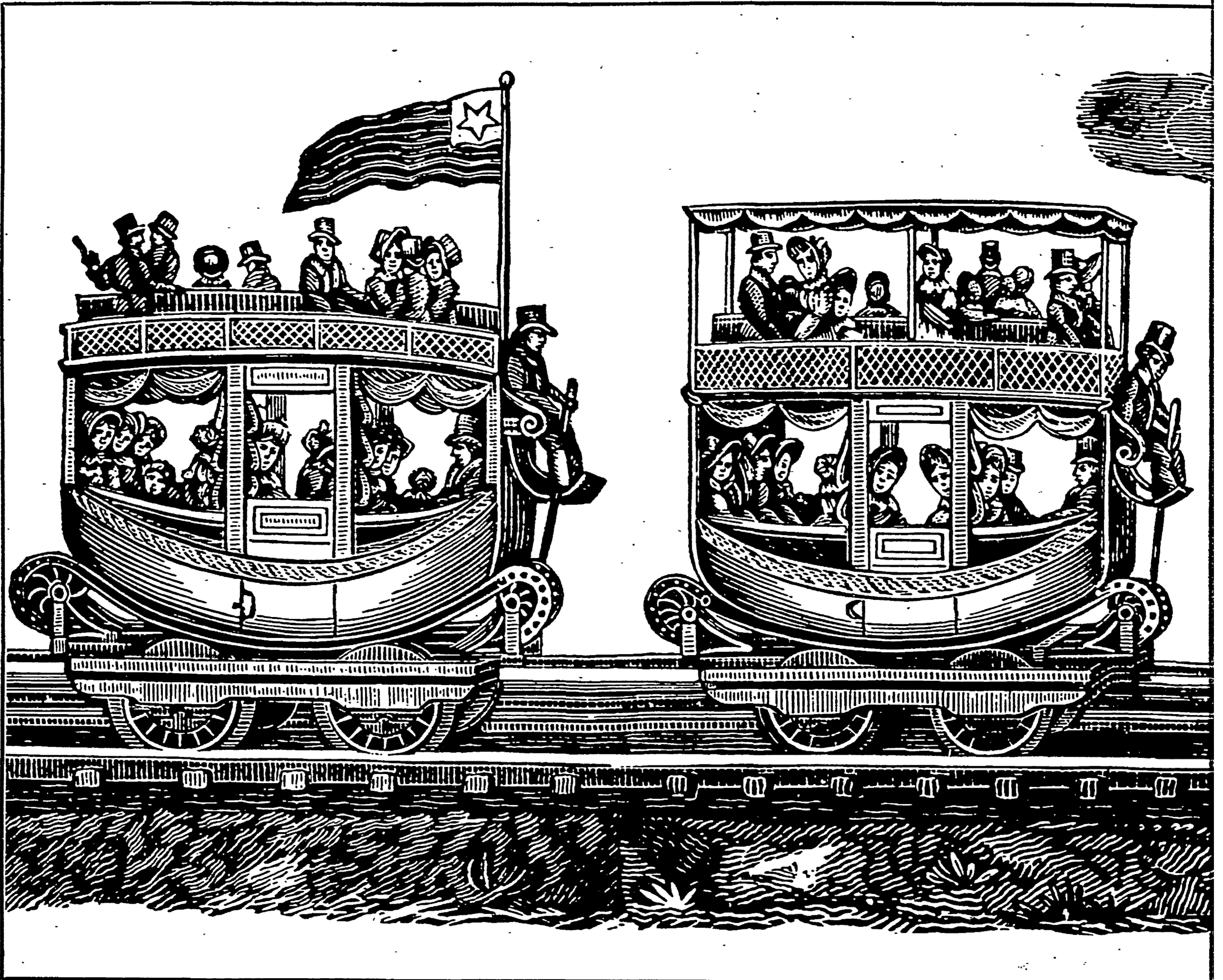


The political machine is still



alive and well in Rhode Island

By RICHARD A. GABRIEL

THROUGHOUT most of the Northeast, political machines either lie rusting along the road to reform or have long since been hauled away to history's scrap pile.

But in Rhode Island's old urban centers of Providence, Pawtucket, Woonsocket and Central Falls, the "old-style" machine—Democratic, disciplined and patronage-oriented—seems to roll along with scarcely a sputter. And this at a point in history where most people presumably have come to expect efficiency and integrity of their governments. Where suburban growth has reduced the population, both relative and absolute, of the old cities. And where civil service regulations have become the bulwark against patronage.

