

**Power, Patronage and Paternalism in the Gator Nation:
Student Government at the University of Florida**

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*"I never encountered, in state and federal politics,
activities as aggressive as at the University of Florida."*

Bob Graham, former US Senator and former Governor of Florida¹

*"Politics at UF was hardball. In my first political races for the legislature,
I found them to be minor league after being in a UF campaign."*

Lawton Chiles, former US Senator and former Governor of Florida²

1. Introduction

In January 2012, soon after the start of my second semester in graduate school at the University of Florida (UF), I was unexpectedly thrust into a world that I did not know existed. An undergraduate called Alex Cornillie, whom I had met a few times in the preceding few months, had decided to run for Student Body President and asked me to help run his campaign. Knowing nothing about campus politics, I agreed to help and quickly discovered to my astonishment that our Student Government wielded a great deal of influence at the university. I also learned that it was historically dominated by a coalition of particular organizations which seemed to be held together by a surprisingly sophisticated system of patronage and horse-trading. Alex and his running mate Jesse Schmitt were the latest in a long line of underdog opposition candidates to challenge the status quo, and as I learned more about our opponents I became increasingly emotionally invested in the campaign. Over a three-week period in February of that year the campaign became all-consuming, and when we eventually lost by an unusually small margin I was determined to harness the momentum that our "movement" seemed to have gained. In less than a month I had been transformed from an apathetic graduate student into a fully-fledged campus politico.

During that same campaign I was elected as a graduate member of the Student Senate, and quickly became an influential member of the opposition party. I took a particular interest in the rules governing elections on campus, challenging several statutes in the Supreme Court of the Student Body. I was also elected as campaign manager for the Senate elections in fall 2012 and started to proactively recruit potential candidates for the presidential elections that were scheduled for the following spring. By the end of 2012, I decided to cut back on my efforts in order to focus on academics but I still acted as an adviser to Johnny Castillo, the eventual opposition candidate

¹Flechas 2012

²Douthat 1991

in February 2013. At around that time I started to see the potential of embarking on scholarly study of UF's Student Government as an alternative to activism, and after Johnny was defeated in a landslide I chose to draw my direct participation to a close. My decision was in some ways a practical necessity: I had become far more interested in my Student Government-related activities than I was in my studies, and I felt that combining the two was probably my best chance of staying motivated to continue on my PhD program in political science. Eventually, I decided in the summer of 2013 that my greater motivation for activism than academics indicated that I should change my career plans, and I switched from a PhD program to a Master of Arts. The present work is the first of two final papers required for the latter qualification.

I hope that my decision to provide the personal history above does not seem like a self-indulgent way to begin the present work – my rationale for its inclusion is to provide some context for the genesis of this project, and to concede that much of my early interaction with the various characters in this work was not as a neutral observer but as a committed partisan. Although I think that I eventually moderated my position as I came to know and better understand people on the “other side”, it would nonetheless be ludicrous to suggest that my approach could ever be a wholly objective one. However, I think it is also important to note that I would probably never have gained the necessary insight or contacts to produce this work if I had not first been involved in Student Government as an activist. I believe I have made an honest effort to base my analysis here on information that I can trust as being factual – in the rare event that I refer to claims based on hearsay or second-hand accounts, I have made every effort to acknowledge this. I will leave it to the reader to judge the credibility and fairness of my findings.

With all of that in mind, my aim for the present work is to paint a picture of Student Government at the University of Florida, by which I mean an account of its institutional structure and culture. After providing an overview of the institution's basic constitutional makeup in section 2, I search for clues as to how a particular coalition maintains its dominance over the system on an almost permanent basis. Sections 3 and 4 seek to explain the various power blocs within that coalition, the ways in which those blocs jostle for influence, and the reasons for the apparent robustness of the alliance between those blocs during election season. Section 5 focuses on one particular institution at the university which wields unrivalled influence over the whole process, while section 6 describes the various incentives, threats and other strategies routinely used to maximize obedience to the system on the part of everyone who has a stake in it. Section 7 examines how the ruling coalition leverages its incumbency to consolidate its power, and considers other institutional features that might assist it in this task. Finally, in section 8 I consider the outlook for any changes to the status quo in the near future.

Throughout the work I rely on a combination of my own experiences as an activist, press cuttings and other articles relating to the system, and responses from around fifteen in-depth, unstructured interviews that I conducted in October 2013 with key players from both the ruling coalition and the opposition movement. I am grateful to all of these interviewees for their candor, and have respected the fact that some of the information they provided was on condition of anonymity for both themselves and the people they discuss. I have specified instances where such conditions are included – mercifully, there are relatively few. In my view, the existence of *any* such instances

provides some insight into the culture of the system that the interviewees are describing. Some of the interviews are referenced frequently, others less so – but all helped me tremendously to advance my understanding. I concede that there is much more that could have been done if time had permitted: I originally produced a list of about 60 people whom I wanted to interview, but it soon became clear that this was not going to be feasible given the limited time available to me. Consequently, I should emphasize that there are many occasions in the sections that follow where I was unable to get “both sides” of the story. In some of these cases I have strong doubts in any case that the relevant people would have been willing to speak with me; in all such cases I simply did not have sufficient time to contact them. Any charges made against people in this work should therefore be asterisked with the possibility that some relevant information may have been unintentionally omitted. Nonetheless, I have not included any claims here unless I am confident that they are accurate and I firmly believe that the final essay provides a generally accurate account of the political environment on the UF campus.

Before proceeding, I want to preface my findings with some brief remarks about why I think the present study is relevant beyond the UF campus – without this, it might seem like such an endeavor is “small fry” compared to the work of political scientists into major national institutions such as Congress or the Presidency. I believe that the case study of UF Student Government is important to a broader understanding of American political life for at least three reasons. First, my research has suggested that the UF case is far from unique – there are many student governments on college campuses across the United States with arrangements that resemble those of UF, meaning that conclusions made in this case study may potentially be applicable to a range of other cases across the country. Second, as I will explain, many alumni of the system have gone on to hold influential positions in state and national government, having “learned their trade” in Student Government. Given the distinct disregard for both democracy and meritocracy that is embedded in the culture of campus politics at UF (and apparently elsewhere), the question of whether values and behaviors learned in student governments are retained by those who learn them over the long term strikes me as an urgent one. Third, the notion that intelligent young people could willingly participate in a system such as that of the ruling coalition in UF’s Student Government while presumably professing to hold democratic and meritocratic values seems puzzling in the extreme, and I think that investigating the reasons for such an incongruence might lead to some intriguing broader conclusions about American political culture and moral psychology. I say more about each of these three points at the end of my second paper, which will focus mostly on how the case of UF Student Government interacts with existing research in moral psychology.

2. An overview of Student Government at the University of Florida

UF’s Student Government is one of the most powerful of any in the United States. It has an annual budget of around \$19 million, has majority ownership of Gainesville’s bus transit service, funds all of the university’s recreational sports facilities, and is responsible for allocating almost \$1 million per year among the 960 registered student organizations on campus (although more than \$800,000 of that is allocated to just twelve major organizations).³ It also runs the speakers’ bureau

³University of Florida Student Government. “Budgets”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Executive/Finance/Budgets>, accessed October 3rd 2013.

ACCENT and Student Government Productions, which brings live music and entertainment acts to campus – these two programs have a combined annual budget of over \$1.3 million. Students currently pay \$17.35 per credit hour to Student Government in compulsory fees, which means that the average student taking 12 credits pays Student Government just over \$200 per semester.⁴ The Student Body President is the only student with a seat on the university’s governing Board of Trustees, and has historically enjoyed a high level of access to state lawmakers – former Director of Student Activities Myra Morgan told a journalist in 2012 that when she arrived at UF in the 1980s she was surprised to find that “it was easier for the Student Body president to have access to the governor’s office than [it was for] the university president.”⁵

In terms of its constitution the UF Student Government is clearly based around the US Constitution: it has executive, legislative and judicial branches, all of which have distinct powers and responsibilities. A Student Body President, Vice President and Treasurer are elected every February for a one-year term, and the President has the power to appoint a cabinet and other heads of executive departments. The Senate must contain between 80 and 100 seats (it currently has 100), half of which are contested in the February elections and represent the different colleges on campus, while the other half are elected in September and represent geographical constituencies. The Supreme Court consists of seven members, all of whom must have fulfilled particular academic requirements in the law school. They are appointed by the Student Body President, confirmed by a two-thirds majority of the Senate, and serve until they either resign or cease to be a member of the Student Body. All Student Government officials are required to maintain a GPA of at least 2.5, and a procedure is in place to allow for impeachment by the Senate for any official who is guilty of misconduct. Amendments to the Student Body Constitution require a three-fifths majority of the students who vote in the spring election. The Student Body President (and, in some cases, the Treasurer) has the power to veto laws enacted by the Senate, although the Senate can overturn a veto with a two-thirds vote. The President of the University of Florida has an absolute power of veto on all Student Government laws.⁶

Student Government elections at UF are major undertakings for the “parties” who compete in them, especially in February each year when both executive and legislative branches are contested. Aubuchon (2005) noted in his study of the 2004 election that “campaigns often design their own graphics for personalized logos, fliers, shirts, and other campaign materials, all typically printed through specialized companies. Each of the parties usually publishes a platform of issues to differentiate themselves from their opponents while attempting to gain the support of the elusive ‘swing voter.’”⁷ These activities often come at significant financial cost: the ruling coalition, popularly known on campus as “The System”, has been known to spend tens of thousands of dollars on campaign materials. In 2011 the family of its presidential candidate Ben Meyers is said

⁴University of Florida Finance and Accounting Office. “Fall 2013 Students for 2013-14 Academic Year”. <http://www.fa.ufl.edu/bursar/current-students/tuition-and-fees-2013-14/fall-2013-students-for-the-2013-14-academic-year/>, accessed October 24th 2013.

⁵Flechas 2012

⁶University of Florida Student Government. “Constitution”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

⁷Aubuchon 2005, p. 2

to have donated around \$50,000 to help ensure his success⁸, and every year candidates for the System party are required to donate a fixed minimum amount depending on the office for which they are running. Nick Stinnett, a fraternity brother of Meyers who was an influential figure in his subsequent administration, told me that fraternities and sororities (collectively known as the “Greek” community) are also required to donate an agreed amount dependent on their degree of influence within the coalition: houses that can expect their members to be given the most prestigious on-campus leadership positions after the election must contribute more. Failure to donate the required amount would mean “there would be consequences – nothing would happen for you.”⁹ In my experience opposition groups’ campaigns are generally much less well-funded, although this is not always necessarily the case: in 1992 presidential candidate Bret Berlin, the son of influential Democratic fundraiser and Miami businessman Jerry Berlin, reportedly spent \$15,000 on materials including fliers, t-shirts and even condoms featuring his party’s slogan “Ready for Action.” Berlin, who was running against a candidate endorsed by most of the groups in the System, spent about twice as much as his opponent and was victorious.¹⁰

Unfortunately for opponents of the System (commonly called the “independent movement” or “indies”), victories such as that of Berlin are extremely rare. Since that campaign only one other non-System candidate has won the presidency: Jamal Sowell, who was already serving as Student Body Treasurer after the previous year’s elections, broke away from the System to run under the banner of a new party in 2004, eventually winning after a run-off against his nearest rival and becoming only the fourth African-American Student Body President in UF history.¹¹ Even that election, which set records for voter turnout in a Student Government election, saw only around one in four UF students cast a ballot. The norm is a one-sided victory for the dominant party after an election in which less than 20% of the student body has voted.¹² Some critics have claimed that such low levels of interest suit the System, which can generally count on a reliable base of electoral support from the organizations in its coalition and consequently has little interest in increasing participation among the rest of the student body – a 2004 article in the St Petersburg Times claimed that “the idea is to combine block voting with low turnout.”¹³ Regardless of whether suppressing turnout is indeed part of a conscious strategy to ensure repeated victories, it is undoubtedly true that such victories have been commonplace for the dominant party in the past few decades. Why might this be? What exactly is this mysterious “System” and how is it able to maintain such a stranglehold on UF student politics? It is to these questions that I now turn.

3. A fortress built bloc by bloc

The System has historically been a coalition of the vast majority of the UF Greek community and several of the most prominent non-Greek student organizations on campus, many of which

⁸Two sources with knowledge of the Meyers campaign both claimed in conversations with me that this was accurate.

⁹Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

¹⁰James 1992

¹¹Aubuchon 2005, p. 1

¹²University of Florida Student Government. “Election Results”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GetInvolved/Elections/ElectionResults>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹³Pillow 2009

represent particular minority constituencies and are often labelled as “the communities”. Among the most prominent of these organizations is the Black Student Union (BSU), the Asian American Student Union (AASU), the Hispanic Student Association (HSA), the Inter-Residence Hall Association (IRHA) and Volunteers for International Student Affairs (VISA), a network of twenty sub-organizations representing different ethnicities and cultures that have a significant presence at UF. All of these organizations have large memberships (and thus a large number of potential voters) and receive significant funding from Student Government.¹⁴ Nonetheless, it is Greek houses that wield the most influence. Most of the Greek houses on campus are affiliated to one of four “councils”: the largest of these are the Interfraternity Council (IFC), which currently includes 2300 members in 25 fraternities and is the fourth largest fraternity system in the country¹⁵, and the Panhellenic Council, with 2500 members in 16 sororities.¹⁶ Such dominance is by no means a new phenomenon: many alumni remember a similar state of affairs during their student days. For example, current US Senator Marco Rubio explained his lack of involvement in campus politics to the Orlando Sentinel in February 2013 by saying that during his UF career in the early 1990s “Student government... was largely dominated by fraternities and sororities, and I wasn't in a fraternity.”¹⁷

For many decades, political power among the Greek community has been diffused into several groups or blocs. According to Aubuchon (2005), there were four main groups during the 1990s, each consisting of a number of houses affiliated to IFC, PC and “minority Greek systems”. The groups, nicknamed “Pi Tau,” “Alpha-Delt,” “Phi-Delt,” and “Super Group”, would battle “outsiders to the system as well as each other in an attempt to re-establish control year after year to ensure that positions of power were equally divided.”¹⁸ Ben Meyers told me that to his knowledge the System was much more internally divided in those days than it is now, but there was not such a strong independent movement to challenge it. He pointed out that even Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, the current chairwoman of the Democratic National Convention and former UF Student Senate President who is often cited by indies as a heroine of their movement, was a member of IRHA when she was at UF in the 1980s, and was thus a part of the System rather than being an “independent” in the sense that such a term would be understood on campus today. According to Meyers, the battles in the 1990s and earlier were “fights within the Greek community, as opposed to fights between the Greek community and indies.”¹⁹

A lawsuit in the late 1990s (the case of Charles Grapski, which I explore later in this work) brought significant public exposure to the workings of this covert System, causing it to weaken substantially. The defeat to Jamal Sowell in the 2004 election finally caused a fundamental restructuring

¹⁴Each of the organizations listed here received between \$69,000 and \$162,000 in the 2013-14 Student Organization budget. Source: University of Florida Student Government. “Budgets”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Executive/Finance/Budgets>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁵Interfraternity Council. “About fraternities.” http://www.ufifc.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2&Itemid=3, accessed Oct 24th 2013.

¹⁶Panhellenic Council. “About Us.” http://www.ufpanhellenic.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=27, accessed Oct 24th 2013.

¹⁷Kassab 2013

¹⁸Aubuchon 2005, p. 29

¹⁹Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

of the System – since that defeat it seems to have become a much more robust coalition, united against the ascendant independent movement. Everyone I interviewed who had internal knowledge of the System agreed that its current iteration began in around 2005 – an assertion supported by an investigation conducted in 2012 by the *Independent Florida Alligator*, the popular student-run daily newspaper at UF known more commonly as simply the *Alligator*.²⁰ That is not to say that different concentrations of power do not still exist within the System – on the contrary, new divisions in the System have formed in recent years and there continues to be a substantial amount of internal wrangling for superiority between the different groups (now internally referred to as “blocs”) that have emerged post-2004, even if all sides are determined to resolve those differences internally by election season. According to Nick Stinnett, such divisions are probably inevitable: “It would be unmanageable for one house to control everybody... everyone else would be trying to pick them off.”²¹ As a result, power naturally diffuses so that no one fraternity or sorority enjoys unchecked power.

