

Constructing The System:
The Development of Political Machinery at the University of Florida (1921-1943)

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Introduction



In 2017, the chicken parm scandal at the University of Florida erupted. A leaked screenshot exposed a Kappa Alpha Theta sister informing members that if they did not vote in UF Student Government elections and turn in their “I voted” sticker, they would not receive their chicken parmesan dinner: “NO STICKER = NO PARM.”¹ This incident of UF Greek life voter coercion, however, was not isolated; in 2010, leaked audio tapes exposed the Delta Phi Epsilon sorority for refusing to let pledges eat until they voted in SG elections.² In 2023, an image surfaced of the infamous “sticker boards” collected by UF Greek houses, with members placing their “I voted” sticker to show that they had voted.³ The organized voter coercion of Greek life—block voting—is the foundation of UF Student Government political machinery.

¹ Mackenzie Behm, “Sorority Withholding Food from Members until They Vote in Student Government Election,” *The Tab*, 2017, <https://archive.thetab.com/us/florida/2017/09/27/sorority-withholding-food-members-vote-2017-sg-election-6523>.

² Elizabeth Behrman, “Unite Audio Reveals Campaign Tactics,” *The Independent Florida Alligator*, March 4, 2010, <https://www.alligator.org/article/2010/03/unite-audio-reveals-campaign-tactics>.

³ The leaked image of the sticker board is shown above. Rey Audrel Zeth Arcenas, “Special Report: Sticker Boards, Leaked Messages Expose Vision Party Sticker Collection,” *UF Politics Seriousposting*, October 4, 2023, https://medium.com/@uf_politics/special-report-sticker-boards-leaked-messages-expose-vision-party-sticker-collection-0a96571b8225.

The System, as UF's political machine has come to be called, currently consists of every campus Greek house and large non-Greek multicultural organizations.⁴ The leadership honorary society Florida Blue Key (FBK) serves as the nucleus of this machine.⁵ This three-fold alliance regularly dominates UF Student Government through the block vote, clashing with its opposition—known as the independent movement or indies—every election cycle.⁶ The stakes of this electoral battle are millions of student tuition dollars, collected from an activity and service fee.⁷ The Activity and Service Fee Budget, administered by UF Student Government, has grown to over \$23 million in its most recent report.⁸ Patronage politics is a staple of the System; FBK, the center of this machine, regularly leverages its control over student government to reward itself with hundreds of thousands of tuition dollars every year in the form of Gator Growl subsidies.⁹ Within the System, certain Greek houses also “own” student government agencies, a practice known as “legacy positions.”¹⁰ Trained in the machine politics of UF Student Government and members of the “oldest and most prestigious honorary society in Florida,” prominent Florida politicians have shaped (and continue to shape) the political landscape of the

⁴ A detailed study of the structure of the modern System is David Bradshaw, “Power, Patronage and Paternalism in the Gator Nation: Student Government at the University of Florida” (Master’s Thesis, University of Florida, 2013). “The System” is a relatively modern name for the political machine that controls UF Student Government, first used in an academic work by Bradshaw.

⁵ Mike Vogel, “Leadership: The New Blue Key,” *Florida Trend*, February 1, 2004, <https://www.floridatrend.com/article/12133/leadership-the-new-blue-key/>.

⁶ Bradshaw, “Power, Patronage and Paternalism in the Gator Nation: Student Government at the University of Florida,” 9.

⁷ For the 2019-2020 fiscal year, the A&S fee levied on students was \$19.06 per credit hour. “SG Finance,” University, *University of Florida Student Government* (blog), n.d., <https://sg.ufl.edu/about/sg-finance/>.

⁸ The budget was \$23,251,863.00 for fiscal year 2023-2024. Catherine Giordano, “Funding for Fiscal Year 2023-2024 Activity and Service Fee Budget” (UF Student Government, 2024), <https://sg.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/FY-23-24-Activity-Service-Fee-Budget.pdf>.

⁹ Rey Audrel Zeth Arcenas, “Florida Blue Key Has Taken Two and a Half Million Dollars of UF Tuition Money Since 2003,” *UF Politics Seriousposting*, June 20, 2024, https://medium.com/@uf_politics/florida-blue-key-has-taken-two-and-a-half-million-dollars-of-uf-tuition-money-since-2003-92fbcf41abac.

¹⁰ The most famous of these legacy positions are the ownership of UF’s speakers bureau, ACCENT Speakers, by the fraternity Alpha Epsilon Pi and the ownership of UF’s entertainment bureau, Student Government Productions, by the fraternity Theta Chi. Thomas Stewart, “ACCENT, SGP Ruled by Two UF Frats,” *Gainesville Sun*, May 11, 2010, <https://www.gainesville.com/story/news/2010/05/11/accent-sgp-ruled-by-two-uf-frats/31756824007/>.

state and the country. The list of politicians who have emerged from UF Student Government stretches decades and across party lines: Fuller Warren, Reubin Askew, Bob Graham, Lawton Chiles, Buddy MacKay, Adam Putnam, and Ashley Moody among others.¹¹ Wielding thousands of block votes, controlling millions of dollars, and boasting a vast roster of powerful alumni, the System is the most powerful collegiate political machine in the United States.

Excavating the details of this semi-secret machine has been an uneven, century-long process. The System, occasionally engaging in an act of egregious corruption, receives critical scrutiny every few years. The most significant of these incidents occurred in the late 1990s, when a UF student named Charles Grapski sued FBK for defamation. In the lawsuit, he alleged FBK operatives defamed him when they distributed fliers falsely accusing him of being a child molester during the 1995 student government elections. A jury ruled in favor of Grapski, rewarding him \$250,000 with FBK paying \$85,000.¹² For his trial, Grapski conducted decades of archival research to expose FBK's historical control over student government,¹³ which led to a judicial notice that unequivocally stated: "Defendant FLORIDA BLUE KEY has historically involved itself in University of Florida student government elections by supporting parties and candidates for office and other means."¹⁴

Other research on the System emerged in similar moments of heightened scrutiny on UF political machinery. David Bradshaw's 2013 master's thesis "Power, Patronage and Paternalism in the Gator Nation" was inspired by the System's near presidential defeat to Alex Cornillie in

¹¹ "Welcome to Florida Blue Key!," *Florida Blue Key* (blog), n.d., <https://www.fbk.org/>.

¹² John McGovern, one of the students who engaged in the defamation and UF Student Body President at the time, was responsible for the remaining \$165,000. Barry Klein, "Blue Key Pays \$85,000 to Settle Suit," *Tampa Bay Times*, September 16, 1998, <https://www.tampabay.com/archive/1998/09/16/blue-key-pays-85000-to-settle-suit/>.

¹³ Unfortunately, much of Grapski's work has been lost to time.

¹⁴ "Judicial Notice in Case 95-4412-CA" (Alachua County Court, n.d.), <https://www.scribd.com/document/29138637/Judicial-Notice>.

2012.¹⁵ Joshua Aubuchon's 2005 master's thesis analyzing college media in campus election concerns the System's 2004 presidential defeat to Jamal Sowell.¹⁶ John Watkins's 1976 honors thesis analyzing Florida Blue Key's impact on state politics emerged amid Daniel Lobeck's successful anti-FBK campaign for student body president.¹⁷ The uneven production of scholarship, often by students embedded within UF Student Government, has led to several limitations. With decades separating moments of controversy, student research lacks engagement with one another. For example, Bradshaw discusses the need for further research into how lessons in student government carry over into political careers, a topic that Watkins touched on almost forty years earlier.¹⁸ The papers, written in moments of controversy, also retain the political convictions of their context. For instance, Watkins argues campus politics and FBK corrupted over time.¹⁹ As the first two chapters reveal, however, this narrative of an uncorrupt beginning is not rooted in historical reality. Rather, it was the dominant narrative of its context: a mid-1970s reform movement in student government. Bradshaw, too, describes the structure of the modern System but acknowledges that its current iteration, the subject of his study, began around 2004.²⁰

A historical analysis broadens the perspective of existing scholarship, written as political science or media analysis theses. Each paper, embedded in its immediate context, describes

¹⁵ Bradshaw, "Power, Patronage and Paternalism in the Gator Nation: Student Government at the University of Florida," 2–3.

¹⁶ Joshua Aubuchon, "Framing Analysis of the 2004 Student Government Election at the University of Florida in a College Media Setting" (University of Florida, 2005).

¹⁷ Eric Estrin and David Klein, "Blue Key Unlocks Doors to Influence," *The Independent Florida Alligator*, March 11, 1976.

¹⁸ David Bradshaw, "Orange, Blue, and Shades of Gray: UF Student Government and the Moral Psychology of Oligarchy" (Master's Thesis, University of Florida, 2013), 60.

¹⁹ John Watkins, "Impact of Members of Florida Blue Key Upon Florida State Politics" (Undergraduate Honors Thesis, University of Florida, 1976), 15.

²⁰ Bradshaw, "Power, Patronage and Paternalism in the Gator Nation: Student Government at the University of Florida," 12–13.

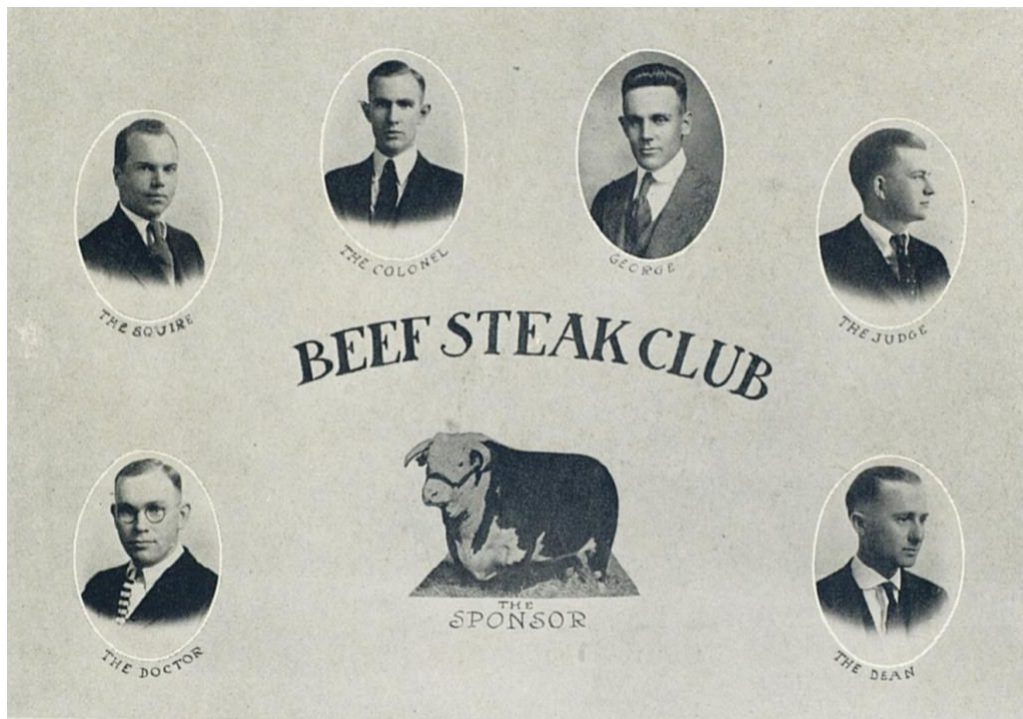
machinery at one moment in time. A historical outlook, however, traces emergence, development, and change—a necessary perspective for the over century-long existence of UF political machinery. This paper contributes to the literature by dispelling institutional mythologies. Machine politics did not hijack the otherwise neutral vessel of UF Student Government; machine politics created it. Florida Blue Key, too, did not degenerate into the nucleus of political machinery but grew out of that machinery. Beneath the superficial appearance of neutrality exists a long history of corruption, block voting, and dirty politics that created these institutions. The System exists not as an aberration but by design.

This thesis traces the history of UF political machinery prior to the Second World War. The first chapter details the origins of machine politics, centered around a post-World War I secret society of veteran students named “The Beefsteak Club.” Beefsteakers created the 1920 and 1925 student government constitutions and monopolized student offices for half a decade, engaging in electoral fraud, financial abuse, and coercive voting. The Beefsteak saga dispels the notion of an uncorrupt beginning to student politics, as machinery constructed student government’s edifice. The second chapter traces the emergence of the Blue Key Society, using primary sources to dispel its official founding story and uncover its outgrowth from Beefsteak machine politics. It then examines Blue Key’s struggle against its early rivals, Omicron Delta Kappa and Blue Key National, as it remade itself into a society unique to the University of Florida: Florida Blue Key. Finally, the third chapter describes the political dynamics of the developing fraternity bloc system after the end of one-party Beefsteak rule. As the bloc system developed in the decade prior to the Second World War, students nevertheless questioned and challenged its legitimacy.

Tracing the history of semi-secret machine politics requires critical historical evaluation. The UF student newspaper, *The Florida Alligator*, is a central source for this project yet, as its staff were elected positions, it was deeply embedded in machinery itself. As a result, this paper relies on a diverse array of primary sources: memoirs, the student yearbook, oral histories, party papers, campaign literature, letters, and other archival materials. The resulting historical narrative emphasizes emergence and construction; political machinery created UF Student Government, but its development was protracted, contingent, and contested.

Chapter 1

Beefsteak, Hamburgers, and an Edifice of Corruption (1921-1929)



Until the year 1926, there existed at the University of Florida one secret political party, organized and composed practically of representatives from certain fraternities. This party, named by its own choice the Beefsteak Club, met in smoke filled rooms behind closed doors, and handed out upon a platter the spoils of university elections.²¹

In his 1976 honors thesis studying the impact of Florida Blue Key on state politics, John Watkins argued that “[f]actionalism has tended to corrupt both student government elections and Blue Key elections.”²² His political science paper, based on thirty questionnaires of FBK alumni, assumed a clean beginning in UF student politics. The narrative of an untainted origin was

²¹ This chapter was previously published as an article in *Alpata: A Journal of History*. See Rey Audrel Zeth Arcenas, “Beefsteak, Hamburgers, and an Edifice of Corruption: Political Machinery at the University of Florida (1918-1929),” *Alpata: A Journal of History* 20 (Spring 2024): 98–115. For the image see William Jeacle, ed., *The Seminole* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1922), 281. For the quote see “History of Politics on Florida Campus” in “The Democratic Journal Vol. 2 No. 3” (1928), Party newspapers and bulletins, 1927-1938, Box: 6. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

²² Watkins, “Impact of Members of Florida Blue Key Upon Florida State Politics,” 16.

widespread in the mid-1970s, when Daniel Lobeck successfully waged his 1976 campaign for student body president. Lobeck, running against FBK corruption, encapsulated this narrative in a letter to alumni urging reform. Florida Blue Key, he wrote, had ceased to be a leadership organization but became “a force for perpetuating the personal campus influence of five power-groups within the membership.”²³ Assuming corruption emerged over time, the mid-1970s movement to reform UF political machinery urged a return to a more virtuous past. A study of UF Student Government’s origins, however, reveals that this narrative is not rooted in historical reality.

Machine politics did not hijack the otherwise neutral institution of UF Student Government; machine politics created it. The Beefsteak Club, a secret society of World War I veterans eventually centered around several fraternities, created and centralized the power of UF Student Government. Throughout their half-decade domination of campus politics, Beefsteakers engaged in coercive voting, election fraud, and embezzlement. UF Student Government was constructed on an edifice of corruption. Nevertheless, this construction was an uneven process as students struggled over the meaning of self-government and democracy.

