 1935 celebration of the entrance of Italy into the war twenty years earlier. “We are not here today only to celebrate an anniversary . . . but to celebrate also the birth of a new Italian civilization on the earth,” proclaimed a Bridgeport Italian notable. The Italian community’s support for Mussolini, who arguably was the first to tap southern Italians’ sense of nationalism, was acceptable to many American businessmen and politicians who were also supportive of Mussolini, but it represented a worrisome trend for Italian-American leftists and unionists who set up national antifascist committees. The massive rallies held in Italian-American communities when Italy invaded Ethiopia, and the ardor with which women gave up their gold wedding rings to Il Duce’s military adventures, hinted that Italians were a politically volatile community in the United States. Italians were never a secure part of the New Deal coalition. Similarly, monarchists in the Hungarian community, as well as some disgruntled Slovak autonomists, provided a base for a growing anti-Semitism and conservative politics in Bridgeport in the late 1930s. Ethnic identification could cut two ways, both liberal and right-wing.46

As the electoral campaign season got underway in the fall of 1937, the Bridgeport Times-Star asked its local readers, “Do People Vote by Racial Blocs at Present?” The answer was equivocal, evidencing both class-based rationales mixed with ethnic propensities and responses from the “new generation,” which protested that the question implied that they were “pro-nationality, rather than American.”47 The second generation was finding its place via a redefined Americanism, one that accepted “hyphenate Americans” as legitimate citizens. As Dobie, the fictional Slovak–American steelworker, mused in Out of This Furnace, Thomas Bell’s saga of the Monongahela Valley,

Made in the U.S.A., made in the First Ward. But it wasn’t where you were born or how you spelled your name or where your father had come from. It was the way you thought and felt about certain things. About freedom of speech and the equality of men and the importance of having one law—the same law—for rich and poor, for the people you liked and the people you didn’t like.48
Thus by the 1930s, foreign-stock, working-class Americans had moved from exclusion from citizenship and unionism to be part of a growing industrial union movement that provided an avenue for a class-based entrance into electoral politics. However, this vision of the worker-citizen, expressed in a language of industrial democracy, was challenged by a more traditional approach to politics, which spoke the language of patronage democracy and used ethnic appeals to incorporate working-class citizens into a web of clientilistic relationships with bourgeois ethnic leaders. While some ethnic-affiliative networks provided the backbone for the CIO efforts in many northern cities, ethnicity was also a pathway for cross-class alliances with reactionary national and international ideologies. A pluralist vision of America mixed uneasily with an internally intolerant ethnic ideal, reminiscent of the pre–World War I integral nationalism. The defeat of working-class politics in the postwar era was rooted in the mixed legacy of this pattern of inclusion, along with the racial dynamic that still excluded African Americans and other people of color.

This investigation of one industrial city’s experience with working-class politics during the Progressive Era and early New Deal suggests a number of qualifications to the “System of 1896” thesis. First, the System of 1896 was not as stable and secure as its theorists have contended. It was repeatedly challenged by third parties, and the issues that these challenges brought to the public sphere reshaped working-class political loyalties and in the process reshaped the general policies pursued by the mainstream parties. Second, there is little room for immigrant working-class politics within this framework. Scholars have argued over the nature of the labor consciousness of the early twentieth century and especially the 1930s, particularly that of new-immigrant workers who are seen to be motivated more by the search for security than the search for power in the workplace.49 The political demands raised by working people in Bridgeport and other cities during the 1930s regarding democracy, social policy, taxes, budgets, and unemployment relief demonstrated their search for “social citizenship,” which reflected a consciousness that combined the goals of security and power. This working-class consciousness played a major role in the shaping of social legislation in the mid-twentieth century. However, the dual nature of working-class inclusion in the American polity, that of patronage or of class, limited the effectiveness of working-class political power in this and subsequent eras.

The colloquium raised a number of issues that are seen more clearly when viewed through the lens of the American case—which provides a perspective and experience both unique and instructive. The structure of politics in the United States, with its distinct levels of local, state, and national government, allowed workers to exercise active citizenship at the local level, arguably the most important level until the early twentieth century. In particular, the process of inclusion or exclusion of workers in
the American polity was related to the shaping of the American working class by immigration. The machinery of the state and of parties emphasized ethnicity and ethnic voting power and could be used to fashion successful challenges to local political authorities. Finally, the malleability of the concept of “American,” shaped as it was by the social and political activities of immigrant workers, gave the notion of citizenship in the United States a flexibility that it has had in few other nations.

NOTES

1. The high partisan loyalty during the Gilded Age was marked by electoral turnouts in the North of 80–84 percent of eligible voters for presidential elections. After the critical contest of 1896, voter turnout in 1900–1916 declined to 77 percent in the North, and then to a dismal 56 percent for 1920–24. Voter participation in the South, always historically lower, reached a 1920–24 nadir of 20 percent after the political disfranchisement of poor and African-American citizens. Note that these percentages are calculated for “eligible voters” only and so do not take into account the increasingly large adult male population of immigrant workers, Paul Kleppner, *Who Voted? The Dynamics of Electoral Turnout, 1870–1980* (New York, 1982), 1–12, 55–82.


4. One clear example of the deliberate intent to limit participation was New York State’s new personal registration laws which applied to New York City and other immigrant cities but not to upstate and rural areas. Burnham, “System of 1896,” 190. In addition, those states, mostly in the Midwest, that had permitted alien voting or so-called alien-intent provisions (which allowed voting to those who had taken out first papers) had all now restricted voting to citizens. Kleppner, *Who Voted?* 1–12.