Even if this explanation goes some way towards logically explaining *why* blocs continue to exist within the System, it does little to explain *how* those blocs form. Why do particular houses choose to join with each other? According to Matt Michel, a UF Supreme Court Justice who has been involved with Student Government for over five years, the most likely explanation is that alliances are based on social bonds that gradually develop between the members of different houses:

“I think honestly most of it is just built on personal affinity between the individual leaders. If the people involved have a lot of interactions with another house, whether because they're physically near them or because they group up and have annual events... I think that when you have enough of those contacts going on over a sustained period of time, everybody involved just sort of gets into the mindset that ‘we're with this group. We associate with house A, B, C.’ And that translates over into ‘Yes, of course, we will push for your candidates that you are putting out there because we know you're going to push for ours as well.’”²²

Ben Meyers agrees with this theory of how blocs develop – he claimed that “a lot of these things are built with personal friendships. For a long time my house [Theta Chi] has had a very close friendship with Delta Tau Delta fraternity (known as “Delt”) and with the Asian community. That is purely by virtue of my very close relationship with their former leaders.”²³ In fact, according to Meyers, the current structure of the System has its foundations entirely in those kinds of relationships: he told me that in the mid-2000s, two friends from high school called Aron Weingard and Ryan Moseley each became presidents of their respective houses, Theta Chi and Sigma Phi Epsilon (or Sig Ep for short). Both also obtained influential leadership positions outside of their fraternities, and eventually Moseley decided he wanted to run for Student Body President in February 2007. According to a pre-existing arrangement within the System, the candidate that year was supposed to be a member of Alpha Epsilon Pi (AEPi) called Josh Weiss. After an internal

²⁰Flechas 2012

²¹Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

²²Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

²³Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

fight within the System, Moseley ended up winning the presidency and he subsequently worked with Weingard to strengthen the positions of both of their fraternities by dividing the houses of their allies between themselves into two power blocs that were nominally distinct but closely allied. The result was that AEPi and its allies were completely isolated until 2011, when Meyers said that an error he made as Student Body President allowed that group to gain traction and to become a viable third bloc, having convinced several houses from the two larger blocs that an alliance with AEPi could be more fruitful for them in terms of their members gaining prestigious positions on campus.²⁴

The result of that process is that the Greek community in 2013 is broadly divided into three blocs of roughly comparable size and influence: the first, known as the “social bloc”, is the one developed by Moseley. It was led by Sig Ep until the national leadership of that fraternity decided to suspend its UF chapter in late 2012, allegedly as a result of various accusations related to drug dealing and alcohol abuse.²⁵ Since the disappearance of Sig Ep the leadership of the social bloc has reportedly transferred to Zeta Tau Alpha (or “Zeta”), a sorority that counts the current Student Body President, Christina Bonarrigo, among its members. The second bloc, known as the “political bloc”, is still led in part by Theta Chi although the frontrunner for the Student Body President candidacy in 2014 is Cory Yeffet, a member of another house in the same bloc called Phi Delta Theta. The third bloc, known somewhat uncreatively as the “third bloc”, continues to be led by AEPi. Clearly though, as suggested by the accounts above, the membership and power dynamics in each of the blocs is – to use Alex Cornillie’s words in his recent interview with me – “a super-shifting landscape of organizations”.²⁶

Despite this fluidity within the System, the positions of some houses has remained relatively constant for a number of years. For example, multiple sources confirmed that Theta Chi has consistently been a major player in campus politics since at least the 1990s while Chris Spears, the current president of Pi Lambda Phi, told me that his fraternity has generally not been an active participant in political activities, at least not since it returned to campus in 2001 following a two-year absence.²⁷ Given the constantly changing landscape in terms of alliances and blocs, how can it be that certain houses are able to maintain a powerful position within the overall System for an extended period of time while others seem unable to get a foot in the door? One obvious explanation is that influence is directly proportional to membership size, as Alex Cornillie suggested in my interview with him:

“A large organization like a fraternity has over 100 members – that’s a significant number of votes, and that is a substantial amount of power. It’s not an unlimited amount of power, but it’s a fraction of the entire electoral make-up, and much like any lobbying group like the NRA or

²⁴ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013. The “error” in question will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this work.

²⁵ The reasons for the suspension were never made public to my knowledge, but my interview with former Sig Ep brother Johnny Castillo supported the widespread rumors on campus that drugs and alcohol were among the main factors involved in the decision.

²⁶ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

²⁷ Author interview with Chris Spears, Oct 2013

*PETA would get its members to vote a certain way to affect a United States election, so too the fraternities do the same kind of thing. So I didn't perceive that we had some kind of magical ability to control things beyond that.*²⁸

While it is certainly true that some of the most influential Greek houses are also among the largest, it seems clear that numbers alone are not sufficient to secure influence. Cornillie was careful to qualify his remarks by saying that the size of any house is only important insofar as it translates into actual ballots cast for the System. According to several interviewees, this helps to explain why a fraternity such as Theta Chi holds more power than one of the minority communities such as the Black Student Union, despite the latter's far greater number of members. Nick Stinnett explained to me that because they do not have an effective means of mobilizing their members to vote, "BSU on a good day is worth a small sorority's worth of votes... they don't have as much turnout [as a Greek house]."²⁹ Regardless of the extent to which this perception is true when comparing an organization such as BSU to an individual Greek house, it is undoubtedly the case that the combined electoral power of all of the houses in a Greek voting bloc outweighs the power of any one "community" organization. Roger Austin, academic adviser and alumnus of Delta Upsilon fraternity, told me that this is almost certainly why the System tends to pick a white person as its presidential candidate: the mostly white Greek blocs are the most powerful in terms of sheer volume of likely voters, hence those blocs are able to always claim the number one spot on the System's executive ticket. If Austin is correct then it seems that the System's apparent preference for white candidates is not a conscious result of institutional racism per se, but rather a reflection of the relative political influence of different power blocs on campus.³⁰

However, even if the "size" of an organization or Greek house is defined as the number of voters it is able to successfully mobilize to vote in Student Government elections, it seems that size still does not fully explain the ability of a house like Theta Chi to maintain its level of influence within the System. Rather, several people told me that once an organization has achieved power in the System, it is able to leverage its advantage to produce more power for itself. According to Alex Cornillie, this is particularly true for a fraternity or sorority that holds a prestigious position such as the Student Body Presidency:

"When you have that power, that person who is the president is able to make all these appointments, so they trade off these appointments for all these different things, and suddenly find themselves with dozens of organizations beholden to them.... They can then parlay that power in the next election to maybe get someone else elected like, maybe they work to get their person elected as treasurer or vice president or something, and they build this kind of ball of IOUs and then they cash it in again and their organization gets to throw another president in, because

²⁸ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

²⁹ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013. In a later section I discuss how Greek houses organize their efforts to ensure that all of their members vote.

³⁰ Of course, the fact that membership of those blocs is still divided in part along racial lines arguably indicates that broader racial divisions still exist on the UF campus and beyond. For example, my interviewees produced some evidence that racism still plays a role in the culture of some parts of the Greek community, as I explain in my second paper. However, I found little evidence to suggest that such divisions were unique to Student Government.

*they always have the political power. That's just what happens. You have the power, and you're able to constantly use it to generate more power. It's a self-perpetuating thing.*³¹

Aside from the conscious use of political capital, it also seems that the collective experience and knowledge of a fraternity or sorority can help to consolidate its position within the hierarchy. Matt Michel speculated that "after a certain point you just sort of build up some institutional momentum. You have a lot of people involved and who know how to get involved... once you have three or four of those, I think you just have enough accumulated knowledge over the years [to succeed in the System]."³² Sometimes this knowledge is even documented so that future members of a house can take advantage of their predecessors' knowledge – Ben Meyers told me that Theta Chi used to have a 300-page book in which brothers recorded their advice on how best to maintain the fraternity's influence within the System. The idea was that each new generation could add to the book so that their successors could learn from the achievements and failures of those who came before them. Although the book was discontinued for some reason before Meyers was active in Student Government, he cited this as an example of how "we were very big into our prior knowledge."³³ Nick Stinnett added that training its members to be leaders in the System was an important part of the culture at Theta Chi, and that this was another reason for the house's sustained success: "we work harder, we're very political, and we do a good job. A lot of people who the other houses put up for positions are grossly incompetent... we vet our own people before we put them up. If we don't think they can do the job then we don't put them there."³⁴

The information presented above suggests a system in which influence for a particular house or organization arises from some combination of its size, its ability to mobilize its members to vote in Student Government elections, the skill that its leaders show in sustaining its existing power and generating more, the degree to which its norms encourage the retention of institutional memory, and the extent to which it trains its members for leadership positions on campus. Over time it seems that a house can gain a reputation for being influential, and this in itself can help to sustain that influence because it attracts a higher caliber of new, ambitious students than other houses do. Both Meyers and Stinnett told me that they joined Theta Chi specifically because of the doors that they thought it would open for them in terms of political involvement on campus. It is a factor that Austin also emphasized as being important to sustaining the hierarchy, observing that "some guys come to college knowing which fraternities have the best parties and get laid the most, and go to those. Some of them know which frats have the best sports teams, and come here to play intramurals. And some kids join fraternities because they know they are powerful politically."³⁵

4. "The Room"

Regardless of how they achieve and maintain their status at the head of their respective blocs, it seems to be generally accepted that a few houses are perpetually the ones whose leaders will be involved in decision-making at the top of the system. I asked several former System insiders

³¹ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

³² Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

³³ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

³⁴ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

³⁵ Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

about the process by which key decisions such as candidates for major Student Government positions are decided. According to Meyers, each of the three blocs will send either one or two representatives to meet with the other leaders: the social bloc sends the leaders of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity (SAE) and Zeta Tau Alpha sorority (who have replaced Sig Ep since the latter's suspension from campus); the political bloc sends leaders from Theta Chi and Alpha Epsilon Phi (AEPi); the third bloc sends the leader of AEPi and, sometimes, a leader from a second fraternity such as Delta Upsilon or Kappa Sigma.³⁶ Bloc leaders are generally chosen at the sole discretion of their predecessors, rather than elected democratically by members of their houses.³⁷ This struck me as being particularly fascinating: I asked both Meyers and Stinnett whether the existence of such a nepotistic process ever seemed to alienate ambitious house members who knew they were not in line to be anointed as the next leader, even if they felt that they merited the role. Neither seemed to think the process presented a particular problem: Stinnett pointed out that even though the future bloc leaders might be known as much as a couple of years ahead of time, there are a wealth of other positions available to members of influential houses: "There's a lot to go around," he said.³⁸

As I explain in my second paper, this acquiescence of fraternity members to a bloc leader's supposed legitimacy in appointing his own successor seems symptomatic of a puzzling tendency within parts of the Greek community to passively accept authority and hierarchy within their organizations. However, it is also worth noting that many members of the Greek community are probably unaware that such a process even takes place within their own houses. Meyers himself pointed out that the position of "bloc leader is not something you put on a resume – it's supposed to be secret, although obviously it's not."³⁹ While he may be correct that the existence of the position is known to many people within the System, there are plenty of Greeks for whom knowledge of the bloc leaders' activities remains essentially a mystery. Even Alex Cornillie, who was press secretary to the Student Body President in 2010 before he defected to become the independent party candidate two years later, had only a limited understanding of how the bloc leaders operated:

"[While I was press secretary] I met the people whom I had been told were the [bloc leaders], but never did I ever hear them refer to themselves as the controller of the bloc of such-and-such organizations. That's not really how politics works – you don't walk around with a badge that says 'I manipulate and control these particular groups, ask me any questions you like.' You just do it in your spare time, or whenever you can, or in a bar, or in an apartment. No-one ever knows

³⁶I found it interesting that, at least until Sig Ep was replaced by Zeta Tau Alpha sorority, all six of the houses with bloc leaders were fraternities rather than sororities. Whether or not this is indicative of a system that is still male-dominated is debatable – it is certainly true, for example, that there have only been six female Student Body Presidents in UF history, although two of those have been in the past four years. My own experience of Student Government is that there are currently female students in many of the most important positions, so my hunch is that the male dominance of the bloc leadership is more an anachronism than a reflection of current values within the System. It would, however, be interesting to look further into this.

³⁷Meyers said that in the third bloc, AEPi members "might technically vote" but he seemed to imply that the vote was a formality and that bloc leaders in AEPi still essentially chose their own successors.

³⁸Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

³⁹Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

what's going on. Things just happen and then all of a sudden the information gets dispersed through the ether, and people find out 'Oh, all of a sudden, such and such fraternity doesn't get that position anymore.' 'Who decided that?' 'Well... someone, somewhere.'"

Many Greeks are apparently unaware that the bloc system even exists, let alone that it has leaders who are appointed unilaterally by their predecessors. Johnny Castillo, the independent movement's presidential candidate in 2013, was a member of Sig Ep before its removal from campus in December 2012. Nonetheless, he had no idea throughout his time as a member of that fraternity that it was the most powerful member of something called the "social bloc". It was only when he ran for the presidency in 2013 that he became aware of this fact. Looking back, he now believes that "no-one talks about [the bloc system] because that would be division. Think about it: if I was a part of Chi Phi [one of the less influential fraternities] and I found out that we were the shittiest of one of the blocs, I would want to know why."⁴⁰ In other words, the leaders of the System have an interest in maintaining the status quo by keeping the existence and details of the bloc system as secret as possible, even within the Greek community.

Once chosen, the five or six bloc leaders will meet secretly on multiple occasions in what Meyers called "The Room" – when he was a bloc leader, he says that "The Room" was his kitchen table but the location varies according to the players involved. Anyone else involved in the decisions being discussed at the time might also be invited: for example, decisions about who will be slated as Senate candidates for the System-endorsed party would involve the Student Body President if (s)he was not already in the room as a bloc leader. According to Stinnett, once the bloc leaders are all assembled they "start horse-trading, and everything is on the table" in terms of positions.⁴¹ This includes the Student Body Presidency, which he says often ends up rotating between the blocs as part of an ongoing agreement. One example of this, noted by Roger Austin in my interview with him, is that there was widely understood to be an agreement between the social and political blocs to alternate the "ownership" of the presidency between themselves in the past few years – a rumor that seems to be substantiated by the pattern of recent System-sponsored Student Body Presidents. Meyers admitted that "we [on the System side] can usually predict the Student Body President or the contenders years out" because of the deals that are made by bloc leaders.⁴²

The vice-president and treasurer candidacies are also among the positions decided by bloc leaders, although in recent years these positions have almost always been filled by members of either the Black Student Union (BSU), the Asian American Student Union (AASU), or the Hispanic Student Association (HSA) as part of the deal that ensures their continued participation in the System. According to two sources, both of whom spoke to me on condition of anonymity, the System's 2012 Student Body President candidate TJ Villamil had reportedly considered giving the treasurer candidacy to a leading member of the Inter-Residence Hall Association (IRHA) in exchange for the support of that organization. This came as a surprise to HSA, who felt it was their "turn" for a spot on the ticket having been overlooked in favor of AASU the previous year. Annoyed by Villamil's move, HSA reached out to the independent movement via a mutual friend in a fraternity

⁴⁰ Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

⁴¹ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

⁴² Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

that was part of the System. When Villamil learned of this development he quickly abandoned his talks with IRHA and offered the treasurer candidacy to HSA member Juan Rodriguez. After Villamil beat Alex Cornillie in the subsequent election, albeit by a worryingly small margin for the usually dominant System, the new president allegedly vowed revenge against the fraternity whose member had acted as a conduit for the HSA negotiations with the opposition. One member of the fraternity in question told me that Villamil sought to deny leadership positions to his organization and, on at least one occasion, was seen shouting “Fuck [the fraternity name]!” from a moving car as he passed their house late at night.

Positions on the System-sponsored party’s slate of Senate candidates for the fifty available seats in each election are also generally allocated as part of the negotiations by bloc leaders each semester, meaning that the “selection process” that candidates go through is mostly a charade.⁴³ Johnny Castillo told me that while he was a freshman who was “pledging” to join Sig Ep in Fall 2009, he was initially selected to be on the System party’s slate but received a phone call a few hours later saying that there had been a mistake and that he was no longer a candidate – he subsequently found out that he had been rejected because the selection committee had not realized he was still a “pledge” rather than a full member of the fraternity, and it was deemed unacceptable to give valuable positions on the slate to pledges. Nonetheless, pledges are still routinely encouraged to apply even though they have little chance of being chosen – this allows the System party to tell the *Alligator* and other media that many more applicants chose to apply for a position with their party than with the opposition. This happened in the recent fall 2013 election, for example, when the System party triumphantly declared in a letter to the *Alligator* that over 550 students had chosen to apply for a position on their slate, constituting 82% of all applicants.⁴⁴

It is not only candidates for elected office who are chosen by the secret negotiations between bloc leaders. Meyers and Stinnett both told me that appointed positions in the cabinet of the executive branch are also subject to the deals made in “The Room”, as are leadership roles in various Student Government-run agencies and programs. Many of the most important positions are, however, generally considered to be the “property” of particular houses. These roles are known as “legacy positions”, and the houses that “own” them are generally expected to retain those positions for multiple semesters. In spring 2010, the Gainesville Sun reported on two of the most notable examples of legacy positions: the chairmanships of speakers’ bureau ACCENT and Student Government Productions (SGP). According to that report, 18 of the previous 21 chairs of ACCENT had been members of AEPi, while the chair of SGP had almost always been a member of Theta Chi since 2004, the earliest date for which reliable records were available.⁴⁵ Contrary to the denials of various Student Government officials quoted in the report, Ben Meyers confirmed

⁴³I say “mostly” because some sources told me that positions are sometimes allocated to particular blocs or houses, rather than individuals. With this in mind, there can sometimes be limited competition between individuals for the available spaces, so long as each bloc receives the agreed total number of positions that was agreed by its leaders. It is also true that, by necessity, some positions on the slate are not decided in advance. For example, Matt Michel told me that he easily obtained one of the available positions for graduate students when he first slated for the System party because the System traditionally struggles to find enough willing candidates among the graduate student population.