The Beginnings of UF Student Self-Government

In 1905, the students of the newly established University of Florida—numbering around one hundred—gathered in the university chapel to elect their class officers. Students nominated candidates from the floor and raised their hands to signal approval. The class officer was a symbolic position, but some students wanted real self-government. They eventually held a vote

²³ “Lobeck Appeals to Alumni, Students for Change,” *The Independent Florida Alligator*, June 3, 1977.

on whether to create a constitution to govern themselves. After some deliberation, they voted the proposal down, deciding they were too young to rule over each other.²⁴

Nevertheless, the student body exercised self-government in limited ways. Students elected staff for the student newspaper and yearbook, *The Florida Alligator* and *The Seminole* respectively, although the lack of activity fee meant both relied on sales for funding.²⁵ The Athletic Association incorporated in 1915 and levied a five-dollar fee at registration which provided admission to athletic games and allowed students to vote for the association's officers.²⁶ That same year, students expanded their agitation for self-government. The summer student body voted unanimously in 1914 to approve the first form of student self-government, an honor system, implemented in the summer of 1915. Its power was relatively limited, consisting of a council of nine student representatives governing infractions against the university's honor code.²⁷ By June of 1916, the student body adopted a more permanent student-governed honor system, involving an executive committee of five voting members elected from each class.²⁸ However, controversy lingered over the meaning of student self-government.

In the spring of 1919, debate erupted over the announcement that a committee of seniors prepared to draft a student government constitution. *The Florida Alligator* described the two sides in military terms: "forces on the campus are being mobilized, and ammunition is being manufactured for a titanic struggle over the question of Student Government."²⁹ The Committee on Public Safety, a group of students opposed to self-government, argued that the move was

²⁴ Haynes Mahoney, "Political History Dates from Chapel Elections," *The Florida Alligator*, October 22, 1938.

²⁵ Mahoney.

²⁶ Jeacle, *The Seminole*, 186; "Board of Control Met Here Monday," *The Florida Alligator*, February 12, 1915.

²⁷ "Self-Government Inaugurated by Normal Students," *The Florida Alligator*, June 30, 1915.

²⁸ "Honor System Adopted By Student Body," *The Florida Alligator*, June 2, 1916.

²⁹ "First Titanic Struggle Over Student Self-Government Will Take Place In Chapel Next Tuesday," *The Florida Alligator*, April 4, 1919.

motivated by a “lust for power,” moving governance from mature faculty to immature students.³⁰ The Committee on Public Information, supportive of self-government, argued it would allow students to practice democracy and create better citizens.³¹ After a tense meeting in the university chapel, the student body voted 110 to 92 in favor of the principle of student self-government.³² Despite the vote, the senior class never finished a draft of the constitution.

The movement for student self-government proceeded unevenly as students debated its merits. Nevertheless, the election of several student offices, the implementation of the honor system, and the 1919 electoral victory of student self-government as a principle indicated a shifting consensus from its rejection in 1905. By the spring of 1920, neglect from the state legislature galvanized the student body to approve a new budget system, empowering a new student body association with fiscal responsibility. Beneath this new system was a conspiracy of World War I veterans who created and monopolized student government for half a decade.

The Early Beefsteak Club (1919-1920)

After the First World War, a group of veterans colluded to seize control of UF campus politics. Royal P. Terry, their unofficial leader, organized them into a political machine to overwhelm the old-line fraternities and take over student government from students who did not fight in the war.³³ The organization that emerged from their conspiracy, the Beefsteak Club, was the beginning of organized political machinery at the University of Florida.

Nepotism and fraternity rivalries were not unfamiliar to student politics prior to the Beefsteak Club’s formation. In 1916, a student accused the Athletic Association of being run as a Tammany Hall, with its board elevating allegedly unqualified candidates and leaving two

³⁰ “First Titanic Struggle Over Student Self-Government Will Take Place In Chapel Next Tuesday.”

³¹ “First Titanic Struggle Over Student Self-Government Will Take Place In Chapel Next Tuesday.”

³² “Student Body Accepts Principle of Self-Government,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 25, 1919.

³³ Angus Laird, *Like I Saw It: The University Years* (Tallahassee, FL: St. Andrews Press, 1981), 21.

positions vacant for months.³⁴ Fraternities, too, wrestled for control of campus offices. Elmer Hinckley, a member of the Beefsteak Club, claimed that the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity monopolized campus politics before the formation of their combine.³⁵ However, the historical record cannot confirm the veracity of his claim. Cross-referencing names of senior class presidents, honor court representatives, and athletic association membership to fraternity affiliation does not reveal the singular domination of ATO, but rather paints a picture of several fraternities struggling for control of campus politics. Regardless of the state of campus politics before the Beefsteak Club, its formation irrevocably shaped student government. Formed as a secret society after the war,³⁶ Beefsteakers played a crucial role consolidating and expanding student government's power.

In the spring of 1920, students agitated over the lack of funds from the state legislature. Students proposed a special budget, paid with a registration fee, to fund student activities.³⁷ After a successful vote, the student body “took a step which is one of the most important ever taken up by this University” and approved a student activities budget.³⁸ The budget levied an entrance fee of \$20 to fund activities such as sports, literary societies, the student newspaper, and the yearbook. Despite “bitter enemies” to the move, it passed by a solid majority. A committee composed of B. E. Bushnell, R. P. Terry, and J. Velma Keene drew a new constitution of a

³⁴ “Is There A Tammany Hall In Operation On The Campus?,” *The Florida Alligator*, December 5, 1916.

³⁵ Elmer Hinckley, Interview with Elmer D. Hinckley, July 25, 1972, July 25, 1972, 17, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program.

³⁶ According to the Liberal Party's newspaper, the Beefsteak Club formed in 1918. However, no other sources date the exact year of its founding, and this chapter refrains from providing an exact date of its formation. Oddly enough, the leading voices against student self-government in the 1919 controversy were members of Pi Kappa Alpha, a leading Beefsteak fraternity. See “The Liberal Bulletin Vol. 1 No. 2” (1928), Party newspapers and bulletins, 1927-1938, Box: 6. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

³⁷ “Special Budget Is Proposed To Remedy Student Activities,” *The Florida Alligator*, January 30, 1920.

³⁸ J. Velma Keene, ed., *The Seminole* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1921), 89.

student body association to manage the funds collected from students.³⁹ Terry and Keene were leaders of the Beefsteak Club and Bushnell was a member of Pi Kappa Alpha, a leading fraternity in the society.⁴⁰

An Era of Beefsteak Domination (1921-1925)

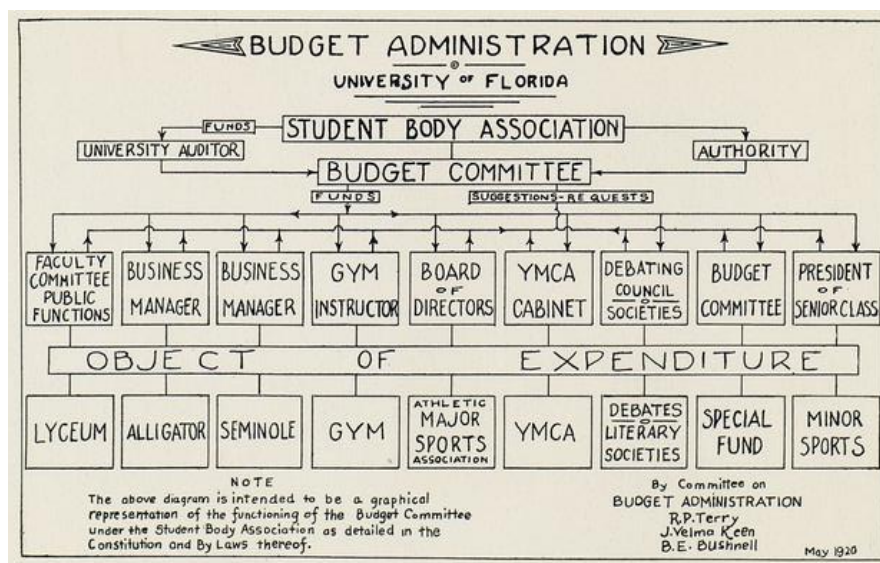


Diagram of the 1920 UF Student Government budget administration.⁴¹

The passage of the budget and 1920 constitution created a financial basis to student self-government. The new student body association controlled and allocated entrance fee funds, totaling around \$14,000, to nine subsidiary organizations.⁴² The Beefsteak Club “landslided away” the elections of 1921.⁴³ To ensure its continued dominance, the group engaged in corruption, election fraud, and conspiracy. According to Angus Laird, a former member of the Beefsteak Club, Beefsteak leaders pre-decided the number of votes each candidate would receive. He recounted other Beefsteakers spending the night before elections marking ballots for

³⁹ Keene, 89.

⁴⁰ Jeacle, *The Seminole*, 281; Van Huff, ed., *The Seminole* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1920), 135.

⁴¹ Keene, *The Seminole*, 86.

⁴² Keene, 89.

⁴³ “The Liberal Bulletin Vol. 1 No. 2.”

their candidates. Then, after polls closed, Beefsteak election officials shut off the lights and, when the lights returned, the vote tallies matched the agreed-upon numbers.⁴⁴ Victorious, the election fraudsters celebrated with a downtown beefsteak dinner: hence the name “Beefsteak Club.”⁴⁵

Kappa Sigma and Pi Kappa Alpha constituted the two main fraternities that controlled the Beefsteak Club. After most WWI veterans left campus, R. P. Terry organized Kappa Sigma to perpetuate Beefsteak control of campus politics.⁴⁶ Pi Kappa Alpha was a fellow charter fraternity of the Beefsteak Club. These two fraternities divided the offices of student government, *The Florida Alligator*, and *The Seminole* among themselves, occasionally allowing other fraternities and non-fraternity men to hold positions.⁴⁷ The Beefsteak Club maintained strict discipline among its participating fraternities. In fraternity houses, Beefsteak leaders posted a list of approved candidates with instructions that pledges vote for them under the penalty of appearing before the “rat court.”⁴⁸ Campus tradition compelled freshmen, dubbed “rats,” to follow the campus rules enforced by a vigilance committee. Each week, *The Florida Alligator* published a list of freshmen to appear before rat court, ordering them to bring a paddle board two and a half feet long, four inches wide, and one-half inch thick.⁴⁹ Freshmen who did not comply with their fraternity’s voting orders faced physical punishment with the paddle. The practice of forcing pledges to vote for the correct party became known as “block voting,” and it ensured the Beefsteak Club won every election in its period of unchecked domination.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Laird, *Like I Saw It: The University Years*, 25.

⁴⁵ Laird, 21.

⁴⁶ Laird, 22.

⁴⁷ Laird, 25.

⁴⁸ Laird, 30.

⁴⁹ “Freshmen Are Given Notices of Three New Rules of Committee,” *The Florida Alligator*, November 23, 1925.

⁵⁰ Angus Laird, Interview with Angus M. Laird, February 1, 1980, February 1, 1980, 33, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program.

With its control of campus politics solidified, several Beefsteakers embezzled student funds. Eventually, the university expelled four students connected to *The Seminole* and the student directory, the *F Book*. Beverly Mann, chairman of the Beefsteak Club and business manager of *The Seminole* increased the price of student pictures, sold plates from the University of Michigan at an inflated price, and printed fraudulent forms to embezzle \$2,100. He subsequently spent the money on a sports car. Years later, Mann requested a diploma from the university and justified his actions as “common practice.”⁵¹

By the spring of 1925, “sweeping agitation” emerged for another reorganization of student government.⁵² Reformers argued for the old constitution’s inadequacy, designed for a student body of less than five hundred. The student body voted for Milton Yeats, the Beefsteak student body president, to lead and appoint a committee that would draft a new constitution.⁵³ With only a few modifications, the drafted constitution was accepted.⁵⁴ This new constitution consolidated the budget system, honor system, and subsidiary organizations into one body. The honor system became the judicial branch of the new government, with nine justices elected at large. Replacing the budget committee was an elected executive council of fifteen students with a student body president, vice president, and secretary-treasurer managing the council’s meetings. The new constitution also laid out subsidiary organizations such as the Athletic Council, *The Seminole*, *The Florida Alligator*, and the *F Book* among others.⁵⁵ The 1925 constitution marked a culmination in the movement for student self-government. No longer characterized by fiery debate, the student body consolidated self-governance in the new constitution, which laid the

⁵¹ Laird, *Like I Saw It: The University Years*, 38–39.

⁵² “New Constitution Proves Successful,” *The Florida Alligator*, May 15, 1926.

⁵³ “New Constitution Proves Successful.”

⁵⁴ “Student Government,” *The Florida Alligator*, November 1, 1925.

⁵⁵ Gardner Piper, ed., “Constitution and By-Laws,” in *F Book: University of Florida 1925-1926*, 1925, 18–

foundation of student government for the next decade and a half. Beneath this consolidation of power laid the machinations of the Beefsteak Club: composing constitutional committees, committing electoral fraud, physically coercing freshmen, enforcing the block vote, and, on occasion, misusing student funds. The era of Beefsteak one-party rule, however, came to an end as other fraternities challenged its monopoly.

The Rise of the Hamburgers (1926)

The Beefsteak Club, centered on Pi Kappa Alpha and Kappa Sigma, formed enmities with other fraternities, namely Alpha Tau Omega. They blacklisted ATO from the candidates they ran, and concentrated offices among Beefsteak fraternities.⁵⁶ The motto of the Beefsteakers, referring to student offices, was “take them all.”⁵⁷ By February 1926, thirty prominent students—half non-fraternity men—formed to fight “the organization.”⁵⁸ The Beefsteak Club derided this opposition with the name “the unorganized organization.”⁵⁹ Eventually, they settled on a wittier nickname: the Hamburger Club.⁶⁰

Olin Watts, a well-respected campus figure and student body vice president, was one leader of the Hamburgers.⁶¹ He described the Hamburgers as a party of individuals working against block and group voting. Fuller Warren, the future governor of Florida, explained that the Beefsteak monopoly on power needed to be curbed by another party: “The [opposition] has controlled politics at the University for the last five years. They have done well, as a rule, but

⁵⁶ Hinckley, Interview with Elmer D. Hinckley, July 25, 1972, 17.

⁵⁷ Arthur Black, Interview with Arthur Black, 07-26-1984, July 26, 1984, 10, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program.

⁵⁸ “The Democratic Journal Vol. 2 No. 3.”

⁵⁹ Laird, *Like I Saw It: The University Years*, 27.

⁶⁰ Laird, 21.