Moreover, the Democratic organizations in these shrinking cities still contribute greatly to the strength of a statewide Democratic machine which may have begun to erode with the gubernatorial defeat of Dennis J. Roberts in 1958, but which nevertheless is far from dead. In the twelve and a half years since that "long count" election, in fact, only one man has successfully challenged the party leadership in a primary for major office—Senator Pell in 1960. Mr. Roberts himself, far from being out of the picture, is frequently consulted by Mayor Doorley of Providence and is widely believed to exercise great influence in the endorsement of statewide candidates.

How does this style of politics, which elsewhere has been dead or dying for six decades, survive with such strength in Rhode Island?

An easy answer, and true enough as far as it goes, is that because of the state's historical peculiarities the Democratic machine came to power rather late; it is simply continuing to run its natural course even into the 1970s.

But behind that fact are events that have to do with immigration, the Great Depression, class conflict and, inevitable in politics, wealth and power.

OF COURSE, machine politics is not all that recent a phenomenon in Rhode Island. What is recent is the Democratic, urban-based, ethnically oriented kind of machine operating in Pawtucket, Woonsocket, Central Falls and, most especially, Providence.

But old-stock, rural-based Republican machine organizations have thrived in the state since 1856. Controlled from the state legislature, they kept a firm grip on anything worth keeping a firm grip on right up until 1935.

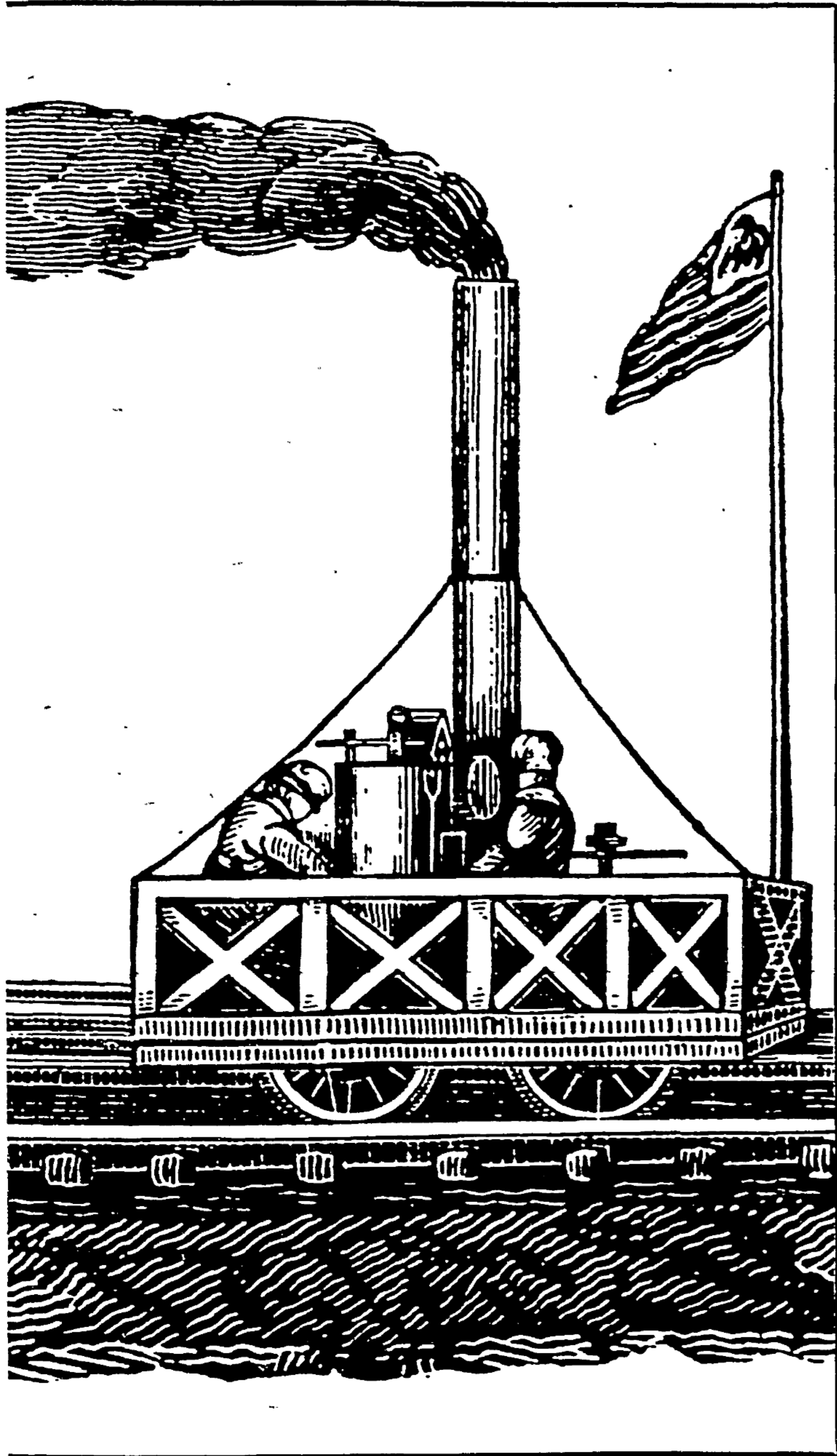
The old GOP machine drew its strength from three basic sources.