⁴⁴Nguyen and Michaels 2013.

⁴⁵Stewart 2010

to me that both positions are indeed considered within the System to be legacy positions, but the bloc leaders often take some steps to make this fact at least slightly less blatant:

“Theta Chi controls SGP, and AEPi controls ACCENT. But, for example, you can’t fill SGP with a majority of Theta Chi’s. What you can do though is to say ‘OK, I’ll fill SGP with 30% Theta Chi and 20% AEPi if you fill ACCENT with 30% AEPi and 20% Theta Chi.’ [Otherwise] it’s too obvious, and then there’s also performance issues. Competition is good to a certain extent - you don’t want just your boys in there, because if it’s just your buddies then you’re not going to get anything done.”⁴⁶

Once all of the horse-trading for positions has been completed between the bloc leaders and all sides are satisfied that they have received their share of legacy positions, houses within each bloc can negotiate with each other for shares in the spoils that their side has won in “The Room”. This can result in a house having to tell its members not to apply for a particular position because they have traded it to an allied house. Of course, it is possible that there can be genuine meritocracy between members of the same house in competing for a position that has been awarded to their organization and, at least to some extent, there appears to be a degree of merit involved in deciding candidates for the highest offices – so long as potential candidates are members of the “right” houses and their bloc has successfully negotiated for “ownership” of their desired position in the relevant year. According to Matt Michel, the result is that “for all of our faults in Student Government politics, I will give it to them that the person who is put up [by the System] to run for the highest office objectively does have a pedigree and relevant experience.”⁴⁷ Certainly, there seems to be a roughly defined route of progression through the hierarchy for aspiring Student Body Presidents – most have been chairs of Senate committees and promoted to Senate President in the fall before they run for the highest office. Some run for president after being elected treasurer. Of course, all of these positions are subject to the negotiations of the bloc leaders, so to some extent the people who end up with the appropriate “pedigree” to run for Student Body President have achieved their experience through a system of patronage rather than pure merit – but within the (potentially severe) limitations imposed by those negotiations, it is at least possible for more competent candidates to achieve a degree of success.

That is not to say that all positions are constrained by legacy positions and bloc leaders’ deals at all times – I found some evidence of positions within the System being allocated on the basis of genuine meritocracy, but this seemed to depend largely on the approach chosen by the person or people with responsibility for recruitment. When he was on the management board for the Reitz Union (the student union facility funded and operated by Student Government), Alex Cornillie said that his colleagues and he tried hard to select the best available candidates:

“It’s not one of those things where the Student Body President is handpicking people, because the union is a big deal and it’s not just something to be played with. It’s a very huge portion of the

⁴⁶ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

⁴⁷ Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

*student government budget so, at least when I was on it, we wanted as many people to apply as possible because if we were going to apply to be on the board again the next year, we didn't want to be on the board of people who didn't know what they were doing or who didn't care. So when we were interviewing we were very harsh, critical interviewers. You have to really pick through those individuals who just heard about it from someone in their fraternity or their organization who said "go do this because you need to be more involved" and those who really cared. So we were looking for people who really cared."*⁴⁸

More often, however, I have heard accounts of people being handed positions for nepotistic reasons, even when some degree of meritocratic competition might have been possible. Nick Stinnett admitted that his first appointment within Student Government, as Assistant Director of External Affairs, was one "which I got because a fraternity brother of mine was Director of External Affairs. I don't even think I filled in an application." Another time, he was asked to apply for a position by a System party leader, because the only other applicants were indies. "I walked into the interview in shorts and t-shirt. I think they asked me about four questions, and I don't think I answered any one of them with a straight answer. Then I walked out, and I was appointed."⁴⁹ Even more intriguingly, Ben Meyers told me that he would sometimes use merit as a weapon of sorts, citing it as a reason to award or deny someone a position when it suited his agenda:

*"Merit is enforced more often than the independents think, but not for the right reasons. Merit is enforced because if I have someone who interviewed for one of [another bloc's] legacy positions but is definitely better, I can say they legitimately earned it. Or if I don't want one of their people to get a position, and then they interview and they're awful, I'll say 'I can't appoint them. They suck, and they're not going to do a good job.' It's merit by convenience."*⁵⁰

Given this extraordinarily complex system of competing blocs and covert political deal-making, it seems remarkable to me that the System has proven to be so robust in recent years. Whatever disagreements and betrayals have occurred between the powerbrokers of the various blocs, the System has managed to present itself to the student body as a united political party during every election since its latest incarnation developed in 2005. Why is it that the various disagreements never seem to result in different blocs running as separate political parties? One possible reason is that, as mentioned earlier, following the System's weakened position in the late 1990s and election defeat in 2004, its various groups realized that they could not afford to compete against each other in the way that they had in the past because they were facing a more organized independent movement. However, I have found compelling evidence that there is far more holding the System together than a simple fear of electoral defeat to the independents. Rather, the people with most influence in the System have the ability to offer houses and organizations powerful incentives to stay loyal to their coalition and equally potent disincentives against defection. Of these tools,

⁴⁸ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

⁴⁹ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

⁵⁰ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

by far the most significant is the control that bloc leaders hold over another organization on campus that I have not mentioned thus far in this work in order to avoid complicating my initial account of the bloc system. However, it is impossible to fully grasp the mechanics of UF's Student Government without understanding its intimate connection to the most prestigious student organization at the university. Their relationship is one of the oldest and worst-kept secrets on campus, and one that I will now explore.

5. The strange double life of Florida Blue Key

According to its website, Florida Blue Key (FBK) is "an active and thriving leadership honorary dedicated to serving the University of Florida, the Gainesville community, and the state of Florida."⁵¹ It is responsible for organizing the annual Homecoming weekend activities including Gator Growl, "a three-hour extravaganza at the football stadium, which at times has drawn up to 60,000 spectators who pay to see student skits, fireworks and such headliners as Jay Leno."⁵² It is also responsible for the annual Florida Blue Key Speech and Debate Tournament, a weekend-long competition for high school students from across the state, and several other events throughout the year. Membership of FBK is by invite only: every semester a number of students are selected (or "tapped") to join, supposedly based on the number of "major" and "minor" leadership positions that they have held on campus and their performance of the duties associated with those positions. According to Matt Michel, a Blue Key member who has served on the organization's "tapping committee", the process proceeds as follows:

*"Officially it's very much resume-based: your application is your resume, formatted in a particular way on a sheet of legal paper. The tapping committee reads it at one meeting - they would consult the guidebook and say 'Yes, Student Body President is obviously a 'major', if not a couple of majors, whereas barbeque chair for your organization is somewhat less impressive, but maybe we'll still reward it with something.' Then a separate committee - the one that conducts the interviews - actually provides point values [for each of those positions], hones in more on a specific score and provides a ranking of candidates into a specific list. These lists are 'Recommended for Membership', 'Not Recommended', and 'Not Qualified.' So at its base, tapping is organized around a merit-based system, and every so often the chapter will update the tapping guidelines."*⁵³

The final decision about whether to admit "recommended" applicants is made by the entire membership, who vote on the matter once each semester at one of their general meetings. Aside from these votes, the general meetings seem by unanimous agreement to be pretty dull affairs, consisting mainly of updates from the organization's leaders about its overt activities such as Homecoming and Gator Growl. For all of the influence that members of the organization are believed to have in campus politics, there is barely even a hint of that on show at general meetings. Michel told me that the only clue is that "in the spring when the [System] party has

⁵¹Florida Blue Key. "About FBK." <http://fbk.org/about/>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

⁵²Vogel 2004

⁵³Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

been announced, the candidate for Student Body President will stand up without fail, introduce themselves and remind us to get out and vote. Of course no-one is there from the other side, so it becomes fairly obvious who has a horse in the race and who doesn't."⁵⁴ Ben Meyers confirmed Michel's description of the general meetings, telling me that "they have to have bar tabs to bribe people to go. When I was a freshman I thought Blue Key was like the Skull and Bones [a notorious secret society at Yale University], and I couldn't wait to see what goes on there. But [in the meetings] I start falling asleep. It's officer reports for 15 minutes. That's all it is!"⁵⁵ This seems to suit some of the members, who have no interest in being involved in Student Government politics – for them FBK is a "destination organization" or, as Nick Stinnett put it, "the retirement home for pols".⁵⁶ An ambition to gain entry into Blue Key is one of the reasons that members of the System work so hard in Student Government – once they have achieved their goal, many no longer have any desire to continue fighting political battles.

What is it about FBK that has made membership such a sought-after prize for the past several generations of UF students? For one thing its alumni list includes some of the most successful Floridians of recent times, including all but one of the men who served as governor between 1971 and 1998.⁵⁷ Adam Putnam, the state's current commissioner of agriculture, told a journalist that at the time of his tapping in 1994, "anybody who was anybody in Florida politics had been in Florida Blue Key and not just politics but business, the law, agriculture."⁵⁸ Governors Lawton Chiles and Bob Graham both cut their political teeth at UF while members of Blue Key in the 1950s, as did current US Senator Bill Nelson in the early 1960s. Given these names, it is perhaps no surprise that FBK events that included alumni were at one time considered to be among the most important political gatherings in Florida, so much so that State Senator William Shands once called the annual homecoming banquet before Gator Growl "the unofficial state Democratic party caucus." The banquet used to regularly attract some of the most important national politicians from both parties as guest speakers, including Vice Presidents Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale and George H.W. Bush; Senators John and Teddy Kennedy; and Congressmen Richard Nixon and Newt Gingrich, among others.⁵⁹ A photo of the future President Kennedy talking with members of Blue Key still features prominently on the organization's home page, presumably as a reminder to website visitors of FBK's historical prestige and influence.⁶⁰

With all of this in mind, it is hardly surprising that throughout the second half of the twentieth century there was a widespread perception that "the doors to the governor's mansion, Legislature

⁵⁴ Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

⁵⁵ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

⁵⁶ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

⁵⁷ Kassab 2013

⁵⁸ Vogel 2004

⁵⁹ Vogel 2004. Although it is true that Blue Key has a long historical association with the Democratic Party, it would be wrong to think that this is at the exclusion of the Republicans. My own experiences, corroborated by several interviewees whom I questioned on the subject, suggest that many of the most prominent members of both Blue Key and Student Government in recent years have been Republicans. The fact that the list of banquet speakers includes prominent politicians from both parties further suggests that the organization has often been viewed as significant by operatives on both sides of the partisan divide.

⁶⁰ Florida Blue Key. "Florida's Leadership Honorary." <http://fbk.org/>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

and judiciary in Florida all seemed to unlock with a Blue Key.”⁶¹ As recently as 1998, the St Petersburg Times declared that “there is no political network in this state more influential than Florida Blue Key.”⁶² Indeed, the benefits of membership in such an elite club have often proved to be very real, with alumni using the contacts they made in FBK to help them years later in their professional lives. According to a 2004 article in *Florida Trend*, many such examples exist:

“Take J. Hyatt Brown (tapped in 1959) and Charles Wells (tapped in 1960), fraternity brothers and roommates. Through Blue Key, they became friends with the likes of future U.S. Sen. Bob Graham (tapped in 1958) and Key alum Lawton Chiles (tapped in 1954.) Blue Key members ‘were kind of a community by reason of that common experience,’ Wells says. When Brown ran for the Legislature in 1972, he turned for help to Graham, who already was serving in the Legislature with a ‘whole bunch’ of other Blue Keys. Brown, later Florida House Speaker and chairman of Brown & Brown, one of the nation’s largest insurance firms, returned the favor to subsequent generations of Keys who came to him for advice, campaign contributions and jobs. Decades after they met, Gov. Chiles appointed Wells to the state Supreme Court. Blue Key was where future leaders learned their skills. ‘It taught you one thing: You make your friends before you need them,’ says Dexter Douglass, Chiles’ general counsel (tapped in 1950).”⁶³

FBK’s own website acknowledges the historical importance of its alumni network. On a page detailing its history, the organization reproduces part of an article originally written by longtime Blue Key advisor and alumni secretary William E. Rion for *Who’s Who in Florida Blue Key*. Rion writes that Blue Key, through the networking of its members “with each other, and with other alumni of the institution, provided... opportunities for personal enhancement and advancement. Many doors were opened to young college graduates whose resume included membership in Florida Blue Key.”⁶⁴ For a number of reasons (to be discussed later in this work) it is somewhat doubtful that the organization retains quite such an influential position in state politics today, but that is not to say that membership no longer has any benefits at all. Roger Austin, who was tapped as a student in the 1980s and has served several times on the tapping committee in recent years, told me that whatever FBK’s status in the broader domain of state politics, “it still pulls the strings on this campus”⁶⁵ and its list of alumni still seems impressive to ambitious undergraduates who are unaware of its apparent decline. Furthermore, Austin pointed out that “if you want to interview for a job with some big law firm... you’re probably going to be interviewing with some 50-year-old partner who was here [at UF] 25 or 30 years ago. They might be in Blue Key – there’s still a whole Blue Key network out there, even if its political power in Tallahassee has waned.”⁶⁶ Certainly then, there is some degree to which perception shapes reality with regard to the continuing importance of FBK in the eyes of both current students and UF alumni, regardless of whether other people in the state see things the same way. This fact can have real consequences

⁶¹Vogel 2004

⁶²St Petersburg Times 1998.

⁶³Vogel 2004

⁶⁴Florida Blue Key. “History.” <http://fbk.org/history/>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

⁶⁵Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

⁶⁶Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

in present-day campus politics: Johnny Castillo told me that when he was deciding whether or not to run as the indie candidate for Student Body President in 2013 it was an important factor he felt he had to consider, because he feared that defying Blue Key would be frowned upon by influential people whom he might encounter later in life: “I know that in the future if I ever want to do state politics in Florida... I would have to explain why I did this,” he said.⁶⁷ In Castillo’s case this fear did not prevent him from deciding to run, but it is surely at least conceivable that others who might have otherwise chosen to challenge the System reached a different decision after contemplating the power of FBK and its alumni.