⁶¹ Laird, Interview with Angus M. Laird, February 1, 1980, 31.

they have gathered excessive power that should be checked.”⁶² Angus Laird, a Kappa Sigma and the Beefsteak editor-in-chief of *The Florida Alligator*, ran stories in support of open elections.⁶³

The Hamburgers, abandoning political secrecy to challenge the Beefsteak machine, rallied excitement for the upcoming election. Turnout in the election of 1926 reached a record-breaking 1,108 votes—63.1% of the student population. Nevertheless, the Beefsteakers clinched victory. The Beefsteak candidate for student body president, Henson Markham, defeated the Hamburger candidate by 49 votes.⁶⁴ The crushing loss almost disintegrated the Hamburger party and defectors from the Beefsteak Club faced retribution. As punishment for publishing stories sympathetic to the Hamburgers and critical of block voting, Laird quietly lost his chairmanship.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the Hamburger Club’s 1926 campaign ended a half-decade era of secrecy in student politics. As the Hamburgers wrote in a future party newspaper:

The [Hamburgers] had been organized two months and its organization could not successfully combat the old block vote of the opposition. In defeat the new party felt that victory had been in a sense theirs’; for they had forced from behind closed doors the opposition, proving to the campus the manner in which politics had been conducted in previous years.⁶⁶

“The Complete Annihilation of the Mighty (?) Beefsteak Club” (1927)

In 1927, opposition to the Beefsteak Club regrouped. The remnants of the Hamburger Club reorganized under a new generation of anti-Beefsteakers. Meanwhile, the Beefsteak Club suffered a split in January of 1927; several reform-oriented Beefsteakers had grown disenchanted by intransigent leadership.⁶⁷ Two leaders of the Hamburger Club approached Angus Laird to lead

⁶² “Hamburger Party Holds Pre-Election Enthusiasm Rally,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 3, 1926.

⁶³ Pete, “Campus Comment,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 27, 1926.

⁶⁴ “Walker, Mizell Poll Large Vote For Major Offices,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 3, 1926.

⁶⁵ Laird, *Like I Saw It: The University Years*, 27.

⁶⁶ “The Democratic Journal Vol. 2 No. 3.”

⁶⁷ “The Democratic Journal” (1927), Party newspapers and bulletins, 1927-1938, Box: 6. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

their anti-Beefsteak party. He agreed to be vice chairman with Robert Parker, a member of Theta Chi, as chairman.⁶⁸

This new coalition of Hamburger remnants and Beefsteak defectors emerged as a new party: the Democratic Club. Campaign material for the Democratic Club embraced its Hamburger roots, often including “Hamburger” in quotes.⁶⁹ The Democratic Club selected two delegates from each fraternity and ten to twelve independents to draw up a constitution and by-laws. The Democrats, concerned with block voting, proposed district voting as a solution. The system of at-large elections for 51 offices, they argued, meant voters did not personally know candidates which naturally led to block voting their fraternity’s endorsed candidates. As a remedy, they proposed geographic primary elections of delegates to a nominating convention. This public convention would nominate candidates for office instead of determining such positions in secret meetings. They hoped that district primary elections would abolish block voting by ensuring freshmen, who lived with the candidates in their districts, would know the men for whom they would be voting.⁷⁰

The Democratic Club adapted to the era of open politics they inaugurated the year before. They published a party newspaper exposing Beefsteak block voting and vote trading. They also publicized Laird’s defection and adopted platform points for financial accountability and fairer elections. The Democrats dedicated themselves to the end of the block vote, and hoped their plan would “go far toward the abolishment of political parties.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ Laird, *Like I Saw It: The University Years*, 35.

⁶⁹ “Democratic Party” (Democratic Party, 1927), Handouts, 1927-1936, Box: 3. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

⁷⁰ “The Democratic Journal.”

⁷¹ “The Democratic Journal.”

The Florida Alligator descended into a “political brawl” in the weeks before the election.⁷² The editor-in-chief, Lewis Hall, fired Monroe Campbell from his columnist position after he promised to discuss campus politics.⁷³ One response criticized the termination, arguing it was motivated by Campbell’s Beefsteak sympathies.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, Beefsteakers and Hamburgers traded verbal blows in the newspaper’s forum. Angus Laird threatened to expose the Beefsteak Club’s corrupt practices: “I do not favor making a scandal sheet of the Alligator, or I would do so now.”⁷⁵ In response, Beefsteakers attacked the Democratic Party as a rebrand of the Hamburgers.⁷⁶ The drama heightened when a third party emerged led by John Wyse, who accused both parties of disproportionately empowering fraternity men.⁷⁷

The morning of Friday, April 8th, 1927 arrived. The election took place the night before, but multiple delays occurred due to political subterfuge. A “disgruntled politician” cut the lights, forcing election officials to count the ballots by candlelight. They repaired the lights four hours later at 3:30 AM. By 7 AM, the results had been tallied. The Democratic Party won almost every office.⁷⁸ The scale of the Beefsteak Club’s loss was staggering. Voter turnout broke last year’s record-breaking numbers at around 1,350 votes. The Democratic candidate for student body president, vice president, and secretary-treasurer, all won by overwhelming margins. Only three Beefsteak candidates won office.⁷⁹ Euphoria swept the Democrats, who felt vindicated in their

⁷² “Forum,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 2, 1927.

⁷³ “The Forum,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 19, 1927.

⁷⁴ “Forum,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 19, 1927.

⁷⁵ Angus Laird, “Forum,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 2, 1927.

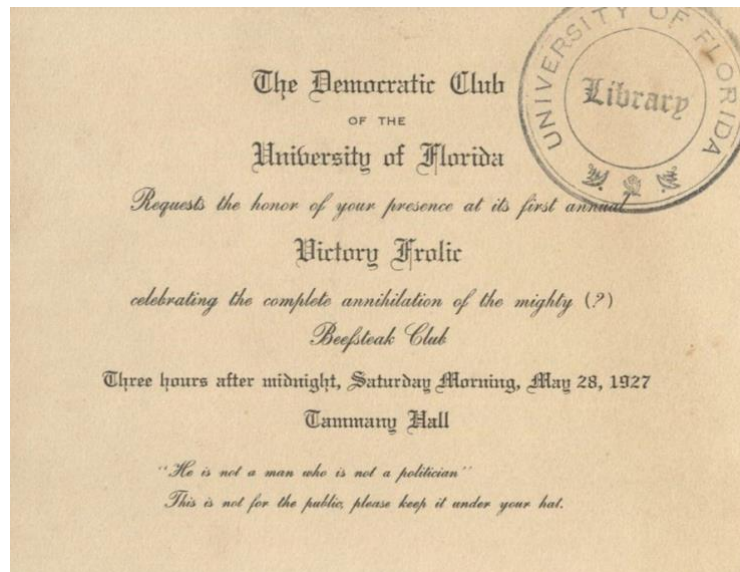
⁷⁶ Charlie Crozier, “Forum,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 2, 1927.

⁷⁷ John Wyse, “SANE READJUSTMENTS,” 1927, Posters, 1937-1939, Box: 1. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

⁷⁸ “Democratic Party Is Winner in Election,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 9, 1927.

⁷⁹ “Democratic Party Is Winner in Election.”

two-year struggle against the Beefsteak machine. They held a victory frolic to celebrate “the complete annihilation of the mighty (?) Beefsteak Club.”⁸⁰



The Democrats ousted the Beefsteak Club from the power it monopolized for half a decade, marking an end to secret politics and one-party rule. Nevertheless, as third-party candidate John Wyse argued, fraternity machine politics persisted. The Hamburger-Democratic Club, too, practiced fraternity block voting.⁸¹ Nevertheless, in principle, they touted an end to the block vote and asked the student body to have “faith enough in human nature to believe that those who pledge themselves to [reform] will do more than those who offer no reform at all.”⁸² Despite Democratic efforts, machine politics proved persistent.

Post-Beefsteak Politics (1928)

By 1928, the Beefsteak Club adapted to the new era of open, multi-party politics. They reorganized into a new party, the Liberal Party, and published their own newspaper. Their

⁸⁰ “The Democratic Club Annual Victory Frolic Invitation,” May 1927, Handouts, 1927-1936, Box: 3. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

⁸¹ Laird, Interview with Angus M. Laird, February 1, 1980, 33.

⁸² “The Democratic Journal.”

periodical, *The Liberal Bulletin*, described the Liberal Party as a new entity composed of fraternities unhappy with the Hamburger Club and remnants of the Beefsteak Club.⁸³ They also accused the ATO fraternity of corrupt politics. They alleged that ATO dominated student politics prior to the Beefsteak Club and masterminded the Hamburger Club to reestablish its grip on student politics. The Beefsteakers, in fact, opposed the ATO “dictatorship” and succeeded for half a decade because the student body supported their policies.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, the Democrat’s new electoral system began on shaky ground. The primary elections for the nominating convention resulted in 26 Liberal and 13 Democratic delegates. Despite the Liberal supermajority, the vote total reflected the close strength of both parties.⁸⁵ The electoral convention, held to nominate candidates from each party in an open forum, lasted a mere forty minutes before ending early due to a failure to notify students of its date and time.⁸⁶ The Liberals accused the student body president of hastily calling for the convention to advantage the Democrats.⁸⁷ On the convention’s second day, the Liberal Party constituted most of the attendees. Because the convention did not establish rules, the Liberals held the power to only nominate Liberal candidates and sweep the election by barring their opposition. Instead, the Liberals allowed the Democrats to nominate their candidates without any stalling procedures.⁸⁸ The Liberal Party’s openness signaled a shift from the old Beefsteak Club as it adapted to the new, contested setting of student government.

In a special bulletin, the Liberal Party responded to charges of corruption leveled by the Democrats. Corruption, they argued, was not limited to one party: “If we must go into the dead

⁸³ “The Liberal Bulletin Vol. 1 No. 2.”

⁸⁴ “The Liberal Bulletin Vol. 1 No. 2.”

⁸⁵ “Liberals Are Victorious In Thurs. Election,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 17, 1928.

⁸⁶ “First Convention Nominates Candidates To Fill Student Body Offices For Next Year,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 17, 1928.

⁸⁷ “The Liberal Bulletin Vol. 1 No. 2.”

⁸⁸ “The Liberal Bulletin Vol. 1 No. 2.”

past, either party may point the accusing finger at the other. The business managers of the last two Seminoles were both expelled for embezzlement of funds. One belonged to each party.”⁸⁹ The bulletin, however, also revealed bitter feelings among the Democrats over defections. The Liberals responded to resentful remarks that their leading candidates were traitors who sought office for graft. The controversial nomination process and accusations levied by the parties led *The Florida Alligator* to comment that 1928 was “the most heated election in the history of University of Florida politics.”⁹⁰ The turnout, which had broken records for two years in a row, broke records for a third time: over 1,600 votes.

The high volume of ballots meant election officials counted from Thursday 5:30 PM when the polls closed to 4 AM on Friday morning. Each party received live updates as the count proceeded. Eventually, the Liberal candidate for president, Clay Lewis, won the presidency by a close margin of 838 to 798. The Democrats won the vice president and secretary-treasurer positions. In total, the Democrats won twenty-two seats, the Liberals won twenty-two seats, and one race resulted in a tie.⁹¹ No clear winner emerged. In such a state of deadlock, the only question was which party would gain the upper hand.

The Block Persists (1928-1929)

One month later, the Independent Party emerged for the freshman class elections and attacked both parties for machine politics. Its newspaper, *The Independent Bulletin*, alleged that traitors in the Democratic Party flipped to the Liberal Party in exchange for selecting the nominee for freshman class president. Further, their platform denounced the “fraternity system”

⁸⁹ “Special Liberal Bulletin” (1928), Party newspapers and bulletins, 1927-1938, Box: 6. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

⁹⁰ “Clay Lewis Is Elected As President Of Student Body For Next Year, Vote Close,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 7, 1928.

⁹¹ “Clay Lewis Is Elected As President Of Student Body For Next Year, Vote Close.”

which “permits the petty politicians engaged therein to swap block votes for the purpose of controlling some political office.”⁹² The Independent Party’s freshman presidential candidate received 40 votes to the Democrat’s 145 and Liberal’s 174.⁹³ Nevertheless, the Independent Party exposed the persistence of block voting in both major parties. The Liberal Party’s victory in the freshmen election, too, foreshadowed its dominance for the next four years, breaking the stalemate from the previous month’s election.

Underlying the defeat of the Democrats and the ascendance of the Liberals (who overwhelmingly dominated student politics until 1932) was the failure to end the block vote, a practice that began with the Beefsteak Club but spread to both parties. The Democrat’s proposal for primaries to a nominating convention failed to reform this system. In fact, the Liberals accused the Democrats of calling the convention without notice to dominate the nominating process. The Liberal platform stated the convention “failed to bring politics out into the open to the degree intended.”⁹⁴ By 1929, both parties supported an amendment that abolished the convention.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, its abolition did not mark a return to secret politics but inaugurated an already-emerging bloc system.

The Liberals, although opposed to the convention, denounced the secret caucus of the past and pledged themselves in support of the new two-party system.⁹⁶ The Democrats, despite urging the limitation of parties to “a means of selecting capable officers,” firmly embedded themselves within this new binary arrangement.⁹⁷ Machine politics did not end with the defeat of

⁹² “The Independent Bulletin Vol. 1 No. 2” (May 3, 1928), Party newspapers and bulletins, 1927-1938, Box: 6. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

⁹³ “Freshmen Elect Class Officers For Next Year,” *The Florida Alligator*, May 12, 1928.

⁹⁴ “The Liberal Bulletin Vol. 1 No. 2.”

⁹⁵ “To Vote Tuesday on Revised Laws,” *The Florida Alligator*, February 23, 1929.

⁹⁶ “The Liberal Bulletin Vol. 1 No. 2.”

⁹⁷ “The Democratic Journal Vol. 2 No. 3.”

the Beefsteak Club but redistributed in form. The block vote, no longer tied to one party, became the practice of all fraternities. With a base of block votes, fraternities aligned themselves in blocs and pledged support to whichever party promised better spoils. William Carleton, a Beefsteaker-Liberal, described the new system: “There were two student parties. The division was not one of fraternities against independents. Instead, one league of fraternities was the nucleus of one party, another league the nucleus of the other party.”⁹⁸

Critics of the emerging post-Beefsteak bloc system denounced its favoritism of fraternities. John Wyse, the earliest critic of this system, attacked both parties for disproportionately selecting fraternity men for office.⁹⁹ A pamphlet from the period made a similar accusation, claiming both the Beefsteakers and Hamburgers “know they already have the fraternity vote pledged – pledged to keep themselves in power!”¹⁰⁰ The Democratic Party, although attempting to end the block vote, failed to reform this system. With the 1929 abolition of the nominating convention, the emerging two-party bloc system developed and matured in the 1930s. The third chapter of this thesis examines the dynamics and challenges to this new system in the decade prior to the Second World War.

Dispelling the Myth of an Uncorrupted Beginning

Political machinery created UF Student Government. The movement for student self-government developed unevenly as students debated their ability to govern themselves. Emerging forms of self-government such as the honor system represented a step forward in the

⁹⁸ William Carleton, *Free Lancing Through the Century* (Gainesville, FL: Carleton House, 1988), 66.

⁹⁹ Wyse, “SANE READJUSTMENTS.”