First, the state was gerrymandered to such an extent that as late as 1957, a mere 3.7 per cent of the population was able to elect more than thirty per cent of the state Senate.

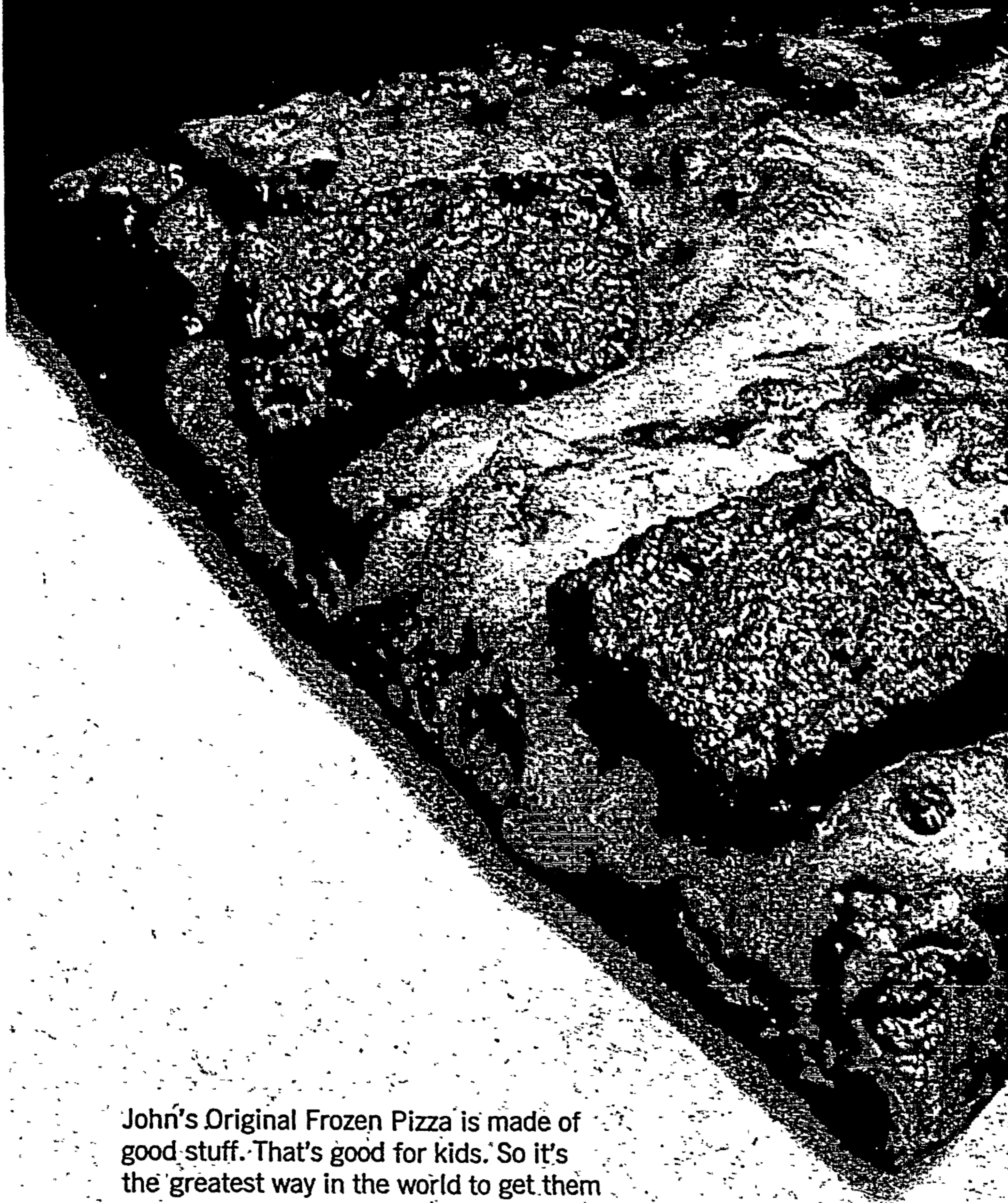
Second, nearly 60 per cent of Rhode Island's total population, most of it in