Before one can fully appreciate how Florida Blue Key came to enjoy such a prominent position in the political landscape of the university and the state, it is important to have an understanding of the organization’s genesis and development. In 1923, UF officials realized that hundreds of miles of newly paved roads across the state provided easy access to the university for many more Floridians.⁶⁸ Administrators recruited a few student leaders to organize a “Dad’s Day” which, according to the FBK website, was intended as “a time for parents to visit and acquaint themselves with campus life.” With this purpose in mind, Florida Blue Key was founded on November 1st 1923, a few days before the event, with its stated purpose to “recognize leadership and promote service to the University.” As time went on, the organization’s duties included “playing host to campus visitors and to be at the call of the President of the University for any duty designated by him.” Membership was initially automatic for students who held particular leadership positions in other student organizations on campus. Soon other universities decided to duplicate the Blue Key model and create similar organizations of their own, and by the 1930s many had united to form the Blue Key National Honor Society. After a dispute about the stringency of a requirement for members to maintain a particular grade point average, the UF chapter split from the national organization, and today they continue to exist as two entirely distinct entities. Over time, “Dad’s Day” evolved into a much more elaborate series of Homecoming events including *Gator Growl* and the annual banquet – UF’s Blue Key chapter expanded in size and influence accordingly.⁶⁹

According to one theory, the Second World War and the Korean War played an important role in creating the potency of the Blue Key alumni network in the 1950s and 1960s. Because a generation of young men saw their education disrupted by military service, they attended UF later in life and “became contemporaries with much younger men through law school and Blue Key.”⁷⁰ At that time UF was the preeminent university in the state, so almost every white male who sought higher education attended the same institution. This may have helped to create the powerful professional network that subsequently emerged. For a long time that network remained exclusively white and exclusively male: FBK did not tap any women until 1974, over a quarter-century after the university started admitting female students. Even then it did so reluctantly, after the UF administration threatened to withdraw its funding if it continued to insist on being

⁶⁷ Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

⁶⁸ Douthat 1991

⁶⁹ All references in this paragraph since the previous footnote are from Florida Blue Key. “History.” <http://fbk.org/history/>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

⁷⁰ Vogel 2004

exclusively a “good-old-boys” network.⁷¹ The first black member was admitted in 1970, and the first black president in 1978.⁷² That same year, the organization again found its financial future threatened by the university when President Stephen O’Connell demanded several reforms to the way it operated, including greater transparency and diversity in its tapping process, and tighter controls on its accounting processes.⁷³ Other controversies periodically plagued the organization too: in 1989 it was fined and placed on six months’ probation after “a social mixer at the campus’ Florida Museum of Natural History turned rowdy. Members apparently under the influence of alcohol removed live snakes from exhibits and urinated in an exhibit pool.”⁷⁴

However, it was in the 1990s that Blue Key faced arguably the greatest threat to its existence. During the 1995 Student Government elections, a graduate student named Charles Grapski ran against the System for the Student Body Presidency. During the campaign, a series of fliers were distributed around campus purportedly displaying a copy of Grapski’s criminal record – but the record had been doctored to include a fictional charge of sexual assault against a minor.⁷⁵ Following the election (which Grapski unsurprisingly lost), he compiled evidence that two members of Florida Blue Key were behind the fliers, and sued both the individuals and the organization for defamation of character. Grapski “successfully generated a trove of sworn testimony [from disaffected FBK members] supporting his contention that FBK actively manipulated student government elections.”⁷⁶ When the case came to trial in 1998, the judge issued a Judicial Notice in which he ruled that:

“Florida Blue Key has historically involved itself in University of Florida student government elections by supporting parties and candidates for office... [It] has historically employed a house and group system of control over members and aspiring members to determine candidates for student government elected and appointed offices, Florida Blue Key membership, and slates of candidates to run for student government offices and political parties controlled by Florida Blue Key through its house and group system or otherwise.”⁷⁷

The jury was left to decide whether the defendants in the Grapski case were guilty of distributing the fliers, and whether they did so with the knowledge and assistance of FBK. On both counts they ruled in Grapski’s favor, and he was awarded \$250,000 in damages. Blue Key subsequently reached a settlement with Grapski under which the organization agreed to pay him \$85,000, one third of the total amount awarded.⁷⁸ Following this lawsuit and the negative publicity that it

⁷¹Douthat 1991

⁷²Vogel 2004

⁷³Douthat 1991

⁷⁴Douthat 1991

⁷⁵Vogel 2004. Grapski did have a real-life criminal record which included a DUI, two charges of aggravated assault on a police officer, and one charge related to violation of probation. However, there was no charge of sexual assault of any kind. (Source: Bushouse 1998).

⁷⁶Pillow 2010b

⁷⁷Judicial Notice in case 95-4412-CA, Alachua County Court. Found at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/29138637/Judicial-Notice>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

⁷⁸Associated Press 1998

generated, UF President John Lombardi ordered an investigation into the extent of Blue Key's influence on campus and ordered that it surrender financial control of Homecoming and Gator Growl to the university.⁷⁹ FBK retained responsibility for organizing and operating both events but the UF administration would henceforth need to approve all spending.⁸⁰

If Blue Key's involvement in student politics had previously been something of an open secret on the UF campus, it was now a matter of public record, having been asserted by numerous witnesses under oath and declared by a judge to be a matter of fact. Grapski described the organization as "a political machine that operated in the shell of a leadership honorary"⁸¹ – sentiments that have since been echoed by people involved in the System, past and present. Speaking in 2004, Adam Putnam described it as "an intensely political organization" that is "probably more political than the Florida Legislature."⁸² In my own interviews for the present study, Roger Austin – a leader in the organization during the 1980s – told me frankly that Blue Key "is a political party. I was the head of a political party."⁸³ Nick Stinnett, who was a leading figure in Blue Key while also serving as "de facto party whip" for the System inside the Student Senate, described FBK's involvement in Student Government as "the invisible hand, the man behind the curtain."⁸⁴

It seems, therefore, that Florida Blue Key has two distinct roles in the life of the University of Florida. Publicly, it is a well-respected "leadership honorary" with a proud tradition of service to the Gator Nation and an unrivalled number of the state's great and good among its alumni. However, it is also deeply enmeshed in the ruthless System that continues to govern campus politics behind the scenes. As I will explain in the next section of this work, the way in which FBK interacts with Student Government provides a powerful explanation for the rarity with which individuals or houses choose to fight the System: most simply have too much of a stake in the process and have too much to lose. The System is able to maintain the status quo of campus politics through four principal strategies: direct intervention of FBK leadership in campus politics, bloc leaders' control of leadership positions and Blue Key taps, the threat of severe consequences for organizations whose members rebel against the System, and the use of a wide range of underhanded tactics in Student Government elections. Many of these strategies seem profoundly disturbing from an ethical perspective and a few, like the Grapski defamation, are clearly illegal.

6. Carrots, sticks, and dirty tricks

Blue Key's involvement in campus politics seems to be beyond any reasonable doubt – but what exactly does that involvement look like? Do the leaders of Blue Key routinely intervene directly in the day-to-day running of Student Government or is their influence more subtle? The answer appears to be a bit of both. In terms of direct involvement, I found some historical accusations of apparent interference in Student Government by Blue Key officials. The most explicit of these was a claim in 1991 by then-*Alligator* editor Geoff Boucher that when he had been reporting on

⁷⁹Palm Beach Post editorial 1998

⁸⁰Lombardi tightens reins on UF's Blue Key

⁸¹Vogel 2004

⁸²Vogel 2004

⁸³Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

⁸⁴Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

the Student Senate for the newspaper, “he saw Blue Key operatives standing in back signaling thumbs-up and thumbs-down to orchestrate voting.”⁸⁵ Perhaps more interestingly, my own interviews uncovered three much more recent claims of direct involvement in Student Government affairs by high-ranking members of Blue Key leadership. The first involved a former Associate Justice of the Supreme Court who, speaking to me on condition of anonymity, claimed that in fall 2012 (while he was still on the Court) a member of the Blue Key executive board called him after the Court approved the text of a non-binding⁸⁶ referendum question to be placed on the ballot at the forthcoming election. The question, which asked students whether they supported the renaming of the student union, was presented by independent party Senator Ford Dwyer in light of evidence he uncovered that J.Wayne Reitz, the former UF President after whom the union is currently named, opposed racial integration of the university during his tenure and participated in a “witch-hunt” against gay students and faculty. The Blue Key executive allegedly demanded that the Associate Justice retract his support of the Court’s decision, on the grounds that several important Blue Key donors were against the renaming.⁸⁷ During the hearing at which the decision in question was made, objections to the wording of the referendum question had been made on behalf of the System by a student called Ariana Alfonso, whose father had been the chair of the university’s governing Board of Trustees until earlier that year.⁸⁸

A second recent instance of direct Blue Key involvement in Student Government politics reportedly took place in early 2013. Ben Meyers, who was elected as Student Body President in February 2011 but resigned before the end of his term⁸⁹, was planning to run for the office again in 2013 and had started to build some support within the System. His main rival was Christina Bonarrigo, the girlfriend of the incumbent president TJ Villamil and a member of Zeta Tau Alpha sorority. According to Meyers, he was contacted by FBK president Dana Somerstein in January 2013 because Somerstein “saw it as her responsibility as Blue Key president to maintain the System.”⁹⁰ She asked Meyers to attend a meeting with Bonarrigo to resolve the issue and hopefully ensure that the System was united at the election. Meyers made it clear before the proposed meeting that he was adamant about running, and the only compromise he would accept was a suggestion that Bonarrigo be his treasurer candidate in 2013, in exchange for his full support if she ran for the Student Body Presidency in 2014. After hearing of his stance, Somerstein apparently delayed seeing Meyers and Bonarrigo until after a Blue Key meeting the following week. At that Blue

⁸⁵Douthat 1991

⁸⁶By “non-binding”, I mean that a “Yes” vote in the referendum would not have resulted in the automatic renaming of the union because it would not have had force of law. Rather, it would have been a statement of the student body’s feelings on the issue.

⁸⁷The controversy surrounding this referendum question is one to which I return later in this work, when investigating the threats that System politicians make against their opponents. There is also more to be said about this specific incident involving the Associate Justice and the Blue Key executive – I revisit this at the beginning of my second paper.

⁸⁸Crabbe 2012

⁸⁹The circumstances surrounding Meyers’ resignation have never been entirely clear. During my involvement in Student Government I often heard rumors that he had been forced from office after being blackmailed for some reason by people in other blocs. However, I have not been able to substantiate those rumors, and Meyers himself declined the opportunity to discuss his resignation when I asked him about it during our interview.

⁹⁰Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

Key meeting, Meyers says that FBK leadership took action to undermine his coalition: several members of Delta Tau Delta (or “Delt”) – an influential fraternity from the political bloc that had pledged its support to Meyers – were not approved for major positions relating to Homecoming and Gator Growl which they had previously been expected to receive. As a result of this, Meyers says that Delt started to become very nervous about the consequences of publicly supporting his candidacy, and their house leaders eventually told him that they would not publicly support him. The apparent withdrawal of Delt from Meyers’ coalition made other houses rethink their support too, and soon Meyers found himself in a severely weakened position. Bonarrigo then offered him what he says was “a very good deal” to abandon his plans of running for president – a deal that he accepted, believing that it “took care of” his house and the other houses in his coalition. He did not elaborate on the details of that deal.⁹¹ I find this story particularly interesting because Somerstein’s apparent view that it was her responsibility as Blue Key president to directly intervene in a matter pertaining to Student Government implies a long-standing connection between the two institutions.

The third recent case of direct intervention into campus politics uncovered by my interviews involves Johnny Castillo, the presidential candidate for the independent movement in 2013. According to Castillo, within an hour of his candidacy becoming public knowledge he received a text from then-Student Body President TJ Villamil asking to meet with him. When they met a few days later, Villamil was accompanied by Brock Hankins, who had been campaign manager for his election in spring 2012 and was at that time the Vice President of Alumni Affairs for Florida Blue Key.⁹² Hankins, who later became FBK president for the fall 2013 semester, started the meeting by suggesting that all three of the former Sig Ep brothers turn off their phones (presumably to reassure each other that they were not secretly recording the conversation). Then the discussion began:

“To make a very long conversation short, Brock was there always as the great risk manager for Sig Ep, seeing if I was going to reveal Sig Ep’s secrets. Tj was trying to get a sense of why I was [running for president]. He was like, ‘You could have got positions if you wanted them. Why did you do things this way?’ It’s funny, but he called out Ben Meyers completely. He called Ben Meyers a piece of shit, said he was the most corrupt human being in the world, and said that ‘we don’t do things like that anymore, now it’s all based on merit’. They wanted to change my mind, obviously, and this was their last attempt to do so.”⁹³

This was apparently not the only time that Hankins intervened in the 2013 election campaign. Castillo told me that a couple of weeks later, a UF alumnus who was a pledge brother of Castillo in Sig Ep posted a message of support for his friend’s candidacy on Facebook. Shortly afterwards he received a phone call from Hankins, who asked him “Why are you doing this? You’re in Blue

⁹¹This paragraph is based entirely on Meyers’ account of the incident in question, provided to the author in an interview, Oct 2013.

⁹²Florida Blue Key. “Spring 2013 Tapping Class”. <http://fbk.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Spring-2013-Tapping-Class.pdf>, accessed Oct 28th 2013.

⁹³Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

Key.”⁹⁴ It was as though it seemed like a betrayal to Hankins that a member of Blue Key would prioritize a personal friendship over his loyalty to the organization. This particular friend was not intimidated by receiving an angry phone call from the soon-to-be Blue Key president and left his message online, but Castillo felt that others might not have held their nerve in similar circumstances.

Given these multiple recent examples, it seems evident that Blue Key leaders can sometimes directly intervene in Student Government politics. However, the general conclusion I reached from the various accounts I collected of FBK’s power was that direct intervention to avert a political crisis was rarely necessary for its leaders. Student Government and Florida Blue Key are really two sides of the same coin, inextricably bound together in the same system of patronage and coordinated by bloc leaders behind closed doors. Ben Meyers told me that the same bloc leaders who decide on the System candidate for Student Body President are the ones who decide the identities of the Blue Key president, Gator Growl producer, Homecoming chair, and other roles within FBK. These positions are all essentially bargaining chips in the same game: for example, if the Student Body President and the Blue Key President are leaders of different blocs then they might make trades with the positions over which they have specific influence. The Student Body President could say “I want two [Gator] Growl directors and I’ll give you two cabinet secretaries.” If the Blue Key president agreed to the deal then they would promise each other the Senate votes and the Blue Key votes to confirm those appointments.⁹⁵

It is not just leadership roles that are traded as part of the negotiations between bloc leaders. Admissions or “taps” into FBK are themselves subject to the same horse-trading as all other prestigious positions, contrary to the apparent meritocracy implied by the existence of a “tapping committee” and the scoring system for achievements that was described earlier. Because Blue Key membership is still seen by many as an important status symbol for Greek houses and other organizations at UF, each of the blocs wants to maintain parity with the others in terms of the number of Blue Key members that they have. According to Roger Austin, this is an important part of the tapping process – no bloc is prepared to approve the tapping of an uneven number of applicants such that one of the other blocs has more members than theirs.⁹⁶ This dynamic alone can serve as an important caveat to whatever meritocracy otherwise exists in the selection of new members.

Sometimes, however, political interference in the tapping process can apparently be much more explicit and severe. Ben Meyers told me that this is especially the case each spring, when the newly-elected Student Body President finds herself with an enormous number of bargaining chips: “The Student Body President is powerful by virtue of the position for about two months, between their election and their appointment of cabinet. After that they are more of a ceremonial

⁹⁴ Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

⁹⁵ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013.

⁹⁶ Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013. Austin also pointed out that this process can lead to blocs trying to keep secret when individual students are admitted into graduate school or law school at UF. If the other blocs were to become aware that a student would still be enrolled after the end of their undergraduate career (and thus would still be a member of FBK) then this might lead to the student’s bloc being denied a new member whose application might otherwise have been approved, in order to ensure that parity is maintained.

figurehead, unless they happen to be a bloc leader as well, in which case they have influence elsewhere.”⁹⁷ Because the Student Body President has the sole power to appoint cabinet positions, this can be leveraged to ensure other blocs support her choices for Blue Key taps. If the new president wants to pursue a political grudge against another house or bloc then she can do so by insisting that others who are interested in cabinet posts must vote against particular Blue Key applicants. This is precisely what happened when Meyers himself held the power in spring 2011. Working with Nick Stinnett, Meyers conspired to rig the process such that applicants from the social bloc were not tapped to Blue Key. Stinnett’s account of their plan is fascinating: the political and third blocs decided that the social bloc “had been getting really cocky. Their bloc leaders had been doing a lot of things to try and be dominant, and had reneged on some deals made between the blocs, so it was time to put them in their place.”⁹⁸ The tapping committee generally consists of six members – two from each bloc. This ensured that between the political and third bloc there was a majority for any votes that the committee took. These two blocs agreed that the various positions held by applicants from the social bloc would be “zeroed out” when the committee assigned scores to each applicant’s resume, so that barely any of those applicants would achieve the minimum required score to be placed on the “Recommended for membership” list. By failing to make this list, those applications would not come up for a vote at the next FBK general meeting and they would not be tapped.