¹⁰⁰ This pamphlet by the “University of Florida Party” deserves some comment. No other primary source references such a party and a written comment on the pamphlet states “Election, 1928?” Despite its unclear origins, the pamphlet’s references to the Beefsteakers and Hamburgers implies a publication between 1926-1928. “MEET THE ISSUE SQUARELY!” (University of Florida Party, n.d.), Posters, 1937-1939, Box: 1. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

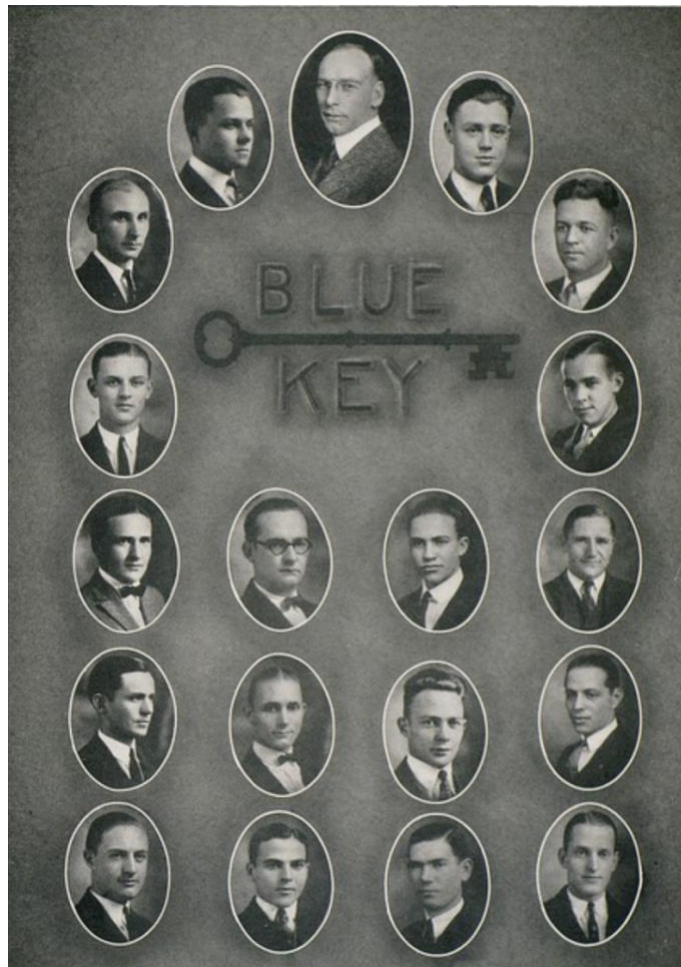
movement. The Beefsteak Club, however, marked the first concerted effort to create, expand, and monopolize student government. Initially centered around WWI veterans and later organized around a nucleus of fraternities, Beefsteakers created the 1920 constitution that levied an activity fee. This budget system gave student government financial power for the first time. Later, Beefsteakers created the 1925 constitution, consolidating student government's financial and penal power as well as its control over subsidiary organizations. In the half-decade of its monopoly on power, Beefsteakers engaged in election fraud, physical coercion, and several members embezzled student funds.

Even as other fraternities challenged the Beefsteak monopoly on power, machine politics persisted. The Beefsteak practice of block voting spread to other fraternities and its rival, the Hamburger-Democratic Club, failed to reform this system after winning the 1927 elections. The Beefsteakers, reorganized into the Liberal Party, defeated the ascendent Democrats in 1929 and dominated student politics for the next three years. Although the era of one-party rule ended, a newly emerging two-party fraternity bloc system developed in its wake.

John Watkin's narrative of a clean beginning to UF student politics is a myth. Rather than reflecting the historical record, his thesis is better understood as the product of a mid-1970s reform movement in UF Student Government. This mid-1970s movement, attacking corruption in student politics, legitimized itself by urging a return to a supposedly uncorrupted past. This mythology persisted to another institution, by then thoroughly exposed for its control over UF Student Government: Florida Blue Key. Watkin's thesis argued FBK similarly corrupted over time. This, too, is a myth.

Chapter 2

The Making of Florida Blue Key (1923-1934)



Formerly, it was necessary to be a leader before being tapped BLUE KEY. Now the formula is: “honeyfuggle” some [susceptible] Blue Key member [enough] to get tapped and the BLUE KEY, thru the LIBERAL PARTY will make you a leader.¹⁰¹

Following the First World War, Florida underwent a dramatic transformation. The land boom in the state brought the growth of real estate, railroads, migration, tourism, and roads.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ For the quote see “The Primary Progressive Party Bulletin No. 2” (1932), Party newspapers and bulletins, 1927-1938, Box: 6. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida. For the image see “The Seminole” (Senior Class of the University of Florida, 1924), 210.

¹⁰² Rogers William, “Fortune and Misfortune: The Paradoxical Twenties,” in *The New History of Florida* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1996), 290–293.

The University of Florida, too, grew alongside the state. At its first Homecoming in October 1916, UF enrolled 460 students while sandy roads paved the way to the university.¹⁰³ By 1924, several thousand miles of completed highway foreshadowed an unprecedented attendance for the university's annual Homecoming and Dad's Day.¹⁰⁴

The official accounts¹⁰⁵ of Blue Key's founding trace its origins to University of Florida President Dr. Albert Murphree asking Major B. C. Riley, Head of the Extension Division, to help organize the 1924 Homecoming and Dad's Day.¹⁰⁶ Major Riley brought together twenty-five student leaders at the Language Hall and divided the work among them to ensure a well-organized Homecoming. The resulting event was so successful the students requested Riley to continue meeting with them and find ways to improve campus life. As student leaders, they decided to meet at luncheon, leading to the group's nickname as the college man's Rotary Club. At this time, there was "no idea of forming a national fraternity"; nevertheless, this group eventually founded the Blue Key Honorary Society.¹⁰⁷

Rooted in the growth of the state and service to the university, the official account emphasizes Florida Blue Key's importance to both institutions. In the century since its inception, FBK has accumulated a roster of powerful alumni that transformed Florida and the university that bears its name. At the height of its influence, "the doors to the governor's mansion,

¹⁰³ "Brief History of Florida Blue Key to 1941" (n.d.), Blue Key-History File, Box: 2. Bert Clair and Ruth Lemon Riley Papers, Ms Coll. 011., Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁰⁴ John McCann, "Short History of Blue Key" (October 1939), Blue Key-History File, Box: 2. Bert Clair and Ruth Lemon Riley Papers, Ms Coll. 011., Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁰⁵ Variations of this account still exist on the official Florida Blue Key and Blue Key Honor Society websites. FBK dates its founding to the 1923 Homecoming while the Blue Key Honor Society dates its founding to the 1924 Homecoming. The difference between the two organizations will be explained later in this chapter. See "Our History," *Florida Blue Key* (blog), accessed December 3, 2024, <https://www.fbk.org/history>; "What Is Blue Key Honor Society?," *Blue Key Honor Society* (blog), accessed December 3, 2024, <https://www.bluekey.org/about>.

¹⁰⁶ "History," *Blue Key: The Official Journal of the Blue Key National Honor Fraternity* II, no. 3 (May 1936): 6–7.

¹⁰⁷ "History," 6–7.

[l]egislature and judiciary in Florida all seemed to unlock with a Blue Key.”¹⁰⁸ Among the century-spanning list of politicians that have held membership in FBK, a running thread persists on UF Student Government’s importance as a political training ground. Former Florida Governor and U.S. Senator Bob Graham attested: “I never encountered, in state and federal politics, activities as aggressive as at the University of Florida.”¹⁰⁹ FBK trained generations of Florida politicians and established itself, for a time, as a central institution to the state.¹¹⁰

Contentious student politics was not only the training ground for FBK alumni but was the birthplace of the organization itself. The official founding story of FBK is a myth, created years after its formation. Rather than service, the organization grew from Beefsteak machine politics. Its birth, too, was a protracted and contested process as it challenged another leadership honorary society, Omicron Delta Kappa, for campus dominance and eventually separated from its own national organization. More than a decade after its emergence from Beefsteak politics did the organization reinvent itself as a society unique to the University of Florida: Florida Blue Key. This reinvention required a convenient founding myth, one that emphasized its connection to the state and university.

The Real Founding Story of Blue Key (1923-1926)

The minutes of the first Blue Key meeting on October 1, 1923, did not mention Homecoming. Instead, they described Major Riley receiving the idea for the organization from a letter about a similar society at the University of Pennsylvania, Dartmouth, and Cornell.¹¹¹ *The*

¹⁰⁸ Vogel, “Leadership: The New Blue Key.”

¹⁰⁹ Joey Flechas, “Blue Key Membership Controlled by Powerful Few,” *The Independent Florida Alligator*, April 23, 2012, <https://www.alligator.org/article/2012/04/blue-key-membership-controlled-by-powerful-few>.

¹¹⁰ Florida Blue Key’s importance has been waning for the last few decades as other Florida universities have been established and the state’s population has grown dramatically. Bradshaw, “Power, Patronage and Paternalism in the Gator Nation: Student Government at the University of Florida,” 84–87.

¹¹¹ “Minutes Volume for Florida Blue Key (Includes Directory, Roll and Meeting Minutes for 1923)” (Florida Blue Key, 1923), Minutes, 1923, Box: 2, Folder: 1. Records of Florida Blue Key, Ms Coll. 083. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

Florida Alligator also described the formation of Blue Key in the fall of 1923. Blue Key members attended the 1923 Homecoming, but they did not help organize it.¹¹² Only one year after its formation, in the fall of 1924, did Blue Key help organize Homecoming. Yet, *The Florida Alligator* did not describe Dr. Murphree asking for help but instead stated “Blue Key will also assist in putting on ‘Dad’s Day,’ as soon as Dr. Murphree’s approval is secured.”¹¹³

In an oral history interview with Elmer Hinckley, a charter member and first vice president of Blue Key, he dispelled the myth that the organization emerged from Homecoming. His interviewer, puzzled at his recounting of a different story, commented “I had always heard that [FBK] was a group that had been organized—student organized—to help with the Homecoming that year and that Blue Key grew out of that.” Hinckley responded: “No. No. We just wanted a leadership fraternity. Later we took over Homecoming, I think.”¹¹⁴ In Hinckley’s recounting of the organization’s founding, he first suggested the idea of a leadership honorary society to two other charter members, K. K. Hansen and Dave Rambo. The three agreed that such an organization should exist and produced a list of campus leaders from various offices.¹¹⁵ They called the leaders for a meeting at the Language Hall, and Major Riley “heard about it and came to the organizational meeting and wanted to join...so, we let him join.”¹¹⁶

Although discrepancies exist among primary sources on Blue Key’s founding, they all attest that it did not form from an ad hoc group of campus leaders organizing Homecoming. Instead, they show an organization consciously formed by campus leaders in the fall of 1923. Significantly, in 1923, the Beefsteak Club monopolized campus offices. As a result, Beefsteakers

¹¹² “Blue Key Honorary Society Has Been Organized,” *The Florida Alligator*, November 10, 1923.

¹¹³ “Blue Key Actively Cooperating in Univ. Projects,” *The Florida Alligator*, November 2, 1924.

¹¹⁴ Hinckley, Interview with Elmer D. Hinckley, July 25, 1972, 14.

¹¹⁵ Elmer Hinckley, Interview with Elmer D. Hinckley, July 25, 1972, July 25, 1972, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program, 12.

¹¹⁶ Hinckley, 13-14.

composed the Blue Key's charter members. Hinckley himself founded the Beefsteak Club, tying the new leadership honorary society to the already-existing campus fraternity political machine.¹¹⁷ Major Riley, whose importance is disputed in primary sources, nevertheless played a central role in growing the organization into a national fraternity.¹¹⁸ The development of Blue Key's national organization will be explored later in the chapter.

Examining its influence on UF's campus, developments in Blue Key reflected a shifting landscape in student politics. Prior to 1926, membership in Blue Key existed on an *ex officio* basis; students in major campus offices and positions automatically received membership. Beefsteakers, who monopolized student offices, therefore constituted most of its membership. By 1926, however, membership changed to a selective basis.¹¹⁹ As student politics developed out of the era of one-party Beefsteak rule, student politics exerted influence on selection into Blue Key.

The Liberal Party's Domination (1927-1931)

After the 1927 defeat of the Beefsteak Club to the Democratic Party, a new multi-party fraternity bloc system within student politics emerged. Parties did not represent a division between fraternity and non-fraternity students but instead, "one league of fraternities was the nucleus of one party, another league the nucleus of the other party."¹²⁰ Fraternities aligned themselves in blocs, pledging their block votes to whichever party promised better benefits. Because each party carried a roughly equal number of fraternity block votes, the votes of non-fraternity men decided elections.¹²¹ Despite the seeming parity between campus parties, from 1929 to 1932, one party, descended from the Beefsteak Club, dominated every election season:

¹¹⁷ Hinckley, 17.

¹¹⁸ According to Hinckley, Major Riley heard about the meeting of student leaders and asked to attend. According to the minutes of the first Blue Key meeting, Riley conceived the idea for the society.

¹¹⁹ "Brief History of Florida Blue Key to 1941," 1.

¹²⁰ Carleton, *Free Lancing Through the Century*, 66.

¹²¹ Carleton, 66.

the Liberal Party. In its first election, spring of 1928, the Liberal Party won the same number of offices as its opponent, the Democratic Party.¹²² By the following year, however, the Liberals continued a long streak of defeating its opponent by large margins. In spring 1929, they won all but five positions and in spring 1930 they won all but six positions.¹²³

Responding to the Liberal Party's domination, its opposition employed several strategies. After losing the spring 1929 elections, the Democrats dissolved and nine fraternities formerly affiliated with the Democrats formed a new party in spring 1930: the Independent Party.¹²⁴ After losing again, the Independent Party briefly changed its name to the Progressive Party in fall 1930 but lost every seat to the Liberals.¹²⁵ By spring 1931, opposition to the Liberal Party coalesced around a new, underhanded strategy. For the entire election season, the Liberals faced no organized opposition. However, thirty minutes before polls closed on election night, approximately 350 students entered, scratched out the names of the Liberal candidates, and casted write-in votes.¹²⁶ The Liberals accused seven fraternities affiliated with the Independent Party for the scheme and for bringing "politics back to the day of secret domination."¹²⁷ The Honor Court threw out the results and, once again, the Liberal Party decisively won 40 of 49 open positions in the new elections.¹²⁸

Despite forming a new party, changing names, and embracing underhanded tactics, the Liberal Party's opposition failed to defeat its grip on student politics. In the spring of 1932,

¹²² "Clay Lewis Is Elected As President Of Student Body For Next Year, Vote Close."

¹²³ "Liberals Place 41 Men In Office: Votes Polled Largest Yet," *The Florida Alligator*, April 6, 1929; "Liberals Take Campus Election," *The Florida Alligator*, April 5, 1930.

¹²⁴ "The Independent Vol. 1 No. 1" (April 1930), 1, Party newspapers and bulletins, 1927-1938, Box: 6. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹²⁵ "Liberals Place All Nominees in Campus Voting," *The Florida Alligator*, October 19, 1930.

¹²⁶ "Dark Horse Party Comes to Life," *The Florida Alligator*, April 4, 1931.

¹²⁷ "Liberal Roots Break Forth in Forum," *The Florida Alligator*, April 11, 1931.

¹²⁸ "Student Body Elects Chiefs for Next Year," *The Florida Alligator*, May 9, 1931.

Liberal Party, groomed student leaders and threatened political oblivion against those about to be tapped by a rival honorary society. They also drew attention to the influence of party bosses, noting secret meetings of the student body president behind the College Inn and at Room 133 of the New Dorms.¹³¹ Throughout their bulletins, they denigrated the Liberal Party as the Blue Key Party, claiming that Blue Key is the “executive council of the Liberal Party” and played “an active, nay dominating, role” in student politics.¹³²

They also alleged that the Liberal Party engaged in financial corruption, failing to increase the printing of *The Florida Alligator* despite larger funds and cheaper costs. The money, they claimed, instead went to increasing the salary of the circulation manager. In another allegation, they state that the executive council of the Liberal Party divided \$247.58 in extra funds from the student directory among the editor and business manager. Even further, they wrote that their campaign threatened the Blue Key machine to the extent that fraternities in the Liberal Party levied a \$5 fine on fraternity men who did not vote.¹³³

Their exposés drew attention to a brewing on-campus rivalry among leadership honorary societies: Florida Blue Key and Omicron Delta Kappa. In their second bulletin, they stated that Blue Key threatened potential taps into ODK, coercing them into Blue Key. In response, ODK and Blue Key released a joint statement denying any connection to campus politics or that any animosity existed between them.¹³⁴

Despite their efforts, the Primary Progressive Party faced a brutal defeat, losing the presidential office to the Liberals by a vote of 976-531.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, they drew attention to

¹³¹ “The Primary Progressive Party Bulletin No. 2.”