9. While each of the explanations given for the “no socialism” question has some explanatory merit, the answer inexorably leads to a consensus view of American political development that cannot adequately address the realities of conflict in American history. Redefining class consciousness has provided a new perspective on the exceptionalism argument. Two excellent overviews and critiques are Eric Foner, “Why is There No Socialism in the United States?,” *History Workshop Journal* 17 (1984):57–80; and Sean Wilentz, “Against Exceptionalism: Class Consciousness and the American Labor Movement,” *International Labor and Working-Class History* 26 (Fall 1984):1–24, along with critiques by Nick Salvatore and Michael Hanagan, 25–36.


20. Emily Greene Balch, Our Slavic Fellow Citizens (New York, 1910), 419. Ironically, this idea was remarkably close to the argument that politicians and AFL leaders were using to limit immigration of undesirable ethnicities who were not capable of commanding and appreciating an American standard of living and thus not capable of becoming good citizens. Marianne DeDeouzy, ed., In the Shadow of the Statue of Liberty: Immigrants, Workers and Citizens in the American Republic, 1880–1920 (Paris, 1988), 194–99.


22. Quoted in Park and Miller, Old World Traits Transplanted, 137–38. Similar profiles could have been assembled for other “new-immigrant” groups, with the exception of Italians who were secular and fractured into small local or regional societies. Bucki, “Pursuit of Political Power,” 175–94.


26. Bucki, “Pursuit of Political Power,” 184–85. Also see Robert J. Embardo, “‘Summer Lightning,’ 1907: The Wobblies in Bridgeport,” Labor History 30 (Fall 1989):518–35, though my interpretation differs significantly. The outcome of the strike, far from being a repudiation of radicals as Embardo contends, actually established a strong radical presence in the Hungarian community. The subsequent active histories of the Socialist party, the Socialist Labor party, the IWW, and even the postwar Communist party in this community can be traced back to effects of this strike.

27. Richards interview by V. Frazetta, December 1938, Box 114, RG 33, Works Project

28. 1907 quotation from Bolletino della Sera, in Park and Miller, Old World Traits Transplanted, 240.


30. Gavit, Americans by Choice, 255–95. The Falcons (Sokol) was a gymnasium society, engaged in “nationalistic physical culture.” In 1911, the Falcons set up a formal military school to train its members for eventual participation in the liberation of Poland. Joseph A. Borkowski, “The Role of Pittsburgh’s Polish Falcons in the Organization of the Polish Army in France,” Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, 54 (October 1971):359–74; Donald E. Pienkos, One Hundred Years Young: A History of the Polish Falcons of America, 1887–1987 (Boulder, Co., 1987), 91–104.


33. The phrase is from Barton, “Eastern and Southern Europeans,” 157. Also see William Wolkovich, Bay State “Blue” Laws and Bimba (Brockton, Mass., n.d.), for an example of how Lithuanian communist leader Anthony Bimba became caught between two rival Lithuanian fraternal organizations in a dispute with anti-Soviet and secular versus clerical overtones.

34. Report on the PNA convention from L. Krzycki, “A Letter Not for Publication,” Advance, September 30, 1927, 5. Krzycki was the ranking Polish organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and prominent in the Socialist party of America. For the debates in the PNA, see Pienkos, One Hundred Years Young, 119–50; Joseph A. Wytrwal, America’s Polish Heritage: A Social History of the Poles in America (Detroit, 1961), 227–35.

35. John J. Bukowczyk, in “The Transformation of Working-Class Ethnicity: Corporate Control, Americanization, and the Polish Immigrant Middle-Class in Bayonne, NJ, 1915–1925,” Labor History 25 (Winter 1984):53–82, suggests that the search for customers and accommodation to corporate anti-unionism merged to create this conservative milieu in Polonia during and immediately after World War I. He contends that rivalries between Polish and Jewish grocers in their search for Polish customers during the war contributed to anti-Semitic activity in the Polish community. This suggests a parallel with later Hungarian and Slovak anti-Semitism in Bridgeport and elsewhere in the mid-1930s.


37. The phrase is from a pamphlet by the socialist mayor of Milwaukee. Daniel Hoan, Taxes and Tax Dodgers (Chicago, 1933), 3–4, 12.

38. Bucki, “Pursuit of Political Power,” 285–421; idem, “Defining the Public Good: Class, Taxes, and Municipal Finance in the Early Depression” (unpublished paper, 1994). I do not wish to imply that the Bridgeport Socialist party was a “radical” party (by contemporary standards it was not). Rather, as a party based in old-immigrant, AFL, skilled-worker communities (but with support from new-immigrant communities), it reflected an alternative to traditional patronage politics. The flurry of activity on behalf of a labor party in the 1930s has occupied much attention from labor historians, whose studies have usually ended in disappointment at the decision of the CIO Labor’s Nonpartisan League to endorse FDR in his 1936 reelection bid. For one example, see Eric Leif Davin and Staughton Lynd, “Picketline and Ballot Box: The Forgotten Legacy of the Local Labor Party Movement, 1932–1936,” Radical History Review 22 (Winter 1979–80):43–63. For the grassroots connection between CIO

39. Mary Heaton Vorse, *Labor’s New Millions* (New York, 1938), quotation 292; also see 275–84 for the CIO’s political agenda.


41. *Bridgeport Sunday Herald*, October 23, 1932. The parallels went on: “There is a great deal in common between Americans and Poles. Neither union has fought for aggression and both nations have not only fought for their own liberty but also for the liberty of others.” Ibid., October 16, 1932.


47. *Bridgeport Times-Star*, October 29, 1937.

48. Thomas Bell, *Out of This Furnace* (Pittsburgh, 1976; orig. 1941), 411.