Unfortunately for Meyers and Stinnett, the plan backfired. In the days between the announcement of the “Recommended” list and the FBK general meeting at which the applicants on that list would come up for a general vote, the third bloc apparently decided to betray the political bloc. At the meeting, a record seven members of Theta Chi (the leading house in the political bloc) were included on the “Recommended” list but, thanks to the combined votes of the third bloc and the enraged social bloc, only one of the seven was tapped. Stinnett recalled knowing at that moment that his career in campus politics was over, and he was right: within a week his newly emboldened political enemies had ensured that he was removed from his position in FBK as vice chair of Homecoming, and that plans to make him a vice president of Blue Key were shelved. He had become a pariah. Looking back at the incident in 2013, he accepts a lot of the blame for his own fate: “a lot of it was me and Ben coming in as new bloc leaders and wanting to be a big swinging dick, and show how powerful we were. It was a stupid decision.”⁹⁹

This is seemingly not the only occasion in recent history that denial of Blue Key taps has been used as a punishment for a group within the System that has been deemed guilty of some wrongdoing. Perhaps because of their less aggressive voter mobilization methods (as discussed earlier), it seems that the minority communities are regularly blamed by others in the System in the event of poorer-than-expected election results.¹⁰⁰ Such a thing almost certainly happened in 2012: after independent candidate Alex Cornillie almost beat TJ Villamil to the Student Body Presidency in 2012, some of the blame for the near-defeat was attributed to the Black Student Union, the Asian American Student Union and the Hispanic Student Association, whose members had apparently

⁹⁷ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

⁹⁸ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

⁹⁹ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

¹⁰⁰ Among others, Stinnett told me that this was the case.

not voted for Villamil in sufficiently high numbers. At the next round of tapping, several well-qualified applicants from these organizations were denied Blue Key membership including then-Senate President Aundre Price, who stepped down from his position soon afterwards. According to a report in the *Alligator* at the time, “the class of new Florida Blue Key initiates is nearly devoid of diversity. Of the 50 students selected in early April, six were members of what are called ‘the communities’... One source from the communities said they are receiving the blame for the slim victory in this semester’s SG [Student Government] elections. ‘It’s supposed to be our fault that the margin was too small,’ the source said.”¹⁰¹ For the worst “offences” against the System, punishments can often last for an enormous length of time. According to Stinnett, several years ago a member of Kappa Kappa Gamma sorority decided to run for Student Body Vice President against a System-endorsed candidate. She lost, and as punishment for her decision, no-one from Kappa Kappa Gamma was tapped to Blue Key for six or seven years. Such a long-standing grudge is not uncommon.¹⁰²

Given everything described above, is there any sense in which the Blue Key tapping process involves a genuinely meritocratic element, or is the tapping committee essentially a sham? Matt Michel, himself a recent member of that committee, seemed somewhat conflicted about the process. He acknowledged that Cornillie, who was a good friend and former roommate of his, was never tapped despite having four items on his resume that counted as “majors” in the scoring process, while others were admitted with a far less impressive pedigree. Sometimes, though, Michel thought that a decision not to tap someone might be based on an arguably reasonable notion – namely that some Blue Key members will not vote for an applicant whom they do not know. He thinks this is probably true of his own case: Michel was placed on the “recommended” list four times before eventually being admitted, but he was a graduate student who did not know many of the undergraduate-dominated FBK membership. He attributes his three rejections more to this fact than to any malice on the part of bloc leaders.¹⁰³ I was particularly interested to hear Nick Stinnett’s take on the extent to which he thinks genuine meritocracy plays a part in the tapping process. In response, he told me that even the applicants whose scores are “objectively” assessed by the tapping committee cannot be said to have attained their membership entirely on merit, since their appointments to those positions were themselves probably a result of deals between the bloc leaders rather than a genuinely competitive application process. Roger Austin made much the same point in his interview: “you can’t take the politics out of politics,” he said.¹⁰⁴

Denial of Blue Key taps is not the only punishment that the System can use against Greek houses or other organizations who defy it. At present, for example, Pi Lambda Phi fraternity is allegedly being targeted for punishment after it decided to defect to the opposition party during the February 2013 elections. Eager to impress his fraternity’s national organization by getting some of his brothers elected to the Student Senate, Pi Lam president Chris Spears and two others decided to run for the independent party, known in 2013 as the Students Party. “I wasn’t confident I could get anyone slated with the Swamp Party [the System party’s current incarnation] because

¹⁰¹Flechas 2012

¹⁰² Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

¹⁰³ Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

¹⁰⁴ Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

I had a rough idea of how that worked,” Spears told me, but in any case his house had very little involvement in the System so had little to lose.¹⁰⁵ Nonetheless, he found that in the months following the election, his house was still targeted for retribution. Later in the semester a member of his house who had had nothing to do with the Student Government elections decided to run for a major leadership position in one of the largest student organizations on campus. According to Spears, the System party mobilized everyone it could who was a member of the organization in question to vote against the Pi Lam brother whose name was on the ballot, purely as a retaliation for the house’s non-compliance in the Student Government election. Fortunately for Spears and his fraternity, their brother won the vote anyway, but Spears saw this as a clear example of the System’s propensity to hold grudges against those who dare to defy it.

Indeed, my interviews for this work and my own involvement with the independent movement have uncovered numerous cases of the System finding ways to threaten organizations, even those such as Pi Lam who have no real stake in the patronage system that governs the appointment of positions in Student Government and Blue Key. Often these threats relate to Student Government’s control over the funding of student organizations – an individual will be coerced into behaving in a particular way because they are told that their failure to comply will result in the defunding of any student organizations to which they are affiliated. I am aware of at least three reports of such incidents in the past two years alone, all of which have been verified by a sufficient number of sources that I am very confident of their veracity. The first two both involve members of UF’s Mock Trial Team, which receives a large portion of its funding from Student Government.¹⁰⁶ In late January 2012, when Alex Cornillie and Jesse Schmitt had been chosen as the independent party executive ticket, they still did not have a candidate to run for Student Body Treasurer. Cornillie approached John Kelly, a roommate of his who was a good public speaker and had budgetary experience through his roles in Mock Trial and IRHA. Cornillie persuaded Kelly to run, but less than 24 hours later he backed out. The following is Cornillie’s account of what happened:

“We talked him into it, but then the next day he called me up and he was like, ‘Hey man, I’m really sorry but I can’t do it... They said they were going to defund the Mock Trial team if I do it.’ I think he might have said IRHA too. He was like, ‘Any organization I’m a part of is going to get defunded.’... [I found out that the threat] was passed from Severin Walstad, who was the little political manipulator in IRHA at the time. He got the news from whatever powers that be, he passed it onto John and said, ‘Oh John, IRHA is going to be defunded if you do this thing.’ He tried to convince him in some way, and Severin is very convincing, so John bought it and was like, ‘I can’t do it.’ I tried to convince him, but he was like, ‘No, I just can’t do it.’”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Author interview with Chris Spears, Oct 2013

¹⁰⁶ CLAS Student Council. “Frequently asked questions”. <http://web.csd.ufl.edu/classc/faq.html>, accessed Oct 22nd 2013. The Mock Trial team receives Student Government funding as part of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Student Council. In 2013-14, that council received \$28,000 from Student Government, although I was unable to find documents that showed how much of this went to the Mock Trial team.

¹⁰⁷ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

Carly Wilson, who was eventually chosen to be Kelly's replacement as the treasurer candidate, was one of several other interviewees who confirmed Cornillie's account: "[Kelly] was afraid they [the System] would have substantially cut Mock Trial's budget, which is true. I'm sure they would have... that's exactly how they work."¹⁰⁸ A year later, the Mock Trial budget was allegedly threatened for a second time: one of its members had been very proactive during the late part of 2012 and early 2013 in helping the independent Students Party to argue various cases against the System in the Supreme Court of the Student Body. However, around the time of the spring 2013 elections the person in question suddenly ceased his work for the party and later admitted that someone from within the System had threatened Mock Trial's funding if he continued to be a thorn in their side. Not wanting to be responsible for damaging the student organization, he submitted to the threat and has had little to do with the Students Party since.¹⁰⁹

If the original source of these types of threats was unclear in the two cases described above, the same could not be said of a third incident that happened a few weeks before the fall 2012 elections. As mentioned earlier, that was the election in which Ford Dwyer, a senator from the Students Party, was attempting to place a non-binding referendum on the ballot asking students whether they supported changing the name of the student union. Dwyer had uncovered evidence that J. Wayne Reitz, the former UF president after whom the union is currently named, had opposed racial integration of the university and sought to expel gay students and faculty from campus. In the build-up to the referendum vote, Dwyer arranged for leading members of several student organizations including the Black Student Union, Asian American Student Union, Pride Student Union (an organization for LGBT students), the Women's Student Association and others to appear with him at the podium during a Student Senate meeting and declare their solidarity in supporting the referendum. However, days before the Senate meeting when this was set to take place, almost all of the leaders involved called Dwyer to say that they had decided it was no longer in the interests of their organizations to publicly take a position on the referendum.

At the time of the fall 2012 elections I was serving as campaign manager for the independent Students Party, and in that capacity I worked with Dwyer to investigate what had caused the sudden change of heart from each of these organizations – after all, it seemed particularly strange that the Black Student Union and Pride Student Union would choose not to support a referendum specifically aimed at condemning historical discrimination against their communities. Eventually I managed to meet privately with the presidents of two of the organizations that had previously agreed to be involved in Dwyer's Senate announcement, and both of them confirmed that they had received phone calls from then-Budget Committee chairwoman Christina Bonarrigo, who had told them (incorrectly) that it was prohibited for any student organizations receiving funding from Student Government to take a position on a referendum question. Both leaders confirmed to me that they felt Bonarrigo, who was widely expected to be the System party's candidate for Student Body President the following semester, was suggesting that their funding would be jeopardized if they proceeded with their plans to publicly endorse Dwyer's referendum. I told both of the students (truthfully, I might add) that regardless of my role as campaign manager for the

¹⁰⁸ Author interview with Carly Wilson, Oct 2013

¹⁰⁹ The person in question told me personally about the threats that had been made to him. Since that conversation did not take place as part of this project, I chose to hide his identity in the description above.

party opposed to Bonarrigo, I believed they were being bullied and that they had a responsibility to come forward. Given the prominence of their organizations on campus, I felt that Bonarrigo would never have been able to follow through on her apparent threat to defund either group, and I told them that this would especially be the case if they reported the incident to the *Alligator*. Both of them considered my suggestion but eventually decided that they felt Bonarrigo's threat was a sincere one, and that they could not risk the funding of the organizations for which they were responsible.¹¹⁰ The story was never made public and Bonarrigo went on to be elected Student Body President in a landslide the following February.

Given these three recent examples of the System seemingly using its control over student organization funding for political advantage, I asked several interviewees whether they were aware of this being a commonly used tactic. Matt Michel, who has served in both the Senate and the Supreme Court, thought that such methods would only be used rarely, if at all: "if that is happening then I think it must be done very rarely. Otherwise I think there would have to be fingerprints somewhere. Someone would slip up and it would all come to light."¹¹¹ However, Nick Stinnett and Ben Meyers – both of whom were at one time among the System leaders with the authority to decide that such threats should be made – told me that threats to defund organizations are a relatively frequent strategy employed to keep students and their organizations "in line". Stinnett said that such threats are made "regularly" and that he used to be one of the people who would be issuing the threats – people might be threatened in situations such as that of John Kelly and the treasurer candidacy, but also if they were talking to the *Alligator* about something that would generate negative press, or in any number of other circumstances where they "were not doing what they were told."¹¹² For his part, Meyers said that threats to defund organizations are "absolutely" something that happens: "that's rarely explicit, it's much more implicit, but it happens."¹¹³ I heard several stories of threats being made in the implicit, non-specific way that Meyers describes: for example, Carly Wilson told me that she knew of someone who voted the "wrong way" in the Senate on a particular issue and received a sinister text message from Severin Walstad, the same person who Cornillie accuses of delivering the threat to John Kelly. According to Wilson, the message read simply: "We know how you vote."¹¹⁴

Obviously, the aim of these kinds of threats is to control people's behavior by making them fear not only the consequences for their organizations if they displease the System, but also that they will be held responsible by their friends and peers for those consequences. Being disowned in this way was a major fear for Cornillie when he was deciding whether to run for president with the opposition party, and he told me that it was one of the main reasons that he was initially against the idea. Interestingly, he claimed he was approached by many people in System party t-shirts who were handing out fliers for his opponents but secretly supported him: "I had a lot of people who would come up to me and tell me I'm going to vote for you... I really believe in what you're

¹¹⁰ Again, given that my conversations with these people took place outside of the context of this project, I have decided not to reveal their identities in this paper.

¹¹¹ Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

¹¹² Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

¹¹³ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

¹¹⁴ Author interview with Carly Wilson, Oct 2013

saying, but I just have to wear this shirt and pass out these flyers.' That is how severely ingrained the fear of retribution is for them and their organization."¹¹⁵ Cornillie believes that at the root of this fear is the concern that students have for their future careers, and a belief that they will only be able to get good jobs after college if they are able to be involved in important organizations while at college: "If suddenly that whole avenue is blocked off [to everyone in your organization] just because you passed out some flyers for the wrong political party during a Student Government election, think of the people who would be mad at you that you could have maybe ruined their chances for a particular job."¹¹⁶

One of the most frustrating things about such a mentality is that the fear is often unwarranted. As I suggested with regard to the student organizations involved with the student union referendum in 2012, it would be politically disastrous for the System to defund a student organization that was the main representative of any reasonably sized community on campus – the negative headlines created by such a move would surely act as a deterrent against trying such a thing. In fact, both Cornillie and Carly Wilson gave me examples of times when they had actually *benefited* from defying the System. In Cornillie's case, the experience in question happened early in his college career, while he was still part of the System as an active member of Kappa Sigma fraternity. There were two positions in Student Government that interested him at the time, so he applied for both. Soon afterwards he was approached by one of the political leaders in his fraternity who asked him to withdraw his application for one of the two positions because the fraternity had another brother in mind for that role. Cornillie was assured that if he withdrew his application for one of the positions then he would definitely receive the other, but he chose to ignore this edict and interviewed for both positions. He ended up being appointed for both roles, which angered some people within his fraternity but really brought no other negative consequences. Meanwhile, Wilson found during her time in Senate as a member of the System party that the more she spoke out against policies with which she disagreed, the more she was rewarded: "I would speak out against things that I found to be morally reprehensible. The further I would go in that direction, the more things they would offer me in hopes that I would stay. I got to be a member of the judiciary committee and of the budget committee, and they made me the chair of two made-up committees!"¹¹⁷ Wilson thinks that the System leadership had to use this tactic with her because she was not affiliated to any organization that they had the power to threaten. Put another way, they could not hit her with sticks so all they could do was to offer her carrots.

Both carrots and sticks are used during the actual election days on campus to ensure that all members of Greek houses vote, including the "pledges" who have not yet been accepted as members. Each fraternity and sorority has a "house rep" (more recently known as an "organizational rep") who is responsible for ensuring that every member of their chapter votes before the polls close. According to Johnny Castillo, who was a house rep for the System party as a freshman in spring 2010, the people who fill those positions are normally people who are interested in rising up the ladder in Student Government – for them, showing that they can get all of their houses

¹¹⁵ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

¹¹⁶ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

¹¹⁷ Author interview with Carly Wilson, Oct 2013

to vote is a way of proving themselves capable of bigger things. Castillo said that as a house rep, “you facilitate it any way possible so that they [your fellow house members] can vote, whether it's taking them to the gym so they can vote at the gym, or whatever. You have to make sure that the med student - who doesn't give a shit and hasn't slept in three days - goes to vote.”¹¹⁸ Most of the house reps display a “sticker board” in their house, which is a list of the house roster with a space next to each name where the corresponding member can affix the ‘I Voted’ sticker that they receive from the polls, to prove that they have voted. Throughout the two days of elections, System party leaders are in regular contact with the house reps to see what proportion of each fraternity and sorority has voted. According to Alex Cornillie, people who did not yet have a sticker by their name on the board would be “bothered over and over: ‘Did you vote? Did you vote? Why didn’t you vote? Why don’t you go vote? How about somebody drives you there?’ If they don’t want to vote, just leave them alone! But that just couldn’t be, so all of these votes were being cast by people who didn’t really want to be voting, and I just felt that it distorted the whole electoral system.”¹¹⁹

The existence of sticker-boards is an issue that has animated many within the independent movement for years – a referendum question asking whether to ban “I Voted” stickers from being distributed at Student Government elections was soundly defeated in September 2009¹²⁰, while in 2011 an independent party was banned from running for office in the fall election after one of its alumni was found guilty of distributing “I Voted” stickers to Greek students so that they would not have to vote.¹²¹ In Roger Austin’s view, this is the wrong battle for the indies to be fighting and is no different to the way in which Republicans and Democrats repeatedly contact registered voters in “real-world” elections on election days to encourage them to vote. “[If you're] complaining about voter boards, you're proving why you keep losing,” Austin said. “You're politically inferior to your opponents, who are more sophisticated and know how to get out the vote.”¹²²

Most of the people to whom I spoke about the System’s voter mobilization efforts said that a combination of regular harassment and “guilt trips” about the need to be supportive of house members who were running for office is often enough to get many Greeks to vote – indeed, as I will argue in my second paper, the norms and values of some fraternities and sororities seem to make them particularly good targets for mobilization strategies that appeal to voters’ sense of loyalty and to their obedience towards the wishes of their house leaders. However, there is some evidence to suggest that the tactics used by house reps can sometimes move beyond simple encouragement of their peers. After the first day of the February 2010 elections, an anonymous source made a recording of a meeting for house reps that the System party reportedly held in a fraternity house. The recording, which was subsequently given to the independent movement and passed on to the press, allegedly features several party officials (including future Student Body