¹³² “The Primary Progressive Party Bulletin No. 6.”

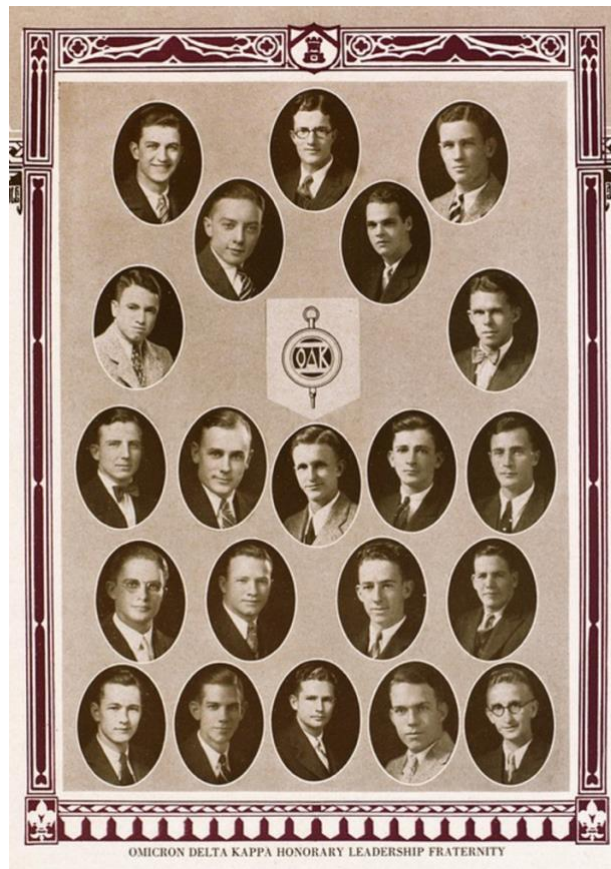
¹³³ “The Primary Progressive Party Bulletin No. 6.”

¹³⁴ “Proclamation,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 3, 1932.

¹³⁵ “Election Results,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 17, 1932.

the role that Blue Key played in campus politics and heightened divisions within the Liberal Party. These divisions, driven by the rivalry between Blue Key and Omicron Delta Kappa, led to the dissolution of the Liberal Party and the amalgamation of both societies.

The Rivalry and the Amalgamation (1929-1932)



1930 Florida Chapter of Omicron Delta Kappa.¹³⁶

The rivalry that the Primary Progressives exposed and both organizations denied began in the spring of 1929 when Omicron Delta Kappa established a circle at the University of Florida. ODK, another leadership honorary fraternity, was founded at Washington and Lee University in 1915. By 1930, it established around 50 chapters nationwide.¹³⁷ In the Blue Key Constitution,

¹³⁶ "The Seminole" (Senior Class of the University of Florida, 1930), 291.

¹³⁷ "Fourteen Tapped by Omicron Delta Kappa Fraternity," *The Florida Alligator*, January 11, 1930.

however, a prohibition exists for membership in any similar organization. As a result, ODK and Blue Key developed an animosity that turned into “a very serious problem.”¹³⁸

Blue Key’s exclusivity requirement led to a degeneration of pledging, with both organizations competing to rush qualified men. In this competition, both organizations pledged based on potential abilities rather than actual accomplishments, sacrificing quality of membership. Blue Key and ODK also refused to work with one another, focusing on their own projects to the detriment of the student body.¹³⁹

This rivalry played out in the field of student politics. In their second bulletin, the Primary Progressive Party described a feud in the Liberal Party “between Charley Bennett and the Montgomery-Kirton-Lavin Cliques.”¹⁴⁰ Bennett, tapped into ODK as editor-in-chief of *The Florida Alligator*, faced backlash for his entrance into Blue Key’s rival organization.¹⁴¹ The Primary Progressives alleged that Blue Key men impeached Bennett from his editorship to make room for another Blue Key. Bennett, editor of the newspaper at the time, denounced the “present deplorable situation of petty feud which is lowering both groups [Blue Key and ODK] in the eyes of the campus and is destroying at every turn any good that either group might render to Florida.”¹⁴²

Eventually, in the fall of 1932, both societies appointed members of a joint committee on amalgamation.¹⁴³ After meeting on October 17th, they decided to merge. Each organization made

¹³⁸ John Prunty, “Letter to Dr. William M. Brown Executive Secretary of Omicron Delta Kappa,” October 5, 1932, Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida Office of the President (John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹³⁹ Prunty.

¹⁴⁰ “The Primary Progressive Party Bulletin No. 2.”

¹⁴¹ Bennett Charles, Interview with Charles E. Bennett, May 15, 1995, May 15, 1995, 35, Samuel Proctor Oral History Program.

¹⁴² “Reallocation of Blue Key and ODK,” *The Florida Alligator*, October 4, 1931.

¹⁴³ Walter Matherly, “Letter to Dr. William M. Brown Executive Secretary of Omicron Delta Kappa,” November 4, 1932, Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the

concessions; ODK surrendered its charter and active circle while Blue Key created a new constitution and laws. In a letter to alumni, ODK President John Prunty insisted that the amalgamation would be “an entirely new fraternity...a new Blue Key Fraternity.”¹⁴⁴ With amalgamation, student leadership centralized into one body, leaving no room for question of the highest campus honor.¹⁴⁵

Despite merging into a supposedly new organization, Blue Key retained its name for one significant reason: it was the mother chapter of the National Blue Key Fraternity.¹⁴⁶ Prunty wrote that “to do away entirely with that name here would mean the destruction of the entire national organization of Blue Key.” Yet, in only two years, the Florida chapter of the Blue Key Society split from Blue Key National. The nationalization controversy and subsequent divorce from the national fraternity produced a leadership honorary fraternity truly unique to the University of Florida: Florida Blue Key.

The Nationalization Controversy (1925-1934)

After Blue Key’s formation at the University of Florida, it quickly grew into a national leadership honorary. Student body conferences represented one means by which the fraternity spread to other universities. Angus Laird, an early member of Blue Key, wore his key at conferences in Sewanee, Atlanta, and Milwaukee. There, he answered the questions of curious students and provided them with the contact information of Major Riley, helping establish three Blue Key chapters.¹⁴⁷

University of Florida Office of the President (John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁴⁴ John Prunty, “Letter to Brother,” November 12, 1932, Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida Office of the President (John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁴⁵ “Brief History of Florida Blue Key to 1941,” 2.

¹⁴⁶ “ODK-Blue Key-Leadership,” *The Florida Alligator*, October 23, 1931.

¹⁴⁷ Laird, Interview with Angus M. Laird, February 1, 1980, 39–40.

At the beginning of the 1926-1927 scholastic year, twenty chapters existed throughout the country. By early 1929, the chapter roll grew to forty-five. Major Riley, who had drawn the key and pledge of the organization, became its national president by common consent.¹⁴⁸ Despite its rapid growth, Blue Key had “no real organization, no national constitution, no elective national officers, no national dues” and was instead “a confederation of chapters.”¹⁴⁹ As the society spread throughout the country, the Florida chapter took a special interest in nationalization.

At the National Association of Student Body Presidents, the Florida chapter received information on the declining quality of other Blue Key chapters throughout the country.¹⁵⁰ By October 1933, the Florida chapter appointed a committee on nationalization to urge Major Riley to convene a national convention and create a stronger Blue Key National. Riley, however, refused. He also argued the Florida chapter had no more say on nationalization than any other Blue Key chapter. Rather than a convention, Riley believed that Blue Key should elect a national council.¹⁵¹ In addition to a ballot for the national council, Riley mailed a questionnaire to each Blue Key chapter asking whether they favored paying to send delegates to a convention.

The Florida chapter boycotted the vote on the national council, arguing it was stacked with Riley’s associates who did not represent Blue Key chapters throughout the country.¹⁵² They also objected to the questionnaire, arguing it should have included information that the Florida

¹⁴⁸ McCann, “Short History of Blue Key,” 4–5.

¹⁴⁹ McCann, 5.

¹⁵⁰ “A Resume of the Activities of the Florida Chapter of Blue Key towards Nationalization, the National Council of Blue Key and the National Constitution of Blue Key, with a Brief of the Florida Chapter’s Objections to the National Council and to the National Constitution, as Well as a Summary of the Conference with Dr. Jordan, National President of Blue Key” (n.d.), 15, Blue Key; historical background, activities toward nationalization, constitution, brief of objections to National constitution, summer of conference with Jordan, National president of Blue Key, 1934, Box: 4. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida College of Business Administration Office of the Dean, Series 048. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁵¹ “A Resume,” 33–34.

¹⁵² “A Resume,” 8.

chapter would cover full convention expenses should it be held in Gainesville. Nevertheless, Riley sent out the ballot and original questionnaire, eventually concluding that “the financial condition of the country as reflected in their student bodies made [a convention] impossible.”¹⁵³ After failing to convince Riley on the need for a convention, the Florida chapter discharged its committee on nationalization in November of 1933. A second nationalization committee also formed and failed.¹⁵⁴

With a successful vote from the other chapters, the elected National Administrative Council of Blue Key met on February 17th and 18th, 1934 at St. Louis, Missouri, created a constitution, and sent it to each chapter for ratification.¹⁵⁵ The Florida chapter, again, protested that the constitution centralized too much power in the National Council. They also protested the lack of input from chapters and the Council’s mandate that they ratify the Constitution or face removal from Blue Key.¹⁵⁶

By March 1934, the Florida chapter formally requested UF Administration to “investigate the National Organization of Blue Key, feeling that years of mismanagement of said National Organization has brought detrimental criticism to the good name of the University of Florida.”¹⁵⁷ UF President Tigert subsequently sent letters to other universities asking about their Blue Key chapters. From these communications, he found “considerable dissatisfaction” with some chapters prepared to or actively surrendering their charters.¹⁵⁸ Behind the scenes, in April 1934,

¹⁵³ “A Resume,” 50.

¹⁵⁴ “A Resume,” 13.

¹⁵⁵ McCann, “Short History of Blue Key,” 6.

¹⁵⁶ “A Resume,” 19–22.

¹⁵⁷ Bill Sherrill, “Blue Key Resolution to Tigert and the Administration,” March 21, 1934, Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida Office of the President (John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁵⁸ John Tigert, “Letter to R. L. Hill, University of Missouri,” April 23, 1934, Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida Office of the President

the Florida chapter wrote a letter to the Blue Key chapter at Western Reserve University about circumventing Blue Key National and instead nationalizing with “a nucleus composed of the chapters in your area and the Florida Chapter.”¹⁵⁹ These plans to nationalize separately would come to an end after a visit from Blue Key National President, Dr. John Jordan, to the University of Florida on May 1934.

Following UF’s investigation, Riley invited Jordan to visit Gainesville. After meeting with the Florida chapter and discussing widespread dissatisfaction among Blue Key chapters, they agreed to hold a convention in Chicago later that year. The Florida chapter emphasized their agreement held that the convention would have “full plenary powers” to create a new constitution and establish its own rules.¹⁶⁰ If the convention failed to create a set-up satisfactory to the Florida chapter, “the Florida Chapter is compelled, it feels, in order to maintain its prestige and the good name of the University of Florida, to sever all relations with Blue Key National; and to become a separate, local fraternity, with the name of Florida Blue Key or another name, as the chapter and alumni shall decide.”¹⁶¹

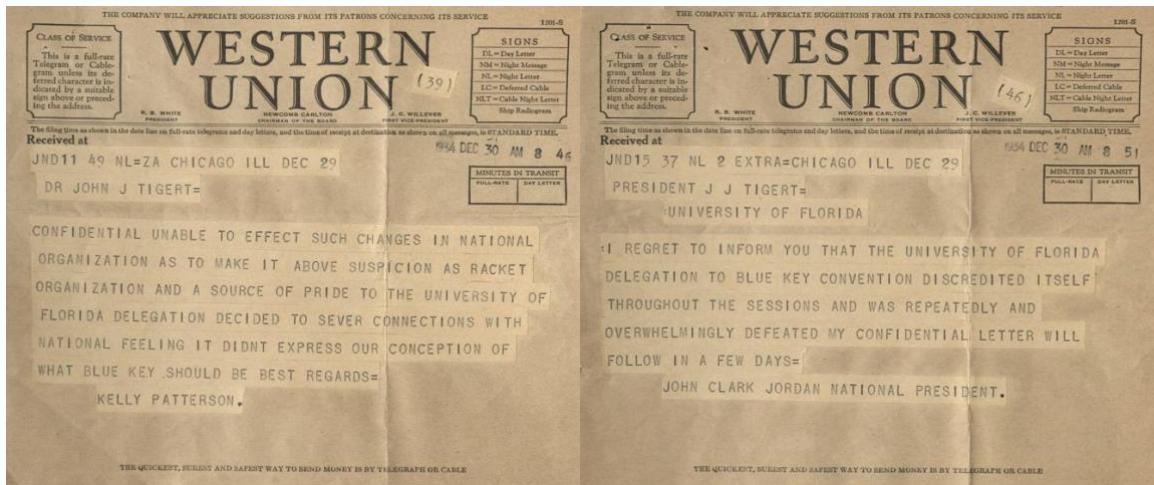
(John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁵⁹ “A Resume,” 37–39.

¹⁶⁰ “A Resume,” 23–25.

¹⁶¹ Bill Sherill, “Letter to John J. Tigert, University of Florida,” April 20, 1934, Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida Office of the President (John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

The Convention (1934)



Two telegrams President Tigert received concerning the 1934 Blue Key National Convention.¹⁶²

On December 28th and 29th of 1934 the Blue Key National Honor Fraternity held its first national convention at Stevens Hotel in Chicago.¹⁶³ Seventy-four chapters of the fraternity existed nationwide, and each chapter paid for their own expense despite the economic depression.¹⁶⁴ The first day of the convention began with the Florida delegation objecting to the proceedings. Citing their agreement with John Jordan, the Florida chapter insisted the convention should have plenary powers to create an entirely new constitution. Jordan, however, disagreed and believed the convention only had the power to amend the existing constitution. In their back-and-forth argument, other chapters expressed confusion on the discussion. Eventually, the convention voted to proceed under the current constitution, with delegates from other

¹⁶² Kelly Patterson, "Telegram to Dr. John J. Tigert" (Western Union, December 30, 1934), Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida Office of the President (John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida; John Jordan, "Telegram to Dr. John J. Tigert" (Western Union, December 30, 1934), Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida Office of the President (John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁶³ John Jordan, "A Call to Convention," *Blue Key: The Official Journal of the Blue Key National Honor Fraternity* I, no. 2 (October 1934): 3.

¹⁶⁴ Bert Riley, "The Convention and the Future of Blue Key," *Blue Key: The Official Journal of the Blue Key National Honor Fraternity* I, no. 2 (October 1934): 8.

universities consistently overruling the Florida chapter.¹⁶⁵ The Florida chapter, incensed that their earlier agreement had been ignored, protested the National Council's control over the convention's committees and proceedings. They believed "a minimum of constructive work" had been accomplished. By the second and final day of the convention, the Florida chapter declared its intention to disaffiliate from Blue Key National.¹⁶⁶

Other convention attendees denigrated the Florida chapter's behavior. One delegate from Nebraska described conditions of drought in his home state, the expense of attending the convention, and complained that the Florida chapter's behavior unnecessarily dragged out the proceedings.¹⁶⁷ An attendee from Kent State College wrote that the Florida delegates "exhibited the most asinine conduct possible" and "played the part of the little boy who would take his ball and go home if his playmates refused to play as he wished."¹⁶⁸

The Florida chapter, writing to President Tigert, justified their disaffiliation for several reasons: the centralized power within the National Administrative Council during the convention, excessive national fees, and that the other chapters "had not grasped the high principles and ideals nor maintained the standard of service" as conceived by the Florida chapter.¹⁶⁹ Thus, the Florida chapter of Blue Key transformed into a society unique to the University of Florida—

¹⁶⁵ "Blue Key National Fraternity Proceedings" (Blue Key National Honor Fraternity, December 28, 1934), Blue Key National Fraternity Proceedings, Dec. 28-29, 1934, Box: 1, Folder: 4. Records of Florida Blue Key, Ms Coll. 083. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁶⁶ T. Kelly, "Initial Report of Convention Delegates," n.d., Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida Office of the President (John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁶⁷ "Blue Key National Fraternity Proceedings," 139-41.

¹⁶⁸ Harold Gear, "Letter to University of Florida Blue Key Fraternity Faculty Advisor," January 4, 1935, Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida Office of the President (John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁶⁹ Kelly, "Initial Report of Convention Delegates," n.d.

Florida Blue Key—and “its aim was not mere ‘service’ but ‘service to the University of Florida.’”¹⁷⁰

The (Re)Birth of Florida Blue Key

The University of Florida’s investigation into Major Riley and Blue Key National’s finances eventually uncovered evidence of suspicious financial dealings. Riley informed Blue Key chapters that some of their dues and initiation fees would be invested in a bulb farm and Florida real estate. This bulb farm, however, eventually went bankrupt and he failed to inform the chapters.¹⁷¹ Blue Key National, writing later on the separation, described the Florida chapter’s withdrawal as an “unhappy event” to a convention that was otherwise a “tremendous success.”¹⁷² Some in National Blue Key believed that the Florida chapter would, in time, return to the national organization, but such a return never occurred.¹⁷³ Aware that the Florida chapter had disaffiliated from its national organization, the executive secretary of Omicron Delta Kappa asked the new organization to affiliate with ODK.¹⁷⁴ Florida Blue Key, however, unanimously rejected the offer and passed a resolution to forever remain local.¹⁷⁵ In 1936, the organization incorporated as a nonprofit, solidifying its independence.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁰ “Brief History of Florida Blue Key to 1941,” 2.

¹⁷¹ Laird, Interview with Angus M. Laird, February 1, 1980, 40–41; Laird, *Like I Saw It: The University Years*, 59–61.

¹⁷² Granville Larimore, “A Run-Around The Convention,” *Blue Key: The Official Journal of the Blue Key National Honor Fraternity* I, no. 3 (February 1935): 5–6.

¹⁷³ Gear, “Letter to University of Florida Blue Key Fraternity Faculty Advisor,” January 4, 1935.

¹⁷⁴ John Tigert, “Letter to Dr. William M. Brown Executive Secretary of Omicron Delta Kappa,” April 6, 1936, Fraternities - Blue Key - Florida, 1932-1942, Box: 38-41. Administrative Policy Records of the University of Florida Office of the President (John James Tigert), Series P7. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁷⁵ “After the Definite Refusal...” (n.d.), Nationalization issue, 1934, Box: 3, Folder: 3. Records of Florida Blue Key, Ms Coll. 083. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁷⁶ “Charter of Florida Blue Key” (Florida Blue Key, April 1936), Articles of incorporation, 1936, Box: 1, Folder: 2. Records of Florida Blue Key, Ms Coll. 083, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

Eleven years after its 1923 conception, Blue Key grew out of University of Florida fraternity machine politics into a national honorary fraternity, amalgamated a rival society, dominated campus politics, and disaffiliated from the national organization it birthed. To solidify its born-again identity, Florida Blue Key redefined its history. Examinations for new initiates emphasized that Florida Blue Key had never been affiliated with a national organization.¹⁷⁷ Its new constitution also dated Florida Blue Key's founding to 1924, reinventing its founding to the 1924 Homecoming. The Blue Key National fraternity, too, adopted this story but emphasized Major Riley's centrality in Blue Key's formation.¹⁷⁸ These invented origin stories, however, reflected both organizations' later need to legitimize themselves as a leadership fraternity (and, in Blue Key National's case, the need to legitimize Riley's leadership) rather than the historical record.

Amalgamating with ODK and no longer tied to a national organization, Florida Blue Key established itself as the highest honor in the "field of recognizing outstanding ability and merit in University of Florida men."¹⁷⁹ Its growing roster of young alumni, trained in contentious campus politics, looked forward to influential careers. By the early 1940s, descriptions of Florida Blue Key recognized it would "be one of the most powerful organizations in the state in a few years."¹⁸⁰ Its role in campus politics, however, remained clandestine as the era of Beefsteak domination ended and a two-party fraternity bloc system emerged. This developing bloc system provided fertile training ground for campus politicians, who navigated the complex alignments, patronage networks, and political dynamics of the era.

¹⁷⁷ "Florida Blue Key Examination Guide" (n.d.), Nationalization issue, 1934, Box: 3, Folder: 3. Records of Florida Blue Key, Ms Coll. 083. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

¹⁷⁸ "Our History."

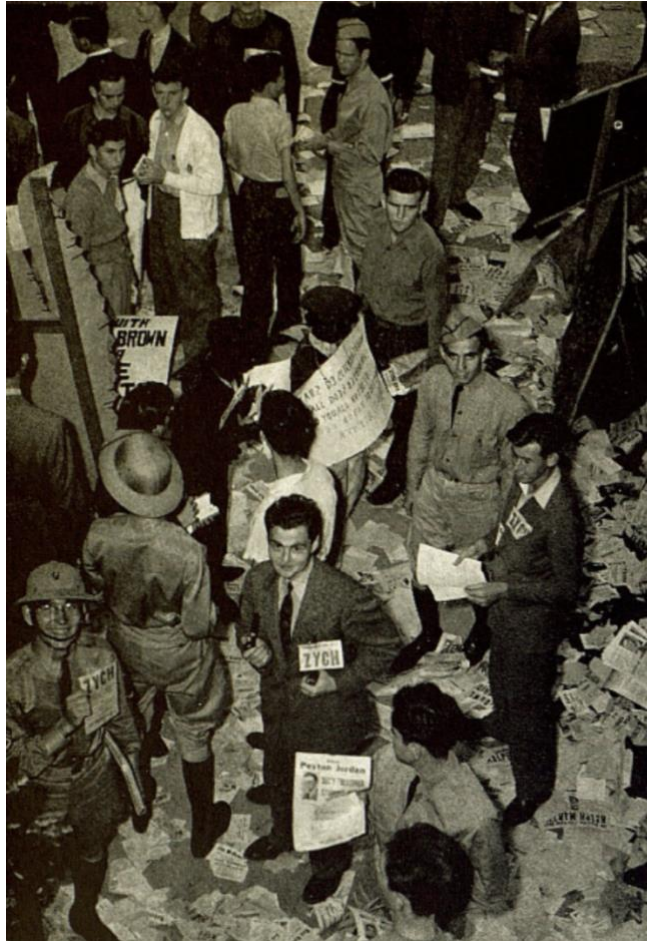
¹⁷⁹ "Brief History of Florida Blue Key to 1941."

¹⁸⁰ "Brief History of Florida Blue Key to 1941."

Chapter 3

Maneuvering Among the Machines:

The Development of the Fraternity Bloc System (1932-1943)



“True, in many ways the campus system does duplicate political systems in our state and our nation. Unhappily, this is only another way of saying that our student government is built on a policy of pay-offs, intimidated or ignorant voting, domination by closed-door cliques and, in past years, actual graft and unprincipled behavior.”¹⁸¹

The development of University of Florida political machinery in the decade preceding World War II established norms, traditions, and political dynamics that defined campus politics for decades. Paul Maynard Hendrick’s 1965 master’s thesis, *The Rules of the Game: Norms of*

¹⁸¹ For the quote see Bill McGuire, “Etc.,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 1, 1939. For the image see Ralph Blank, ed., *The Seminole* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1941), 140.

Political Behavior in a Campus Elite, is the earliest academic work on UF campus politics.

Written in coded language—replacing “Florida Blue Key” with “Campus Elite” and “University of Florida” with “large Southern university”—Hendrick conducts interviews with sixty-one members of Florida Blue Key and concludes that there exists a “high level of consensus” on the norms of campus politics.¹⁸² Although he writes in the 1960s, the norms his thesis described originated from the 1930s as the bloc system firmly established itself after the end of one-party Beefsteak rule.

The bloc system of the 1930s allowed for limited political flexibility as fraternities jostled for power, shifting political alliances in realignments semester to semester. Non-fraternity men, or independents, outnumbered and checked the power of fraternity blocs in heated political moments, defeating bloc-heavy parties that neglected their interests. The political fluidity produced by the bloc system leads to a history “so long and checkered it would be difficult to trace [UF politics] from the days of the Beefsteak and Hamburger parties even in a series of heavy volumes.”¹⁸³ Nevertheless, this chapter provides a broad overview of campus politics in the decade prior to WWII, which interrupted university life throughout the country.

Rather than a detailed party-by-party history,¹⁸⁴ this chapter highlights the dynamics of early UF student elections by first describing campaign seasons and the underlying factors that drove the spectacle. Then, the chapter focuses on three chronological case studies that highlight dynamics within the bloc system: the 1932 collapse of the Liberal Party due to a major fraternity bloc realignment, the 1935 defeat of the Progressive-Liberal Party by the Non-Fraternity League

¹⁸² Despite its coded language, the subjects of Hendrick’s thesis can be inferred by a thorough reader. For example, he refers to a “Mascot Growl” event organized by the “Campus Elite” organization, a clear reference to Gator Growl organized by Florida Blue Key. Paul Hendrick, “The Rules of the Game: Norms of Political Behavior in a Campus Elite” (Master’s Thesis, University of Florida, 1965), 94.

¹⁸³ “Florida Politics Waver Fiercely with Disputes and Party Splits in Good Old Democratic Fashion,” *The Florida Alligator*, October 5, 1940.

¹⁸⁴ A party-by-party timeline from 1921 to 1943 is provided in the appendix of this thesis.

in a moment of independent reassertion,¹⁸⁵ and the 1941 Labor Party campaigns that threatened the foundations of the bloc system. The final case study emphasizes that the establishment of norms around campus political machinery was not a historical inevitability but one that was questioned and challenged during its emergence. Student politicians maneuvered among the machines but, in rare moments, disputed the system's foundations.

The Spectacle

The 1925 Constitution of the Student Body of the University of Florida did not undergo a sweeping revision¹⁸⁶ for fifteen years and provided the blueprint for UF Student Government in the 1930s.¹⁸⁷ Elections occurred in the fall and spring.¹⁸⁸ Fall elections selected class officers: president, vice president, and secretary-treasurer for the four undergraduate (freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior) and three law school (freshmen, junior, and senior) classes. They also selected replacements for any vacant positions from student officers who failed to return after spring. Fall elections provided an opportunity “to begin building up candidates for better positions in the big spring balloting,”¹⁸⁹ which provided larger spoils to the parties. In spring, students voted for officers of all three branches of student government, roughly equivalent to the three branches of the United States National Government. The president, vice-president, and secretary-treasurer composed the officers of the executive branch. The misleadingly named

¹⁸⁵ Sources from the period regularly use the language of “realignment” to describe shifting fraternity bloc loyalties. In contrast, “independent reassertion” is not a category used by contemporary sources which instead describe “arousing” the non-fraternity vote. This thesis coins the term “independent reassertion” to better describe the dynamic of a bloc-light party courting the non-fraternity vote to overwhelm a bloc-heavy party.

¹⁸⁶ Minor amendments to the 1925 Constitution continued to be passed by the student body. The most important of these changes include revisions made in 1929 that removed the controversial nominating convention discussed in chapter 1. See “To Vote Tuesday on Revised Laws.”

¹⁸⁷ The following paragraph is based on the Constitution printed in the 1929 F Book. See Bob Evans, ed., “Constitution of the Student Body of the University of Florida,” in *F Book: University of Florida 1929-1930*, 1929, 33–45.

¹⁸⁸ Elections also occurred in the summer for the summer student body. Summer elections remain out of the scope of this paper.

¹⁸⁹ “Square Dealers Hit Bloc,” *The Florida Alligator*, September 24, 1941.

executive council composed the legislative branch and was elected according to college. The honor court composed the judicial branch. Offices for subsidiary organizations such as *The Florida Alligator* and *The Seminole* were also elected in spring.

Election season constituted a major spectacle. Parties held rallies, blared support for candidates from sound trucks, and flooded the campus with campaign materials. Cards and circulars supporting candidates littered campus, posted on doors with unsuspecting students leaving their rooms to be hit with a “southern snow.”¹⁹⁰ Aspiring politicians suddenly became friendly, racing to hand out cigars to voters.¹⁹¹ Nonfraternity men, usually denigrated as “Dormitory Dans” or “boys without neckties” received happy greetings and became “the saviors of democracy.”¹⁹² Candidates embraced creativity on the campaign trail, bringing ducks, alligators, and cows to catch attention.¹⁹³ Others grabbed attention by wearing costumes and relying on parlor tricks to attract votes.¹⁹⁴ The frenzy reached a fever pitch on election night, with a gauntlet of candidates outside the polls making one last pitch or distributing cigars to solicit votes.¹⁹⁵ After polls closed, vote tallying went into the night. The traditional “death watch” involved candidates perched on the gallery of the Old Gym waiting for results from the election officials counting ballots below.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁰ Bill Rega, “Southern Snow--Political Notices Indicate Election Time Is Here,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 15, 1941.

¹⁹¹ “Campus Comment,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 25, 1934.

¹⁹² “Politicians Pitch Woo--But It Isn’t Inspired By Romance,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 1, 1939.

¹⁹³ Blank, *The Seminole*, 142.

¹⁹⁴ Harry Brown, ed., *The Seminole* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1939), 68.

¹⁹⁵ “What Price Glory?,” *The Florida Alligator*, November 4, 1934.

¹⁹⁶ Brown, *The Seminole*, 1939, 70.



Campaign material deluged campus during election season.¹⁹⁷



The gauntlet greeted voters outside polls.¹⁹⁸



The death watch.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Harry Brown, ed., *The Seminole* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1940), 148.

¹⁹⁸ Brown, *The Seminole*, 1939, 69.

¹⁹⁹ Brown, *The Seminole*, 1940, 140.

Although the spectacle waxed and waned with the intensity of a particular campaign, tactics that demonstrated effectiveness spread quickly. For example, after an enterprising candidate distributed cigars at the polls and won a startling victory over his popular opponent in the early 1930s, the practice became so widespread that by 1934 *The Florida Alligator* commented “at present only a few candidates are so bold that they dare solicit votes without first presenting a cigar.”²⁰⁰ Other traditions, such as the deluge of campaign material on campus, continued practices from the era of Beefsteak and Hamburger politics when they “so generously plastered trees, sidewalks, and buildings.”²⁰¹ Beneath the spectacle, however, existed a semi-secret network of fraternity blocs that fueled the intensity of campaigns. Distributing cigars and printing campaign materials, for instance, cost an exorbitant amount of money. One estimate described printers profiting \$2,500 from a spring campaign.²⁰² Another estimate placed the cost of a campaign at \$2,000, a large sum during the Great Depression.²⁰³ The underlying networks of fraternity alliances provided the financial and human resources to energize student government campaigns.