¹¹⁸ Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

¹¹⁹ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

¹²⁰ University of Florida Student Government. “Election Results”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GetInvolved/Elections/ElectionResults>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹²¹ University of Florida Student Government. “Previous Cases and Rulings”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/PreviousCasesandRulings>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹²² Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

Presidents TJ Villamil and Christina Bonarrigo)¹²³ expressing their displeasure at the low turnout that several of the houses had managed by this point in the election. At one point in the tape, a male voice praises two sororities' reps for some particularly disturbing tactics: "Theta, you guys had that incentive of getting your girls a bottle, not too many sororities do that, that's awesome. Uh, DPhiE, I know you had your baby pledge class that they couldn't eat until they went and voted. [Giggles] That's amazing, that's what you need to do. So I applaud you all for doing that."¹²⁴

Although I did not find any evidence besides this recording that the denial of food to pledges who have not voted is a common occurrence, several interviewees confirmed that house reps will routinely offer alcohol as an incentive for people to vote. Castillo told me that "at Sig Ep [denying people food] would have never worked because we were a bunch of big, cocky motherfuckers who would have literally punched you in the face... But we loved to drink. So we had a bottle raffle - the house rep had to pay for a handle of something good like Jack [Daniels] that people would actually want, and you raffle it [among the brothers who have brought home an 'I Voted' sticker]."¹²⁵ Nick Stinnett told me that the party usually has a bar tab at a popular location in midtown Gainesville after the second day of the election, so that would also be used as an incentive to ensure that people voted: "if you bring in a sticker then you get a wristband [that gains you entry into the bar]."¹²⁶

However ethically and legally questionable the System's tactics are with regard to their own voters during election season, those are nothing as compared to some of the methods that it historically uses against the opposition party. As indicated by the quotes at the beginning of this work, former Florida governors Lawton Chiles and Bob Graham both recalled that the campaign strategies used at UF can be even more aggressive than those used in state and national politics. The false accusations of child molestation leveled against Charles Grapski are perhaps the most famous example of dirty tricks used in a Student Government election, but those are just one part of a disturbingly sordid legacy of incidents. One tactic that has been used repeatedly by members of the System party is to steal copies of the *Alligator* from its racks around campus if it endorses the non-System candidates, so that fewer students are able to read the endorsement. Gov. Graham told the *Alligator* in 2012 that this happened when he was a student in the 1950s¹²⁷, and in 1976 the State Attorney's Office investigated after a similar incident. According to the Palm Beach Post, "Blue Key operatives stationed themselves at *Alligator* newsstands to read the endorsements. Their mission was to raid the news racks if the *Alligator* endorsed the candidate running on an anti-Blue Key platform. The *Alligator* endorsed the candidate, Dan Lobeck, and by the time classes started, 17,500 of 22,000 copies had disappeared."¹²⁸ In the end no charges were filed, but Lobeck won a rare victory against the System and became Student Body President. The

¹²³Two of the voices on the tape have been identified by multiple sources as being TJ Villamil and Christina Bonarrigo, the couple who would later be elected as Student Body Presidents in 2012 and 2013 respectively. Johnny Castillo, who says he was at the meeting where the recording was made, verified in my interview with him that the voices on the tape are indeed those of Villamil and Bonarrigo.

¹²⁴Transcript as reported in Pillow 2010a

¹²⁵Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

¹²⁶Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

¹²⁷Flechas 2012

¹²⁸Douthat 1991

Orlando Sun-Sentinel reported another such incident in 1996¹²⁹, and Roger Austin told me in our interview that he was aware of several times when copies of the *Alligator* had gone missing after it issued endorsements, including one time in the late 1990s when a member of his fraternity, Delta Upsilon, was caught in the act and was arrested.¹³⁰

In February 2012, when I was helping to run the independent party's campaign, I was personally involved in another case of System members trying to remove copies of the *Alligator*. On Monday February 20th, the *Alligator* announced that Florida Gators football coach Will Muschamp had endorsed independent party vice presidential candidate Jesse Schmitt, who was a walk-on member of the team. By mid-morning I was told by an *Alligator* reporter that there were several reports of empty racks in less highly-populated areas of campus, and that the staff at the newspaper suspected an organized attempt to remove them, but that they had printed extra copies in case of such an incident and were working to refill the racks as quickly as they could.¹³¹ In the afternoon, a member of our party called me to say that a friend of hers had reported seeing Jason Tiemeier, a System party leader who was the Senate Pro Tempore at that time, removing a stack of *Alligators* from a rack and throwing them in a nearby trash can. I was able to track down the witness through Facebook and obtained his phone number from a mutual friend who was living in the same apartment complex as me – shortly afterwards he agreed to speak with the *Alligator* and to name Tiemeier on the record as the culprit. The story ran on the front page on Tuesday February 21st, the first day of voting.¹³²

The reaction from System party presidential candidate TJ Villamil was one of outrage. In a YouTube video filmed and released on that Tuesday, a visibly shaken Villamil accused the *Alligator* of conducting a smear campaign against him because, as Student Body Treasurer during the previous year, he had reduced the amount of money that Student Government spent advertising in the publication. He also clearly implied that there might be a racial motive behind the *Alligator* coverage, drawing on the fact that his party's ticket was billing itself as the first "all-minority" executive ticket in UF Student Government history:

"They [the Alligator staff] have thrown away all journalistic integrity for the sake of those few dollars – misrepresenting facts, inaccurate quotes and completely falsified stories are just some of the ways that the Alligator has attempted to skew my message to the voters. They are no longer a paper motivated by student interest, but by financial greed, vengeance, and possibly

¹²⁹Bushouse 1998

¹³⁰Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

¹³¹An interesting aside: At approximately 1 o'clock that morning when we received confirmation that the story was running on the front page, I immediately called the University Police Department to tell them of our fears that the System party might try to steal the newspapers – I was aware of the previous incidents mentioned above, and was hopeful that the police might take seriously the possibility of such a thing happening again. Unfortunately for me, the officer on the phone told me dismissively that because the *Alligator* was a free newspaper, it was perfectly legal for people to take as many copies as they wished – a position which contradicts the position taken by a police spokesperson later that day when speaking to the *Alligator* about what had happened. The spokesperson was quoted as saying that it might be considered theft because even though the newspapers are free, they are not intended for mass destruction. He added that the incident would definitely be referred to Student Conduct. See Hamilton 2012.

¹³²Hamilton 2012

something more. To address the rumors of racial discrimination by the Alligator, it is important to understand that this historic minority ticket is sure to face opposition. However, those who stand up for what is right will always prevail."¹³³

As noted earlier, Villamil was narrowly elected the day after this diatribe against the *Alligator*. However, that was not the end of the story: shortly after the election, Tiemeier admitted in a letter to the newspaper that he was guilty of throwing away the newspapers.¹³⁴ Despite this admission, Villamil has never (at least to my knowledge) publicly retracted or apologized for the serious charges that he made against the *Alligator*.

Aside from throwing away newspapers, another common trick employed by the System party is to change its name every few elections, particularly when the existing party brand has been damaged by negative headlines. Of course, this is not something that is unique to student politics, but in the case of UF it is notable for the vehemence with which System members publicly deny any link to the previous incarnation of the party. After the newspaper controversy and near-defeat of the spring 2012 elections, the System party rebranded itself from the "Unite Party" to the "Swamp Party" in time for the Senate elections of the following fall. Following the change, members of the "new" party including its spokesperson Daniel Landesberg claimed that "this is not a name change for the Unite Party... but a new party that stands for 'fair and proper representation of constituents and commitment for straightforward, no-nonsense government.'".¹³⁵ In fact, the leadership of this new party was filled predominantly with people who had played key roles in previous Unite Party campaigns. There is a long history of the System party changing its name: in his deposition for the 1998 Grapski defamation trial, former Student Body President Howard Christopher Thompkins admitted that "the party names are routinely changed and recycled from year to year"¹³⁶ – indeed, the name "Swamp Party" was previously used as recently as 2006 before it reappeared in 2012.¹³⁷ Another example of such a tactic came before the 2004 election, when Jamal Sowell split from the System and ran successfully against it for the presidency. For that campaign the System changed from "Ignite" to "Innovate", causing Sowell to tell the *Alligator* that the switch was not a new party at all, but simply a name change.¹³⁸

A range of other questionable campaign strategies have been reported through the years: Gov. Graham said in a 2012 *Alligator* article that during his student days there were incidents of the System party "tapping phones to listen in on conversations of opposing parties"¹³⁹; Debbie Wasserman-Schultz recalled that during the 1980s "Blue Key violated election codes and used petty intimidation tactics against her and her colleagues: torn-down party fliers, smear campaigns,

¹³³YouTube. "What the Alligator Won't Tell You". <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DpbFDr7lvY8>, accessed Oct 19th 2013.

¹³⁴Tiemeier 2012

¹³⁵Shavell 2012

¹³⁶Pillow 2010b

¹³⁷University of Florida Student Government. "Election Results". <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GetInvolved/Elections/ElectionResults>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹³⁸Aubuchon 2005, p. 38

¹³⁹Flechas 2012

slashed tires, [and] pouring sugar in an opponent's gas tank"¹⁴⁰; Gov. Chiles remembered that when he was at UF, "parties would deface their own campaign signs or run sound trucks through campus housing areas blaring the name of the opposing candidate to give the other political party a bad name".¹⁴¹ Indeed, the tactic of blaming the opposition for offences that were in fact carried out by System supporters is still used: on the first day of the spring 2012 election I received a phone call from an *Alligator* reporter asking for my reaction to a quote she attributed to Christina Bonarrigo (then the spokeswoman for the System party) claiming that the disappearance of copies of the *Alligator* was probably the fault of the independent party, who might be trying to frame her party in hopes of having them disqualified from the election. I responded by asking the reporter how plausible it seemed that my party would want to throw away copies of a newspaper whose front page featured the Florida Gators football coach endorsing our candidate. The discussion ended shortly thereafter.

Bonarrigo's apparent claim that the independent party was trying to abuse the process by which parties can be expelled for violating election codes is particularly galling in light of evidence I found during my interviews for this project which suggests that the System party itself made an attempt to exploit the complaints process for purposes that it knew to be illegitimate. During the first day of the election – an eventful day by all accounts – the System party filed a complaint claiming that an e-mail sent by candidates from the Students Party (the independent party) in the College of Engineering broke the rules governing campaigning over the internet. It seemed to be quite obviously a bogus claim, but the Elections Commission moved to disqualify the Students Party's engineering candidates. The Students Party appealed, and the case was to be settled by the Supreme Court after the election. Meanwhile the Students Party candidates won all three of the seats allocated to the college. Wilson told me that soon after the election, the Students Party's legal counsel Jon Ossip received a call from a leading member of Florida Blue Key who had helped to manage TJ Villamil's campaign:

*"Jon got a call from [the FBK member], who said that they filed the complaint as an insurance in case Tj lost, and when Tj won they wanted to withdraw the complaint because - imagine this - it would look really, really bad if you disqualified an entire slate of people because someone sent out an e-mail... If Tj had lost by a couple of hundred votes then they planned to claim that the 'unfair e-mail' was the reason he lost, and they would try to get the Students Party disqualified. But Tj won, and now they didn't know what to do because they could not withdraw the complaint at that point. We won that Supreme Court hearing."*¹⁴²

It therefore seems that the System party has a long and disturbing history of election tactics that are ethically troubling and, in some cases, illegal. However, there are two important qualifications I think it is important to make before closing this account of those tactics. The first is that my focus on the System party here should not be taken as an assertion that the independent movement

¹⁴⁰Bushouse 1998

¹⁴¹Douthat 1991

¹⁴²Author interview with Carly Wilson, Oct 2013. At Wilson's request I have kept the identity of the FBK member anonymous.

has always been beyond reproach in terms of its methods. For example, one valid response to my claims about the System's frequent changes of party name is that the opposition parties have been guilty of similarly frequent changes. This is undeniably true, but I think the two cases are different in some important respects: my understanding of the history of the independent movement at UF (or, at the very least, its recent history with which I am most familiar) is that most of its "name changes" have been the result of genuine divisions within the movement. For example, the Students Party was created in 2011 as an attempt to reunify opposition to the System following a damaging split in which two separate independent parties had briefly existed. While it is probably true that the names of opposition parties have changed as often as has the System party, this has often been because of legitimate internal divisions rather than a cynical rebranding exercise designed to deceive voters.

That being said, there are certainly cases when opponents of the System have been guilty of ethically questionable behavior. One recent example happened during the February 2013 campaign, when an anonymously-authored website appeared online about presidential candidate Christina Bonarrigo. The site, called "The Truth About Bon Bon", claimed to be written by Swamp Party supporters who were opposed to Bonarrigo's candidacy. It made numerous claims about her character, many of which were cryptic or posited without evidence. Months after the election, a student who had contributed to the site told me who had been its mastermind and main author – contrary to its claims, the website had not been written by well-intentioned Swamp Party members but was apparently developed by a student supporter of the Democratic Party who disliked the Republican Bonarrigo. Although the site's author was not a member of the Students Party, this case nonetheless showed that ethically questionable practices were not solely the province of the System and its supporters.¹⁴³

A second important qualification to make is that, in my experience, some of the more outlandish claims made by independents about corrupt practices in the System are without foundation. For example, I found that one particularly common belief is that the System has the ability to rig elections somehow. Intuitively this does not make much sense: if they had the ability to simply fix the vote then why would supporters of the System go to the trouble of organizing a costly campaign and engaging in some of the campaign tactics described above? Moreover, I simply did not find any credible evidence that such a practice was possible – several of the people with whom I spoke for this project were former leaders of the System who no longer had any obvious motivation to be protective of it, and who were generally very frank about how it operates. None of them suggested that there was any way in which Student Government elections were rigged.

These two qualifications to my argument should not be read, however, as an attempt to be an apologist for the System or to imply that "both sides are as bad as each other." I believe that there is an overwhelming volume of evidence to suggest that there is a complex interplay of carrots, sticks and dirty tricks at the heart of the System that dominates UF's Student Government. The strategies that the System deploys to maintain its dominance are highly organized and operate on a scale that the independent movement does not and could not match. I also believe that over

¹⁴³ As with several other cases in this work, I have kept the identity of the website author anonymous because it was told to me in confidence.

a long period of time, as the System has consolidated its grip on campus politics, it has been able to leverage its long-term incumbency in such a way that many of the rules and procedures governing Student Government inherently benefit it and disadvantage any opposition. I will now turn to a discussion of those institutional advantages.

7. Choosing the rules and picking the referees

It seems to me that one of the principal advantages enjoyed by the System is that every one of the people with responsibility for adjudicating Student Government elections is chosen, either directly or indirectly, by the majority party. The Student Body Constitution provides little guidance in terms of how elections must be conducted; instead, that responsibility is left to the Student Senate through its responsibility for the Student Body Statutes, or “codes”, that govern all three branches of government. Unlike constitutional amendments, which require a 60% majority of all those who vote in a referendum of the entire student body¹⁴⁴, most of the codes can be amended by a simple majority vote in the Senate.¹⁴⁵ This includes the “700 codes” (so named because each regulation listed in this section is given a number between 700 and 799) that govern the conduct of elections.