Beneath the Spectacle

The fundamental practice that undergirds UF Student Government is block voting.²⁰⁴ Block voting refers to the practice of fraternities compelling members to vote for a particular party. The method of coercion differed over time. In the era of Beefsteak domination, coercion occurred through physical paddling of pledges that did not vote correctly.²⁰⁵ Another method involved fining \$5 to brothers who did not vote the straight party ticket. In an exchange on *The*

²⁰⁰ “What Price Glory?”

²⁰¹ “Campus Comment,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 11, 1934.

²⁰² “Florida Politics Waver Fiercely with Disputes and Party Splits in Good Old Democratic Fashion.”

²⁰³ “Campus Comment,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 1, 1934.

²⁰⁴ Present tense is used because block voting continues to be practiced in UF Student Government.

²⁰⁵ Laird, *Like I Saw It: The University Years*, 30.

Florida Alligator, a pledge asked whether it was possible for his house to check his vote to fine him, and the author responded: “[C]ertainly they can check. What do you suppose they give you those little cards with your name on it for – to have a record of the membership?”²⁰⁶

Nevertheless, loyalty to the brotherhood was usually sufficient to compel fraternity men to cast their vote for the “correct” party. The fraternity block vote provided a reliable core of votes for political parties, visible in post-election breakdowns of results.²⁰⁷

The support of a fraternity also provided financial resources to a party. After years of complaints about exorbitant campaign spending, the executive council enacted campaign spending restrictions in 1940. These provisions limited parties from taking more than \$15 from member fraternities, implying parties levied larger fees in years prior. Parties also earned money from nominating fees, with the 1940 measures restricting fees based on position. For example, student body president nominees could not pay a fee of more than \$12.50 while other positions’ fees were limited at \$10, \$7.50, \$5, or \$3.²⁰⁸

The political and financial power wielded by fraternities shaped student government dynamics. Fraternities aligned themselves in blocs, supporting parties based on promised positions and benefits. These spoils shifted year-to-year, leading to frequent realignments of bloc support among parties. When relatively equal bloc support among parties existed, the vote of nonfraternity men—who outnumbered fraternity men—decided elections.²⁰⁹ Because of this dynamic, parties balanced the interests of their fraternity blocs and nonfraternity men, requiring equal fraternity and nonfraternity representation within their caucuses and nominating

²⁰⁶ “News in the Nude,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 26, 1938.

²⁰⁷ “Light Voting,” *The Florida Alligator*, October 8, 1938.

²⁰⁸ John Brown, “Executive Council Limits Amount Of Expenses During Campaigns,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 27, 1940.

²⁰⁹ “Political Parties Work To Complete Tickets,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 12, 1933.

committees.²¹⁰ This balancing act, however, inevitably led to moment of disequilibrium, which erupted during election season. If fraternities were not satisfied with their spoils, they would realign to the other party. At other times, if one party concentrated too much bloc support, the other party would energize nonfraternity men to overwhelm their block votes. The fluidity produced by the bloc system leads to a winding succession of parties throughout the 1930s. As a result, the following section focuses on three case studies that showcase examples of key dynamics: bloc realignment, independent reassertion, and foundational challenges.

Bloc Realignment: The Collapse of the Liberal Party (Fall 1932)

As discussed in the last chapter, the Liberal Party, descended from the Beefsteak Club, dominated student government elections from 1929 to 1932. Despite Liberal opposition changing names, using underhanded tactics, and exposing its corrupt ties to Florida Blue Key,²¹¹ only the realignment of its bloc support ended Liberal domination. In the spring of 1932, after its overwhelming victory against the Primary Progressive Party,²¹² rumors spread about “rumblings of dissatisfaction” among the Liberals.²¹³ The following fall, five fraternities—Pi Kappa Alpha, Sigma Nu, Alpha Tau Omega, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, and Phi Kappa Tau—withdrawed from the Liberal Party and formed the nucleus of the Florida Party. Eventually, the Florida Party bloc included twelve of the largest fraternities, leaving the “New” Liberal Party with a few remaining houses and nonfraternity men.²¹⁴

²¹⁰ “Political Parties Evolve On University Campus,” *The Florida Alligator*, November 8, 1930.

²¹¹ See chapter two for a detailed description of the Liberal Party and its opposition from 1929-1932.

²¹² “Election Results.”

²¹³ “Political Revolution,” *The Florida Alligator*, October 2, 1932.

²¹⁴ “Campus Comment,” *The Florida Alligator*, October 2, 1932.

In a bulletin, the New Liberal Party denounced the departure of the big five fraternities, which they characterized as “hav[ing] had the lion’s share of the big offices on this campus.”²¹⁵ They alleged that the fraternities left the Liberal Party because the Liberals offered more benefits to smaller houses and nonfraternity men. The Florida Party responded with its own bulletin that claimed the Liberal Party had become a “patronage-distributing organization” and lost its progressive purpose.²¹⁶ In a fall election with “unprecedented interest and competition,” the Floridians defeated the New Liberals, securing thirteen of eighteen class officers.²¹⁷

Major bloc realignments ended similarly dominant student government parties throughout the 1930s.²¹⁸ Parties that failed to appease their blocs risked defection and defeat. Minor bloc realignments were more common as individual houses regularly changed parties for benefits. When a party grew too bloc-heavy, however, it also risked arousing the anger of nonfraternity men.

Independent Reassertion: The Non-Fraternity League (Spring 1935)

By spring of 1935, the Students Party emerged in the vacuum left behind by the Liberal Party. Despite the Florida Party defeating the New Liberal Party in the fall 1932 elections, the Floridians lost the subsequent three elections to the Students Party: spring 1933, fall 1934, and spring 1934. According to a “reporter glancing over the shoulders of secretive statisticians,” the two parties held relatively equal bloc support.²¹⁹ In the fall of 1934, the Florida Party dissolved.

²¹⁵ “The New Liberal Party Bulletin No. 3” (1932), Party newspapers and bulletins, 1927-1938, Box: 6. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

²¹⁶ “Florida Party Bulletin Vol. 1 No. 1” (1932), Party newspapers and bulletins, 1927-1938, Box: 6. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055. Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

²¹⁷ “Close Counts Result In All Class Races,” *The Florida Alligator*, October 16, 1932.

²¹⁸ Similar bloc realignments ended the Democratic League in the spring of 1938 and Gator Party in the spring of 1942.

²¹⁹ “Campus Again Invaded By Political Plague,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 18, 1934.

The big five fraternities composing the Florida Party convinced two fraternities to realign, and they formed the Progressive-Liberal Party.²²⁰ The Progressive-Liberals won the fall 1934 elections, defeating the Students Party for 17 of 23 offices.²²¹ Nevertheless, the margins remained close, highlighting relative bloc equality. The following spring, however, the equilibrium broke.

In the middle of March 1935, as the Students and Progressive-Liberal parties prepared their nomination slates for the elections, Beta Theta Pi announced its withdrawal from the Students Party.²²² In exchange for their realignment to the Progressive-Liberals, the Beta Theta Pis received the party's nomination for the editor-in-chief of *The Seminole*.²²³ The resulting realignment gave the Progressive-Liberals "the largest bloc vote in the history of the campus."²²⁴ The Students Party, at a disadvantage in bloc support, withdrew from the elections and rallied the non-fraternity men against the Progressive-Liberal Party. The twelve fraternities²²⁵ formerly composing Students Party pledged their five hundred block votes to a new organization: the Non-Fraternity League. Roughly a dozen campus leaders organized the Non-Fraternity League twelve days before the election, nominating candidates in an open primary. Their bet that the independent vote would overwhelm the Progressive-Liberal's block votes bore fruit: the Non-

²²⁰ "Why 500 Fraternity Men Will Support the Non-Fraternity Ticket 100 Percent" (Non-Fraternity League, April 1935), Posters, 1937-1939, Box: 1. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

²²¹ "Students Choose Class Officers For Year," *The Florida Alligator*, November 4, 1934.

²²² "Butler Is Elected President As Non-Fraternity League Scores Upset In Elections," *The Florida Alligator*, April 7, 1935.

²²³ William Fairbanks, "Autocracy Triumphs! What Price Social Prestige?," 1935, Posters, 1937-1939, Box: 1. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

²²⁴ "Why 500 Fraternity Men Will Support the Non-Fraternity Ticket 100 Percent."

²²⁵ The twelve fraternities composing Students Party were Chi Phi, Delta Sigma Phi, Theta Chi, Kappa Sigma, Alpha Gamma Rho, Phi Kappa Tau, Sigma Phi Epsilon, Delta Tau Delta, Theta Kappa Nu and Beta Kappa.

Fraternity League narrowly won the election, winning the student body presidency and 28 of 56 contested offices.²²⁶

The success of the Non-Fraternity League exemplified the danger of a fraternity bloc-heavy party being overwhelmed in a moment of independent reassertion. *The Florida Alligator* declared “the days when a huge fraternity bloc means election are over” and recommended the only logical system was “[a] fraternity realignment with each party holding approximately equal fraternity strength and giving mathematical proportionate representation to the non-fraternity men.”²²⁷ Despite the Non-Fraternity League’s success, other attempts in the period to replicate its strategy failed.²²⁸ Nevertheless, it showcased that a bloc-heavy party was not invincible and nonfraternity men would retaliate if organized by a party with less bloc support. The bloc system, whose logic propelled a dynamic of fraternity realignments and independent reassertions, promoted a limited sense of competition and democracy. Fraternities checked each other’s power, aligned with one of two parties, while independents maintained the power to decide elections. The development of the bloc system, however, was not without its critics and it faced two dramatic challenges in 1941.

Challenges to the Bloc System and Labor Party (1941)

Throughout the 1930s, scattered criticism was levied against the bloc system for limiting political choice and promoting unqualified candidates through its spoils system. Nonfraternity men decided elections but, as one nonfraternity student wrote, “[W]hat can they do with the power? I’ll tell you. They can put into office one or two fraternity blocks!”²²⁹ Maneuvering

²²⁶ “Butler Is Elected President As Non-Fraternity League Scores Upset In Elections.”

²²⁷ “Aftermath,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 7, 1935.

²²⁸ The Non-Fraternity League is the only example prior to WWII of a successful arousal of independents to overwhelm a bloc-heavy party. Other attempts, such as the Better Student Government Movement in the fall of 1936, failed.

²²⁹ Richard Mel, “Forum,” *The Florida Alligator*, October 9, 1932.

among competing fraternity machines, for some students, was not a satisfactory form of democracy. The spoils system, too, limited the election of qualified candidates. When two men from the same fraternity held qualifications for two separate offices, the bloc system prevented both men from receiving their party's nomination to prevent one fraternity from holding too many offices.²³⁰ Parties with heavier bloc support also overwhelmed better qualified candidates from the party with less bloc support. On the other hand, parties with lighter bloc support sometimes nominated unqualified candidates to prevent offices from going uncontested.²³¹ Although the bloc system entrenched itself in UF politics, students questioned and even challenged this system.

Independent candidates without any fraternity bloc backing frequently ran for various offices, but almost never secured election. Examples of non-bloc supported candidates for the highest office, the student body presidency, date back to the days of the Beefsteak-Liberal and Hamburger-Democratic parties with John Wyse's 1927 campaign attempting to arouse the nonfraternity vote against the fraternity blocs of both parties. Wyse was an early critic of the newly emerging bloc system, describing it as "a vicious system of minority control" that disproportionately empowered fraternity men.²³² *The Seminole* mocked his campaign, placing him in the Hall of Fame for losing many of his friends only to receive one hundred votes.²³³ Other independent candidates for student body president fared similarly, with "Honest" John Schaub's 1938 campaign of "poor boys" to "dethrone Pseudo-fraternity men" only receiving 332

²³⁰ "What Do You Want?," *The Florida Alligator*, March 20, 1937.

²³¹ "Council Approves 25 Cent Increase in Fees of The Florida Alligator," *The Florida Alligator*, March 8, 1941.

²³² Wyse, "SANE READJUSTMENTS."

²³³ Frank Boggs, ed., *The Seminole* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1927), 329.

of 2,517 votes.²³⁴ Frank Zych's 1941 Labor Party campaign, however, marked the closest a candidate without bloc support came to the student body presidency.

A 1940 sweeping revision to the student body constitution made the possibility of a student body president without any bloc backing less improbable. The revision, which streamlined the last eleven constitutional articles into four, included single transferable vote for campus-wide elections with more than two candidates.²³⁵ Under single transferable vote, voters ranked their preferred candidates and the candidates with the least number of votes were eliminated in rounds, transferring those votes to their voters' next-ranked candidate. With a week before the spring elections of 1941, Frank Zych threw his hat into the ring and "ran the greatest independent race for president of the student body in the history of the university."²³⁶

Multiple bloc realignments produced two parties almost unrecognizable from the spring of 1935 matchup between the Non-Fraternity League and Progressive-Liberal Party. By spring of 1941, six years later, Gator Party and Square Deal Party constituted the two powerful bloc-backed parties.²³⁷ Zych, running on a zero-dollar budget and the only candidate in his self-run "Labor Party," made speeches at Buckman, mimeographed attacks against the two parties, made jokes about his peg leg, and courted student labor. In his attacks, Zych denounced the bloc system, and attacked the "22 political bosses," presidents of the twenty-two fraternities on

²³⁴ "Arise! Honest Poor Boys Vote For 'Honest' John Schaub For President of the Student Body" (Honest Poor Boys League, 1938), Posters, 1937-1939, Box: 1. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida; "Here's What They Did," *The Florida Alligator*, April 1, 1938.

²³⁵ "Constitutional Revision Approved," *The Florida Alligator*, March 9, 1940. Another addition to the constitution included a cabinet for the executive branch, which provided more positions of patronage within the bloc system.

²³⁶ Jim Hathaway, "Man Who Rocked Campus Politics Becomes Professor," *The Florida Alligator*, August 9, 1941.

²³⁷ For a timeline of UF Student Government parties from 1918 to 1943, see the appendix.

campus. He derided the “small clique of self-interested political pretenders” that controlled student government and described his campaign as a protest vote against the system.²³⁸

Neither party took his campaign seriously nor responded to his attacks. Fraternity men jokingly yelled across campus “Switch to Zych!” Supporters of Zych, however, recognized internal strife among the Square Dealers and the possibility of Zych receiving many second-choice votes in the new preferential voting system. On election night, the first returns placed Zych in the lead. The crowd began to divide not by Gator versus Square Dealer but by party versus independent.²³⁹ Ultimately, Zych failed to place second place, receiving 772 first round votes to Gator’s 810 and Square Deal’s 832.²⁴⁰ After Zych’s elimination, the Square Dealers won the student presidency. However, it was not the end of the Labor Party. A group of students against the bloc system re-organized Zych’s self-run party into a political force to shake up the blocs the following fall.