Under the current terms of the 700 codes, there are three levels of adjudication in Student Government elections. The first of these is the Supervisor of Elections, who is appointed annually “by nomination of the Student Body President, subject to the approval of a two-thirds vote of the Student Senate.”¹⁴⁶ The Supervisor of Elections, along with at least four Assistant Supervisors whom she nominates – subject again to a two-thirds vote in the Senate – is responsible for the administration of the election: this includes ensuring that only eligible candidates are placed on the ballot, ensuring that the polling locations are operated in a fair way, and reporting any possible violations of campaigning rules by candidates or their supporters to the Elections Commission.¹⁴⁷ Given the manner in which the Supervisor of Elections is appointed, it is perhaps no surprise that the office-holder is normally someone with ties to the Student Body President and the System. Nick Stinnett confirmed that this is the case, but denied that it has much practical effect on the conduct of the election. He said that “they [the Supervisor] are one of us, but they can't actually do anything. Polls are worked by poll workers, not election officials. The Supervisor's role is limited to charging people with violations - beyond that, they really don't have any power.”¹⁴⁸

This claim is contrary to a belief that I found to be common in the independent movement – namely that the Supervisor of Elections helps the System party by providing regular updates of

¹⁴⁴UF Student Body Constitution, Article VIII, Section 4. From University of Florida Student Government. “Constitution”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁴⁵Student Body Statute 302.1. From University of Florida Student Government. “Constitution”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁴⁶Student Body Statute 711.0. From University of Florida Student Government. “Constitution”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁴⁷See Chapter 710 of Student Body Statutes – The Supervisor of Elections Act. In particular statutes 711.2, 712.0, 713.3, 713.31. From University of Florida Student Government. “Constitution”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁴⁸Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

the distribution of votes throughout the two days of voting. Stinnett pointed out in our interview that this would never have been possible: in past years when paper ballots were used, none of the votes were counted until after the second day of voting, while more recently the only person with access to the electronic voting system is the IT administrator for Student Government. Both parties are provided with the total number of votes cast after the first day of elections but, as far as I am aware, the System party receives no more information in that regard than does the opposition. Of course, it is hypothetically possible that the IT administrator would break election rules to provide the System party with regular updates, but I found no evidence of that happening. Indeed, Alex Cornillie told me that during his election he was comfortable that the electronic voting system was being administered fairly and, in any case, there was little he could do if even the university employees were involved in conspiring to rig an election: “I was in the room when they were tallying the votes electronically, and they were explaining that it was the same kind of thing that countries used to count carbon credits. There’s no getting in it before the final vote count. And I was like, ‘OK, well, I believe that.’ I mean, if even the IT administrator is lying to me for some... election in Student Government, forget it. Who cares at that point? So I just believe him.”¹⁴⁹

The second level of adjudication in elections is the Elections Commission. This is a body comprised of six individuals: two nominated by the Student Body President, two by the Senate President, and two by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. All nominations are subject to a two-thirds confirmation vote in the Senate.¹⁵⁰ In theory, of course, the fact that each of the three branches of government nominates members to the Elections Commission makes it nonpartisan in the sense that no individual has sole power over the nominations. In practice, given the regularity with which the System party holds the Student Body Presidency and a large majority in the Senate, the System party is able to nominate at least four of the six members of the Commission. The Elections Commission’s main responsibility is to decide the merits of any complaints about code violations filed by the Supervisor and his assistants, the candidates and their parties, or any other member of the student body. The Commission “may formally recommend to the Supreme Court that the candidate or political party be disqualified. Only the Supreme Court shall have the power to remove a candidate’s name from the ballot,”¹⁵¹ except for in the case of the Supervisor of Elections removing a name from the ballot due to ineligibility.

As suggested by the code quoted above, the Supreme Court of the Student Body is the third and final level of adjudication for Student Government elections. As mentioned at the start of this work, the Court is comprised of seven students appointed by the Student Body President and confirmed by a two-thirds vote in the Senate.¹⁵² After appointment, they serve until they resign, are impeached, or graduate and cease to be a member of the student body. However, because

¹⁴⁹ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

¹⁵⁰ Student Body Statute 721.1. From University of Florida Student Government. “Constitution”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁵¹ Student Body Statute 723.1. From University of Florida Student Government. “Constitution”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁵² UF Student Body Constitution, Article V, Section 3(e). From University of Florida Student Government. “Constitution”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

the academic requirements stipulated for the position tend to ensure that most Supreme Court Justices are in at least their second year of law school when appointed, there is a fairly high turnover of membership on the Court. This means that almost every Student Body President is able to nominate one or more Supreme Court Justices during their term in office. Of course, this process is not unique to Student Government – the United States Supreme Court follows a similar procedure for appointing members – but, as with the Supervisor of Elections and the Elections Commission, the perennial dominance of one party over campus politics ensures that the System has a monopoly on appointments to the Court. This means that, unless an opposition party has more than one-third of the seats in the Senate, the System party has unchecked control over appointments to all three stages of adjudication in the Student Government election process.

According to Matt Michel, an Associate Justice who served as Chief Justice until mid-2013, the Court "pretty much exclusively deal[s] with election-related issues. Any decision by the Elections Commission can be appealed directly to us, and we can also issue injunctions telling Student Government officials to do something or not to do something."¹⁵³ Michel said that during his time on the Court, one of the biggest cases brought to it related to a complaint by the independent party that voters were being mistakenly assigned to the wrong zip code in the fall 2011 Senate elections, when the seats being contested were assigned according to geographical constituency. Interestingly, this case actually raised the question of whether the Supreme Court really *does* have the final word on election issues. The Constitution specifies that the Senate shall "be the sole judge of the validity of election results"¹⁵⁴, meaning that when the Court issued a temporary injunction on the Senate to prohibit it from validating the election results while the issue was investigated, Michel was not sure that the Senate was obliged to comply. At the time, members of the Court including Michel argued that if the Senate had absolute authority in validating elections then the existence of an Elections Commission and a Supervisor of Elections was ultimately pointless because the Senate could override all of them. "The metaphor we used the most was that it would be like the fox guarding the henhouse," said Michel. "The Senate, thank God, honored [the injunction] and postponed validation. If they had gone ahead and validated, I don't know what we would have done. We don't have a judicial army at our command to enforce our decrees!"¹⁵⁵

I find the situation of the Supreme Court to be worryingly illustrative of a problem that permeates all three branches of government in a system such as that of UF's Student Government where one party has been able to establish almost permanent dominance over the institution: there is ultimately no formal protection against the System imposing whatever kind of rules it wants on how Student Government operates. In the event that the Student Body President's party has a supermajority of two-thirds in the Senate, there is essentially no means of stopping it from imposing its will on the way in which Student Government operates. The only two entities within Student Government which could constrain this dominance are ill-equipped to do so: the first entity would be a strong opposition that was able to consistently hold at least 34 of the 100 seats in the Senate or had a realistic chance of winning the executive branch elections. Neither of these

¹⁵³ Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

¹⁵⁴ UF Student Body Constitution, Article III, Section 6(e). From University of Florida Student Government. "Constitution". <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁵⁵ Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

occurrences is impossible, but opposition parties have to compete with the complex system of patronage described in earlier sections of this work. This makes their chances of success slim. The second entity that could provide a check on the power of the System is the Supreme Court, but for the reasons just described, it is often unlikely to do so. Given the System dominance of the other two branches of government, there is a strong possibility that people appointed to the Court may be sympathetic to the System, and in any case, the scope of the Court's jurisdiction seems tenuous with regard to elections because of the Senate holding the sole power to validate results.

With the opposition parties and the judicial branch of Student Government unable to provide adequate constraints, both the executive and the legislature have effectively been able to do as they please. I have already explained how this manifests itself in terms of the executive branch: it has often resulted in a near-total absence of scrutiny for appointments to cabinet positions and heads of executive agencies – hence why so many important roles are able to be allocated as legacy positions or as part of a deal between bloc leaders, rather than being based on merit. I now want to say a little more about how this lack of scrutiny affects the way in which the Senate operates, in particular with regard to Senate appointments and the 700 codes that govern elections.

One might think that in a democratic legislature there would be relatively few situations in which an elected representative could be forcibly removed from office before her term expired. I assume that the most common of these might be recall by the representative's constituents and impeachment in the case of severe misconduct, but that the generally accepted democratic norm is that the will of the people must be respected, and that a representative should be permitted to complete the term in office for which the voters elected her, other than in exceptional circumstances. This is not the case in the UF Student Senate, where there are a number of criteria that a senator must meet in order to avoid automatic removal from office: she must not exceed three absences in any given semester¹⁵⁶, she must maintain a minimum grade point average of 2.5¹⁵⁷, and she must meet a series of "constituency requirements" – particular events relevant to her constituents that she is obliged to attend during her term in office, including one hour per semester of sitting at a table on campus, promoting involvement in Student Government.¹⁵⁸ If a senator does not meet these criteria then she can be recommended for removal from office at the discretion of the Rules and Ethics¹⁵⁹, a committee of senators whose membership is invariably dominated by the majority System party. In the event that the Rules and Ethics Committee recommends removal of a senator from office and her removal is then confirmed by a two-thirds vote in the Senate, her replacement is not selected by means of a new election, but by another Senate committee called the Replacement and Agenda Committee, which interviews applicants for the vacant seat and supposedly nominates the most meritorious candidate for approval by a majority of the chamber.

¹⁵⁶Student Body Statute 323.33. From University of Florida Student Government. "Constitution". <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁵⁷Student Body Constitution, Article VI, Section 8. From University of Florida Student Government. "Constitution". <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁵⁸Chapter 324 of Student Body Statutes. From University of Florida Student Government. "Constitution". <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁵⁹Student Body Statute 324.3. From University of Florida Student Government. "Constitution". <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

This committee is chaired by the Senate Pro Tempore and, like Rules and Ethics, the majority of its members are inevitably from the System party because the System holds the majority of Senate seats. In effect, therefore, the System party in the Senate has the ability to remove a democratically elected senator if it can prove – to its own satisfaction – that the senator in question has failed to meet any of a series of criteria that it made up itself. It can then replace the elected senator with one whom it appoints, without the constituents who previously voted having any direct say in the process whatsoever. These “replacement senators” then enjoy the same power as their democratically elected peers for the remainder of the predecessor’s term. As well as nominating replacement senators (who can then be confirmed by a simple majority vote in the Senate), the Replacement and Agenda Committee nominates senators to sit on all of the Senate committees including itself, Rules and Ethics, Budget and Appropriations, Judiciary, Information and Communication, and Allocations – in each case a similar process is used, with interested senators being interviewed by the committee and a nomination being made on a “competitive” basis.

Unfortunately, I have found that there is good reason to suspect that neither the Rules and Ethics Committee nor the Replacement and Agenda Committee are always fair in the way that they go about their work. While he was a senator, Matt Michel spent some time as the chair of the Rules and Ethics Committee – he told me that he was sometimes asked by other Senate leaders to give System party senators the benefit of the doubt with respect to their constituency requirements: “Most of what we did was hear appeals from senators who, for various reasons, had not complied with the requirements but felt that circumstances justified a departure from the rules... More than once I was assured by other members of Senate exec that people had done their requirements but had just neglected to fill out the paperwork. As a matter of institutional comity, of course I accepted the word of the Senate President or other committee chairs.”¹⁶⁰

I have already noted earlier in this work that Nick Stinnett was once appointed as a replacement senator without a serious interview, having apparently been asked to apply simply so that the seat would not have to be given to an independent party applicant. During my own time in Senate, I witnessed several other instances of the Replacement and Agenda Committee appointing replacement senators and committee members who were, by any reasonable definition, not the appropriate choice. For example, at a Senate meeting on April 17th 2012, the Replacement and Agenda Committee had to recommend a replacement for a vacant seat representing the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. The two main candidates for the seat were Luis Suarez, an inexperienced freshman from the System party who had lost to the Students Party in the February election for the same seat two months earlier, and Jesse Schmitt, the Students Party’s vice presidential candidate from that same election who had received a record number of votes for an independent party candidate. Schmitt also had a spectacular resume that included founding a student organization and growing it to a membership of over 700 members, being a walk-on to the Florida Gators football team, running a charity for disadvantaged children out of his garage, and training to be a Marine after he graduated. The Replacement and Agenda Committee nominated Suarez and the

¹⁶⁰ Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

System party majority in the Senate confirmed his appointment.¹⁶¹ One month earlier, a System senator called Katie Waldman came under pressure to resign after Jason Tiemeier publicly named her as his accomplice while admitting that he had thrown away copies of the *Alligator* on the first day of the Cornillie-Villamil election. At the next Senate meeting Waldman did not deny that she was with Tiemeier when the incident happened, nor that she failed to speak up when her party accused the newspaper of falsifying the story, but she nonetheless uttered the same response repeatedly when questioned by opposition senators: “I counseled Jason not to do it. He agreed. I thought I acted very responsibly.”¹⁶² At the time of this incident Waldman was, amusingly enough, a member of the Rules and Ethics Committee. Rather than being removed from that position, she was promoted to chair of the Allocations Committee.¹⁶³

The reason that these kinds of practices are possible is that they are not expressly prohibited by the Student Body Constitution – instead, the Senate is able to set most of its own rules via the Student Body Statutes. The Senate thus has considerable freedom to amend the codes, needing only a simple majority vote to amend many parts of Student Body law. As I explained above, one result of this has been a distinctly paternalistic and undemocratic mechanism for ejecting and replacing senators – rather than allowing voters to decide for themselves whether their elected representatives are doing a good job, the Senate asserts that it should be able to decide unilaterally whether the person elected by the voters to represent them is doing a good job, and if not, to replace that senator with someone who will be appointed without another election.

A similarly paternalistic streak is apparent in the way that the Senate regulates freedom of speech for candidates and parties seeking office during Student Government elections. The 700 codes define campaigning as “any intentional action in support of, or in opposition to, a candidate or political party for an elective student body office, including, but not limited to the distribution of literature and posting of election-specific materials.”¹⁶⁴ They then specify that campaigning begins four weeks before an election¹⁶⁵, thus implying that campaigning is not permitted at any other time outside of this four-week window. Throughout my involvement in Student Government, I

¹⁶¹Minutes were not available on the Student Government website to verify the date of this appointment, but I established the timeline by referring to the draft text of a speech I gave one week later in the Senate where I criticized the decision to appoint Suarez over Schmitt.

¹⁶²Lennon and Shavell 2012

¹⁶³A very similar incident also happened in spring 2013, after I had left the Senate. The *Alligator* published a story about a leaked e-mail that System party campaigner Leah Miller had sent to the house reps of different fraternities and sororities asking them to collect “I Voted” stickers from their members and to donate money to the party’s election campaign. At the end of the e-mail she wrote “DELETE THIS AFTER YOU GET THE INFORMATION!! WE CAN’T HAVE ANYTHING ON RECORD! Sketchy, but do it! Thanks!” Despite this controversy, she was elected as a replacement senator soon after the election and shortly thereafter appointed to the Rules and Ethics Committee. See Wright 2013.

¹⁶⁴Student Body Statute 700.4d. The same statute provides a few exceptions that are not to be considered as “campaigning”, such as “maintaining a website excluded to providing general information about the party and party members, or wearing... a campaign shirt, a button, an emblem or similar paraphernalia.” From University of Florida Student Government. “Constitution”. <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁶⁵Student Body Statute 761.1. The length of time allowed for campaigning has varied considerably in recent years – in the summer of 2012 it was changed to allow only one week of campaigning before an election, but after pressure from the independent party, the rule was changed again a few months later.

took serious issue with this rule: I thought that it was a violation of students' First Amendment rights under the U.S. Constitution – never mind the Student Body Constitution¹⁶⁶ – to stipulate that any support of a candidate or party more than four weeks before an election could be deemed an election violation. It meant, at least theoretically, that if I told a friend in December that he should vote for me in February then my entire party's slate of candidates could potentially be disqualified. In September 2012 I took this case to the Supreme Court of the Student Body, which ruled that it was not able to rule on whether Student Body laws violated students' rights under state or federal law. In essence, as I wrote in a letter to the *Alligator* that was published on September 24th 2012:

*"[The Court is] saying, 'Sure, your right to free speech may well have been horribly violated. If you think that's the case, go to a district court outside of UF because we can't help you.' That's all well and good, except that most students would have no idea of how to appeal to a district court and even if they did, it is prohibitively expensive. In any case, a district court might take years to hear the case or never hear it at all."*¹⁶⁷

In fact, a federal court with jurisdiction over the state of Florida had already heard a similar case thirteen years earlier which potentially settles the issue. In 1989, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit ruled on a case that independent students at the University of Alabama had taken to a district court, complaining that the rules governing elections on their campus violated their First Amendment rights. The Appeals Court upheld the decision of the district court that the university was entitled to limit campaign activities as it saw fit, citing the principle that federal courts should demonstrate "a degree of deference to school officials who seek to reasonably regulate speech and campus activities in furtherance of the school's educational mission."¹⁶⁸ In other words, the Court found that the First Amendment could be partially suspended in campus elections if university officials thought it necessary. Students are not guaranteed freedom of expression in Student Government elections.

As unsettling as that verdict might be, it nonetheless suggests that there is another entity besides the student Supreme Court and the opposition parties which could prevent abuses of power in Student Government at UF if it so chose: the UF administration. Whether or not intervention by

¹⁶⁶Article I, Section 2 of the Student Body Constitution stipulates that "every student is guaranteed certain rights under the constitutions and laws of the United States and State of Florida. Student Government recognizes these rights." From University of Florida Student Government. "Constitution". <http://www.sg.ufl.edu/GovernmentBranches/Judicial/Constitution>, accessed Oct 3rd 2013.

¹⁶⁷Bradshaw 2012

¹⁶⁸United States Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit. 1989. Opinion in case 87-7090: Alabama Student Party v. Student Government Association of the University of Alabama. Document ref. 867 F.2d 1344; 1989 U.S. App. LEXIS 3140. It is worth noting that the decision by the Appeals Court was not unanimous. One of the three judges assigned to the case wrote a dissent, in which he concluded that "the district court should have declared the challenged campaign regulations unconstitutional, as an infringement of appellants' right of free speech. The University of Alabama has not attempted to justify an educational purpose for the regulations -- indeed, the University has indicated that it finds the regulations overly restrictive of its students' right to freedom of speech. Moreover, even if the University had maintained that the regulations were necessary for the pursuit of its 'educational mission,' I would find them overbroad. I therefore respectfully dissent."

administrators into Student Government would be desirable from the perspective of the student body is debatable, but in any case the administration has repeatedly seemed reluctant to take action in its comments to various journalists in recent years. Speaking to the *Gainesville Sun* in 2010 for its article about legacy positions in ACCENT and Student Government Productions, director of the Center for Student Activities and Involvement Nancy Chrystal-Green said that “the administration is going to fall on the assumption that our student leaders have selected the best qualified, the most capable or the best trained people,” and added that if students have a problem with the choices, they are the ones who can make changes.¹⁶⁹ This apparent policy of insisting that students can and should bring about change in the System themselves was repeated in an *Alligator* article about Blue Key in 2012: Chris Loschiavo, assistant dean of students and director of student conduct and conflict resolution, said that “as a student leader, if you’re not happy with something that is happening in SG [Student Government] or in student leadership, you as a student leader have to figure out a way to take it on.”¹⁷⁰ In the same article, Myra Morgan, a former director of student activities who now works in the UF Division for Student Affairs as the director of external relations, said that “when students complain to her about barriers to involvement, she asks them a series of questions. ‘Did you vote? Did you go over and sign up to volunteer on a committee? Did you come forward with a project that you thought might be useful?’ Sometimes the answer is no. ‘Well then you know what, you have nothing to complain about.’”¹⁷¹

Assuming that these quotes reflect the genuine attitude of the UF administration towards intervening in Student Government or Blue Key affairs, I find them to be troubling because they suggest that the source of any problems in Student Government at UF is the unwillingness of the System’s critics to be proactive in seeking change. While it is certainly true that at the University of Florida, as in any large institution, there are inevitably people who like to whine about problems without ever doing anything constructive to provoke change, my experience is that there are many students on the UF campus who have fought in some way to change the status quo but have found that the proverbial deck is stacked against them to an insurmountable degree. To suggest that the System’s continued existence on campus is a result of inaction by its opponents suggests a stunning ignorance of the complexity of the patronage system that has developed here, of the ruthless way in which the System cajoles and threatens people, and of the psychological effect that the perceived prestige of Blue Key membership still has on many ambitious students. With that in mind, I was extremely surprised to learn that Ms Chrystal-Green accepted an honorary tapping into FBK in spring 2013¹⁷² – I think it goes without saying that many students will have interpreted her decision to accept such an award, rightly or wrongly, as tacit approval of Blue Key and its behavior on the part of the administrator responsible for monitoring the organization’s activities.

Is it unreasonable to suggest that members of the administration might be more supportive of the System’s continued dominance of campus politics than they publicly acknowledge? While

¹⁶⁹Stewart 2010

¹⁷⁰Flechas 2012

¹⁷¹Flechas 2012

¹⁷²Florida Blue Key. “Spring 2013 Tapping Class”. <http://fbk.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Spring-2013-Tapping-Class.pdf>, accessed Oct 28th 2013.

I found little evidence suggesting that the administration knowingly “turns a blind eye” to the activities described in this work or actively supports the System in any kind of clandestine way, it was certainly the case that several interviewees with knowledge of the relationship between Student Government and the administration thought that the highest ranking members of the administration probably preferred the System party to remain in power. Ben Meyers, who as a former Student Body President has enjoyed a close working relationship with UF President Bernie Machen, said:

“The connection between the System and the UF administration is very real, but it's done for reasons that I completely support: frankly, you guys [the independent party] would elect whack-jobs if you were in charge. We elect more normal, stable candidates who are more likely to behave in a professional setting... A lot of people in the Dean of Students Office and folks like that would probably prefer ethically for the independents to win. But the highest levels of the administration would prefer to see the average System candidate in power over the average indie candidate. That is the extent of it - I can say with honesty that I don't think there is any explicit support given.”¹⁷³

Nick Stinnett agreed with Meyers about the administration's preference, telling me that “they [the administration] like it when the Greeks win. The vast majority of the Bull Gators are former Greeks; Greeks give a lot of money back to the university; and when Greeks are in charge of Student Government they play ball.”¹⁷⁴ Alex Cornillie, who was press secretary to a Student Body President before he ran for president on the independent ticket, also thought it stood to reason that the administration would prefer that the status quo be maintained:

“They [the administration] have a vested interest in a compliant group of people who are related to wealthy old alumni who don't really care about fees or about what happens to graduate students. I mean, you personally know that the administration walks all over graduate students, and how bad would it be if the Student Body President was very adamantly opposed to that, as opposed to kind of just complacent. So they don't want that to happen, and what do they care if the cabinet secretaries are selected based on merit? That has no bearing on the university, but if the graduate students suddenly mobilize into an actionable union that really does something and has the support of the student government behind them, then that would cause them problems. It costs them money.”¹⁷⁵

Again, it is important to emphasize that none of these quotes suggest any direct intervention on the part of the administration, but rather they constitute speculation that the administration might at least have a passive preference for the System over the independent movement. Nonetheless, I think that one other incident in 2012 merits being raised in the context of this discussion. Shortly after football coach Will Muschamp's public endorsement of Students Party candidate Jesse

¹⁷³ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

¹⁷⁴ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

¹⁷⁵ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

Schmitt during the spring 2012 election. According to Schmitt, Muschamp told him some time after the election that the endorsement got him into trouble with the administration: “Parents of our opponents called in and they were upset because they said, ‘I’ve donated x amount of dollars and your employee is going to endorse this kid over my kid?’ I know that did happen, and I know that Coach Muschamp was censured by the administration. He jokingly mentioned it to me that he ‘took some heat’ for that.”¹⁷⁶ While this does not prove a preference for the System on the part of the administration, it certainly demonstrates how seriously Student Government elections are taken on the UF campus and that even the head coach of a major college football franchise is not immune to their reach.

It seems, then, that in addition to the array of rewards that it offers in exchange for students’ compliance and the harsh punishments that it threatens to those who defy it, the System is able to rely on a range of institutional advantages within Student Government that provide it with further assistance in its efforts to maintain its dominance of campus politics at the University of Florida. The rules governing elections and the Student Senate help to concentrate power within the System, weakening opposition parties and diminishing the ability of the Supreme Court of the Student Body to provide adequate scrutiny of either the legislature or the executive. Little hope is offered to opponents of the System from entities outside of Student Government either: the federal courts have deferred to the judgment of the university administration with regard to how far opposition to the System can be expressed, and the UF administration appears to be reluctant to intervene when the System leverages the advantages of incumbency to impose procedural constraints on its opponents. This helps to explain the continued perseverance of the System despite a series of incidents that have weakened it somewhat in the past few years; it also begs the question of whether there is any prospect of the status quo being broken in the coming years. It is this question that I now explore in the final section of this work.

8. Looking ahead

To recap, I have argued in this work that the System is able to dominate campus politics at UF due to a number of interplaying factors: the sophisticated system of patronage operated by bloc leaders, supported by a wide range of incentives and threats; the influence of Florida Blue Key and its perceived importance among the student body; the institutional advantages that have developed within Student Government as a result of long-term single party dominance; and the lack of an entity with the power and will to provide a check on that dominance. But how stable are these factors? Is there any reason to believe that circumstances on the UF campus might change in the coming years? I believe there is.

First, with regard to the bloc system, it is important to remember that the power dynamics that exist between various alliances of Greek houses and student organizations are constantly shifting – while the political influence of a fraternity such as Theta Chi has the appearance of being deeply entrenched, it is noteworthy that even that fraternity’s power apparently only emerged as recently as the 1990s. According to Roger Austin, things were different thirty years ago: “In the 1980s, DU [Delta Upsilon] was a very powerful house. But fraternities’ and sororities’ power ebbs

¹⁷⁶ Author interview with Jesse Schmitt, Oct 2013

and flows as some people make good political moves and others make bad moves. Theta Chi had some very good leadership in the 1990s, who really set them up well.”¹⁷⁷ As explained earlier, the fundamental structure of the bloc system can completely change in the wake of traumas to the System such as the Grapski defamation case and the defeat to Jamal Sowell in 2004. This kind of fluidity seems to be a consequence of a highly significant feature of the ruling coalition that can be obscured when it is referred to as a unitary “System”: the dominant force in UF campus politics is not a wholly united group of students with common interests, but rather a fragile coalition of different organizations that come together in a political marriage of convenience. Nick Stinnett explained that “I was not looking out for the System, I was looking out for my house. Nobody cares about the System. We care about our fraternities and sororities excelling.”¹⁷⁸ In this sense, the System is less an impenetrable fortress and more like a house of cards – albeit one that always seems to rebuild itself when it collapses.

Second, as noted earlier, there is good reason to believe that the power and prestige historically enjoyed by Florida Blue Key is eroding over time. This has much to do with changes in the state of Florida since the 1960s, when there were only three state universities, of which UF was by far the most politically influential. “In the past fifty years, as Florida has exploded from 1.5 million people to almost 20 million people, they have added eight more state universities,” Austin said. “People go to other universities now and they don’t know what Blue Key is.”¹⁷⁹ Various news articles in recent years have supported this same theory: a 2004 article in *Florida Trend* pointed out that the dilution of Blue Key’s power was directly related to the rising population in the state, noting that when Florida had only ten seats in the US House of Representatives, seven of them were filled by Blue Key alumni. By 2004 the state had 24 representatives and only four of them were Blue Keys. This led former Florida House Speaker John Thrasher, an alumnus of Florida State University, to reflect that “[in the past] people would tell me, ‘If you didn’t go to [the University of] Florida and you didn’t belong to Blue Key and wanted to get involved in politics, you wouldn’t amount to anything. Definitely, that tradition has been broken.’”¹⁸⁰ In February 2013, a report in the *Orlando Sentinel* about the fading stature of Blue Key pointed out that “the 14 years since Jeb Bush took office – followed by Charlie Crist and current Gov. Rick Scott – is the longest Florida has gone without a UF alum in the Governor’s Mansion since at least 1949,” adding that eight of the nine people currently in leadership positions for both parties in the Florida House and Senate are non-Blue Key.¹⁸¹ Indeed, even some of the most successful politicians who attended UF were not part of FBK while they were students: Senator Marco Rubio, a leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 2016, was only given an honorary tapping years after he graduated when it became clear that he had achieved success without the benefits of Blue Key membership. Meanwhile, Democratic National Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman-Schultz has never been a part of the organization and spent most of her UF career fighting parties endorsed by it. In 2012 she

¹⁷⁷ Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

¹⁷⁸ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

¹⁷⁹ Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

¹⁸⁰ Flechas 2012

¹⁸¹ Kassab 2013

told the *Alligator* that the idea of membership in Blue Key being a prerequisite to success in state politics is simply a myth: “I’m not in Florida Blue Key, and it seems like I did OK,” she said.¹⁸²

Blue Key’s apparent decline may not be solely a result of UF’s lost monopoly over the state university system. According to Ben Meyers, financial mismanagement has meant that FBK now has to tap more students each year in order to raise funds. In his view this has made it less prestigious: “Blue Key has degenerated because it has become a business and it wants more members. Gator Growl loses hundreds of thousands of dollars every year, and Blue Key is on its way to going bankrupt.”¹⁸³ Alex Cornillie agreed, saying that “the catastrophic losses of money relating to Gator Growl in recent years make me think that [Blue Key] is probably losing some of its verve, because the alumni don’t really like to see all of this money they’re donating being flushed down the toilet.”¹⁸⁴ Nick Stinnett also concurred, lamenting that FBK has “really gone downhill in the past several years. They have let a lot of people in, Homecoming and Gator Growl are losing money hand over first... It’s got harder to run so no-one really wants to be in charge anymore.”¹⁸⁵ It is certainly true that many people on the UF campus still seem to think that Florida Blue Key retains the prestige and importance that it had in the past – as mentioned earlier, this might be because young undergraduates are unaware of the changing circumstances in Florida politics and the internal difficulties that FBK has had in recent years. It might also be true that parents and other alumni still perceive the organization as important, and hence that message is passed onto their children when they attend UF. However, the evidence suggests that such a perception no longer matches reality. I suspect that there is a kind of lag in FBK’s real-world status being fully acknowledged in the bubble of life on the UF campus. Presumably, though, as time goes on and memories of Blue Key’s influence fade, that perception is destined to slowly change. This would fundamentally alter the dynamic of campus politics.

A similar decline in prestige might also be claimed of the Greek system on the UF campus. According to Meyers, the portrayal of fraternity and sorority life in recent years as revolving around heavy drinking and sexual promiscuity has meant that many employers no longer see involvement in such an organization as being such an attractive trait in job applicants. It may also be the case that, much as the growing population in the state of Florida has diluted the influence of FBK, the growing student population at the University of Florida has diluted the relative importance of the Greek community. Austin noted that “fifty years ago, most of the student body was in a fraternity or sorority because there was nothing else to do... [but] as people have developed new interests, there are many more student organizations and only about 10% of the student body is Greek today.”¹⁸⁶ Nonetheless, Greek houses seem to have thus far retained their historical monopoly on Student Government. Austin added that independent students still think that they don’t have much of a chance to get involved in Student Government – therefore they often do not get involved, and the Greek dominance of campus politics becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

¹⁸² Flechas 2012

¹⁸³ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

¹⁸⁴ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

¹⁸⁵ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

¹⁸⁶ Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

The validity of this explanation for independent disengagement with Student Government is debatable. Undoubtedly it is possible that the claims of campus politics being a “closed shop” can be used as an excuse for people who like to complain about the System’s shortcomings but do not wish to make any effort to change it. As noted before, this appears to be the stance that parts of the UF administration have taken towards the problems described in this work; it also seems to be the strongly-held view of many within the System, as I will explore in my second paper. But regardless of its cause, there is no doubting the truth in the assertion that opposition movements have failed to gain any real traction in campus politics despite the dwindling power of Blue Key and the instability of the bloc system. This failure, combined with the inaction of the student Supreme Court, the UF administration and the federal court system, have ensured that the System has been able to continue ruling affairs on campus without any serious accountability despite the fact that FBK is well past the heyday of its statewide influence.

Where does that leave us in terms of prospects for the future? I think that the System is destined to continue gradually losing its grip on campus politics as the decline of Blue Key and the Greek system shows no sign of abating, but the speed at which this decline will happen might depend on any number of external factors. Sometimes a single incident can create a change in circumstances that rapidly accelerates change: for example, the *Alligator* was not always independent of the university. According to Aubuchon (2005), its editorship “was chosen in some form or fashion through Student Government elections up until the late 1960s. For a majority of this time, the editor-in-chief was selected either by direct election and association through a political party, or through a committee overseen by the President of the Student Body and the President of Florida Blue Key.”¹⁸⁷ However, in 1973 the newspaper’s editors had a disagreement with university officials about whether it should publish a listing of abortion clinics¹⁸⁸ - a dispute that ended with the newspaper becoming independent and moving its offices off-campus. This move towards an independent press on campus strikes me as crucial – without it, none of the subsequent occasions on which the *Alligator* has reported on the System’s various abuses of power would likely have ever made it to print. That single incident in 1973 has surely had an important impact on the subsequent development of UF campus politics.

Another factor that will decide the speed of change in Student Government is the degree of engagement that the wider student body chooses to have with campus politics. While voter interest and turnout is low among students who are not part of one of the Greek houses or student organizations that form the core of the System, it will always be very difficult for an opposition party to score a victory against a political machine that is highly organized and able to mobilize its base with relative efficiency at election time. Matt Michel is pessimistic about the chances of more students taking an interest – as he put it, most students will not care so long as “the trains are running on time” and their college experience is not adversely affected. For its part, the independent movement has recognized that increasing turnout is crucial to its chances of long-term success and has spent considerable energy advocating for the introduction of online voting,

¹⁸⁷ Aubuchon 2005, p. 2

¹⁸⁸ Morris 1986

but has been repeatedly blocked by the System party. Online voting is currently prohibited by the 700 codes.¹⁸⁹

Finally, the speed of change will presumably be dictated by the moral calculus that individual students employ in deciding whether to defy the System. I have found many cases of students who believed that the System behaved unfairly in various ways but were afraid to speak out because of the power that they perceived it had and the consequences that might occur if they defied it. Presumably though, there might be a tipping point in the decline of FBK, at which the carrots and sticks that the System is able to use are no longer sufficient to prevent more students from rebelling against it. Until that time, many seem content to continue participating in the corrupt patronage system that has effectively created an authoritarian enclave on a university campus. Many justify their involvement with a range of rationalizations that allow them to continue seeing themselves as moral beings despite participating in a system that is neither democratic nor meritocratic, and is often fuelled by fear. The dynamics of this kind of moral psychology are the subject of my second paper.

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