In the fall of 1941, the Square Dealers withdrew from the campaign and backed a non-fraternity re-organized Labor Party.²⁴¹ Both the Square Dealers and Laborers supported an amendment that would restrict differences in block votes to less than fifty. The amendment openly acknowledged the existence of blocs and defined it as “any combination for campus political purposes of any of the twenty one²⁴² social fraternities existing at the time of the passage of this article.”²⁴³ It declared that oversized party blocs are “contrary to the best interests” of student government and disqualified parties with bloc membership exceeding fifty

²³⁸ Frank Zych, “FELLOW-SUFFERERS;,” March 27, 1941, Posters, 1940-1951, 1965, Box: 2. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055., Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

²³⁹ Hathaway, “Man Who Rocked Campus Politics Becomes Professor.”

²⁴⁰ “Light Recounts Will Be Necessary; Duckworth Wins in 2nd Count,” *The Florida Alligator*, April 2, 1941.

²⁴¹ “Vote Machines To Settle Fate Of Fifty Thursday,” *The Florida Alligator*, September 27, 1941.

²⁴² The amendment includes the non-fraternity Cooperative Living Organization in its definition of a bloc.

²⁴³ “Square Dealers Hit Bloc.”

of the next largest party bloc. The amendment brought the foundation of UF Student Government, the bloc system, to the political forefront.

The Square Deal-Labor Groups submitted a column in favor of the amendment, which stated that forcing parties to maintain equality in bloc support would end the domination of bloc-heavy parties and promote more qualified candidates.²⁴⁴ The Gator Party's column against the amendment attacked it as an attempt by the Square Dealers to "legislate themselves into office." The amendment contained so many loopholes, they argued, that "it will create the most vicious jungle of treacherous political that any backstage, wire-pulling politician could desire."²⁴⁵ Gator Party went on to win 87% of the offices in the fall of 1941 elections, handily defeating the bloc equalization amendment by 797 to 481.²⁴⁶

War Government and the Persistence of the Bloc System

The Labor Party's 1941 campaigns—Zych's non-bloc backed spring campaign then the bloc equalization amendment drive in fall—marked the most significant challenges to the developing bloc system prior to World War II. Another major bloc realignment the following spring would create two new parties, the Dixie Party and Florida Party, which ran until the war interrupted university life. By 1942, enrollment at the university dropped to around 2,000 from its usual 3,400.²⁴⁷ In the spring of 1943, enrollment decreased further to 1,637 and students recognized the need for a revised form of student government in wartime conditions.²⁴⁸ The executive council asked Florida Blue Key to propose a solution, and they put forward a sweeping war amendment that centralized power in the student senate. The amendment abolished class

²⁴⁴ "Pro," *The Florida Alligator*, September 27, 1941.

²⁴⁵ "Con," *The Florida Alligator*, September 27, 1941.

²⁴⁶ "Gator Party Sweeps Election," *The Florida Alligator*, October 4, 1941.

²⁴⁷ "Union Now," *The Florida Alligator*, March 6, 1942.

²⁴⁸ "University Faces Lower Student Enrollment And Assumes Wartime Duties," *The Florida Alligator*, February 12, 1943.

offices and executive offices, instead allowing the senate to select its own president and vice president. This war government would remain for a year after the end of the war, in which the regular constitution would go back into effect.²⁴⁹ The war amendment received overwhelming support, passing in the spring of 1943 by 520 to 25 votes.²⁵⁰

The war government briefly paused UF political machinery. Florida Blue Key temporarily disbanded after the spring of 1943 because all its members left the university to participate in the war effort.²⁵¹ Although students organized parties to elect the senate of the war government, campaigns remained a shadow of the spectacle before the war. When the war ended, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, or G.I. Bill, brought about sweeping changes to the university: skyrocketing enrollment, older veteran students, and coeducation with women.²⁵² The traditions of machine politics, however, remained entrenched and the bloc system continued after the end of the war. In 1946, with the resumption of regular student government, the Dixie and Florida Parties returned. Florida Blue Key reactivated, in part, to assist university administration with the influx of veteran students and provide guidance on student issues.²⁵³

Florida Blue Key's role in machine politics remained clandestine until decades after the war. The Primary Progressive Party's 1932 spring campaign marked the most significant exposé of their influence in student government prior to WWII, but hints in *The Florida Alligator* mentioned tapping sessions with the "usual amount of blackballing, swapping, horseplay, and griping."²⁵⁴ Frank Zych, too, described a deal in which an aspiring nominee for one party stepped

²⁴⁹ "Florida Blue Key Committee: To Whom It May Concern," *The Florida Alligator*, March 12, 1943.

²⁵⁰ "War Amendment Passed By Big Margin, 520-25," *The Florida Alligator*, April 2, 1943.

²⁵¹ "FBK To Disband After This Term 'Till Close Of War," *The Florida Alligator*, April 9, 1943.

²⁵² Betty Taylor, "A History of Race and Gender at the University of Florida Levin College of Law 1909-2001," *Florida Law Review* 54, no. 495 (2002): 502.

²⁵³ Randolph Matheny, "Letter to Dean J. Ed Price, Assistant Dean of Students," April 7, 1942, War years, 1943-1945, Box: 3, Folder: 12. Records of Florida Blue Key, Ms Coll. 083, Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

²⁵⁴ "The Quadrilateral," *The Florida Alligator*, April 25, 1936.

aside in exchange for receiving the Blue Key presidency.²⁵⁵ By 1965, when Paul Maynard Hendrick wrote his master's thesis, he described Florida Blue Key members playing a "major role in maintenance of party lines or realignments and in choices of candidates and party officials."²⁵⁶ Furthermore, his description of campus politics strongly resembles the bloc system that developed in the 1930s, albeit with the addition of sororities.²⁵⁷

The norms of campus machines politics, the subject of Hendrick's thesis, emerged with the development of the bloc system prior to WWII. Hendrick, and much of the literature on UF Student Government afterwards, takes such norms—Greek blocs that dominate parties and elections, independents that check and balance the blocs, and spoils distributed to the winning side—for granted. However, a detailed study of the bloc system's emergence shows students questioned and challenged the bloc system in its earliest years, sometimes arriving on the precipice of overturning it all together. The bloc system's development, rather than the inevitable product of campus politics, was protracted, contingent, and contested.

²⁵⁵ Frank Zych, "THAN STEAM TONIGHT OUTSIDE OF BUCKMAN ABOUT 7 O'CLOCK," March 27, 1941, Posters, 1940-1951, 1965, Box: 2. Election Campaign Materials of the University of Florida Student Government, Series 055., Special and Area Studies Collections, George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida.

²⁵⁶ Hendrick, "The Rules of the Game," 57.

²⁵⁷ "Fraternity and sorority bloc-voting forms the core of major party support...One party may have more or larger fraternities, giving it as many as 150 to 600 bloc-votes 'up' on the opposition. In such a situation the party which is 'down' in bloc-votes makes a determined appeal for the uncommitted independent vote." Hendrick, 55.

Conclusion

A historical overview of UF political machinery's emergence and early development dispels institutional mythologies. UF Student Government, rather than a neutral vessel of student representation, was the product of machine politics. The Beefsteak Club, an organized secret society of WWI veterans, created and dominated student government for five years, engaging in corrupt politics throughout its period of one-party rule. Florida Blue Key, a leadership honorary that represents the nucleus of UF political machinery, emerged out of Beefsteak politics and rewrote its origins with an official founding story of service to the university. Rather than campus politics degenerating over time, corruption dates to these institutions' earliest days. Nevertheless, the development of machine politics was a contested and protracted process as students questioned and challenged the system of block voting, patronage, and fraternity domination.

UF student politicians of this era navigated complex campus alliances and rivalries and went on to transform 20th century Florida. According to John Watkins, 200 of the 559 students tapped into FBK between 1923 and 1943 held political influence: 17 in the federal government, 66 in state government, 47 in local government, and 64 in other positions.²⁵⁸ Most FBK alumni in the 1940s were young and looked forward to decades-long careers. A celebratory history of FBK from the period already boasted Governor Spessard Holland, House Speaker Dan McCarty, Judge Tom Sebring, and Fuller Warren as alumni and foreshadowed the organization's growing influence: "This account is simply that of the early youth of a powerful organization just

²⁵⁸ Watkins acknowledges that his methodology is not exactly precise, which likely explains why the numbers do not add up to 200. Nevertheless, his study provides quantitative evidence that FBK members tapped in 1923-1943 held influential roles after graduating. Watkins, "Impact of Members of Florida Blue Key Upon Florida State Politics," 20-21.

emerging now into full manhood.”²⁵⁹ UF Student Government provided the training ground for politicians that would shape the state and country in the coming decades.

Although this thesis ties together a hitherto disconnected literature on UF Student Government, future research can develop several themes that remained out of this project’s scope. First, an undercurrent of white supremacy saturated the racial politics of UF Student Government in this era. UF political machinery’s roots in social fraternities reflect this white supremacy as the first campus fraternities—Alpha Tau Omega, Kappa Alpha, Pi Kappa Alpha, and Sigma Nu—emerged in the South after the American Civil War.²⁶⁰ Mocking depictions of African Americans occasionally occurred in political material from the period; the logo of the 1942 Dixie Party was a caricature of a smiling African American eating a watermelon.²⁶¹ Some student campaigns also hired African American children to work publicity. Existing literature on UF’s racial integration in the 1960s characterize it as a protracted process, exemplified by a strategy of “practical segregation.”²⁶² Stephen O’Connell, UF’s sixth president, forestalled integration at the university and, importantly, was involved in campus political machinery as a student, ascending to the student body presidency in 1938.²⁶³ The racial dynamics of student government campaigns hold significance because they reproduced white supremacy as former campus leaders joined university administration. Future work on student government can study how the struggle to integrate African American students transformed campus politics.

²⁵⁹ “Brief History of Florida Blue Key to 1941,” 4.

²⁶⁰ Hazel Levy, Paul Ortiz, and Carl Van Ness, “Changing Times (1906-1958),” in *Report of the Presidential Task Force on African American and Native American History and the University of Florida*, 2022, 26.

²⁶¹ “DIXIE Presents: Its Qualified Candidates,” *The Florida Alligator*, March 27, 1942.

²⁶² Jessica Clawson, “Administrative Recalcitrance and Government Intervention: Desegregation at the University of Florida, 1962-1972,” *Florida Historical Quarterly* 89, no. 3 (2011): 348.

²⁶³ Clawson, 373.



The 1937 *Seminole* described this African American child as a “campaign publicity manager.”²⁶⁴

The integration of women into campus politics remains another avenue of research. Although the co-educational summer student body elected women to campus office before UF’s move to regular coeducation in 1947, Florida Blue Key only started to accept women in 1974. The struggle to integrate women into the leadership honorary society outlasted racial integration, with the first Black member tapped into FBK in 1970.²⁶⁵ The “good old boy” tradition of Southern politics played a role in the formation of FBK and future research can study the shift to include women in the campus machine.

Finally, a broader historical review can examine the links between emerging collegiate political machines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Not an isolated phenomenon, existing literature on “The System” at the University of Florida often draws comparisons to “The Machine” at the University of Alabama.²⁶⁶ The Machine’s origins date to 1888 when a similar secret society, Theta Nu Epsilon, established itself on the Alabama

²⁶⁴ Franklin Bennett, ed., *The Seminole* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1937), 138.

²⁶⁵ Vogel, “Leadership: The New Blue Key.”

²⁶⁶ Bradshaw, “Power, Patronage and Paternalism in the Gator Nation,” 59–60.

campus.²⁶⁷ Theta Nu Epsilon also spearheaded the national movement for student self-government prior to the First World War, which contributed to the development of student government at UF. Evidence exists linking the machines on the UF and UA campuses. Student politicians from both universities met at the Southern Federation of College Students, a conference that discussed student government.²⁶⁸ A 1928 article in *The Florida Alligator* acknowledged Alabama's Theta Nu Epsilon and directly compared it to UF politics:

At the University of Alabama, we are told, there is a local chapter of a national fraternity, known as Theta Nu Epsilon, which operates, the story goes, as a super government...A secret membership, bound together for secret political purposes, although avowing the loftiest aims for public consumption—this is a familiar phenomenon.²⁶⁹

Both political machines emerged around the same time from secret societies at Southern college campuses. These connections deserve a deeper investigation.

Despite multiple avenues for future research, this thesis provides a blueprint to study how campus political machinery changed to accommodate broader social changes. From the 1920s to the 1940s, the UF student population grew from around 900 to 3,400.²⁷⁰ In this period of dramatic growth, some students contested developing norms of machine politics, but its systemic logic subsumed most of the student body as block voting and the bloc system became the campus norm. As newer populations of students, such as women and African Americans, entered the university in the coming decades, they, too, likely became incorporated within the machine's logic. Continuity, not difference, marked the principal trend after political machinery's establishment. The System's corrupt practices today—coercive voting of Greek life, financial mismanagement of tuition dollars, and patronage politics—are not a failure but a feature of UF

²⁶⁷ *One & All*, 1998, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XRmAj6noc4I>.

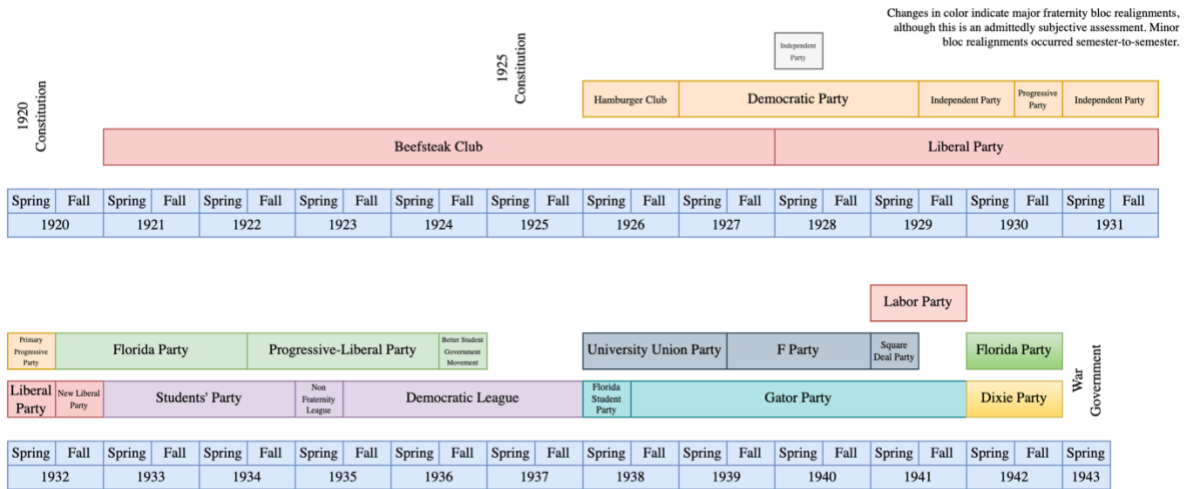
²⁶⁸ "Minutes and Procedure of the Southern Federation of College Students at the Fourth Annual Meeting of the Federation at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, Kentucky, April 22-23, 1927" (Southern Federation of College Students, April 22, 1927), Google Books.

²⁶⁹ "University of Alabama Has Its Political Fight," *The Florida Alligator*, April 14, 1928.

²⁷⁰ "The University of Florida," *The Florida Alligator*, September 30, 1921; "Union Now."

Student Government. Reform requires more than a nostalgic return to a non-existent, uncorrupted past; it requires a forward-looking transformation that addresses corruption at its foundation. From beefsteak to chicken parm, the System exists by design.

Appendix: UF Student Government Party Timeline, 1920-1943



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