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Dr. Richard A. Gabriel, who did his undergraduate work at Providence College, received a master's degree from the University of Rhode Island in 1966 and a Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts, has done extensive political research in New England. He is currently a captain with the U.S. Army, stationed in Belgium. This article was adapted by The Rhode Islander from his The Political Machine in Rhode Island, published last year by the Bureau of Government Research at URI. Dr. Gabriel's views are not necessarily those of the bureau or of the university.



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MACHINE POLITICS

The old GOP machine ran out of gas

the urban centers, was disenfranchised until 1888 because only "native" males could vote. And even after 1888, many immigrants remained effectively neutralized as a political force because of property qualifications which were maintained and even extended.

Third, the Republicans had the money: sheriff's fees, kickbacks from patronage appointees, and financial support from the railroads, banks, insurance companies, electric railway companies and mill owners.

All of which didn't leave the Democrats much to work with. They could elect mayors, once the native-born requirement was lifted, but that made little difference. The cities in those days were tightly controlled by councils, and to vote for a city councilman one had to own substantial property. It was not until 1928, the year the property qualification for councilmanic elections was finally dropped, that Democrats in urban areas could begin to build a powerful organization.

In the meantime, however, they were nurturing their most potent resource: the American newcomers, the immigrants and their children to whom the Democratic Party had always held out an open hand, and against whom the Republicans had maintained a solid power defense.

WHEN the balance of power finally shifted, it shifted completely — and virtually overnight.

It is here that the political history of Rhode Island differs significantly



GOVERNOR GREEN signs the Reorganization Bill of 1935. This was the 'Bloodless Revolution' which set the stage for the rise of Democratic political machines in the cities.

from that of other Northeastern states. Whereas in Boston, for example, the immigrants and lower classes first gained a hold on the city and then assaulted the state bastions of power to which the old-stock groups had withdrawn, the exact reverse occurred here. And ironically, the coup was led by an old-stock Yankee, Theodore Francis Green.

The election of 1934 found Governor Green and the Democratic Party in control of the House but two votes short of a majority in the Senate. That was easy enough to remedy. On January 1, 1935, the lieutenant governor swore in the members of the Senate, but refused to admit two new Republicans, one from Portsmouth and one from South Kingstown. Now the GOP was outmanned by one vote—the tie-breaking vote of the lieutenant governor, in his role as president of the Senate.

With that situation prevailing the Democrats called for and conducted a recount which showed, oddly enough, that the Democratic candidates actually had won the disputed seats.

The newly proclaimed winners were sworn in, and within 24 hours Green and his party majority totally reorganized the state government (including the Supreme Court) and strengthened the governor's powers of appointment.

Although it was a reversing of the normal development of political power, the Green coup was highly effective. For with the resources gained from the state, the Democrats could now gain firm control of the cities.

IT IS important to note that the removal of property qualifications for councilmanic elections in 1928 and the Green coup of 1935 coincided with the most revolutionary period of this century, the Great Depression.

One of the main reasons cited for the decline of the urban machine in America was Franklin D. Roosevelt's creation of federal welfare programs. These provided a source of relief and help to the traditional clients of the machine, thereby depriving the machine of much of its loyalty gained through the provision of social and economic services.

Again, the Rhode Island experience differs somewhat from that of other states. The beginning of federal welfare programs here coincided with Green's two terms as governor, and it was through Green that federal patronage and programs were channeled.


It was no accident that 1935 was the year in which the newcomers were finally united in support of the party organization.


IT IS NOT so long ago, the year 1935. The wounds of ethnic discrimination and hard times have not yet healed. And it doesn't take much insight to see that it is the Democratic, urban machine which remains the beneficiary of the memories — living memories — of Republican discrimination against the newcomers and their children.

There is another reason for the durability of the city Democratic organizations, and that is the fact

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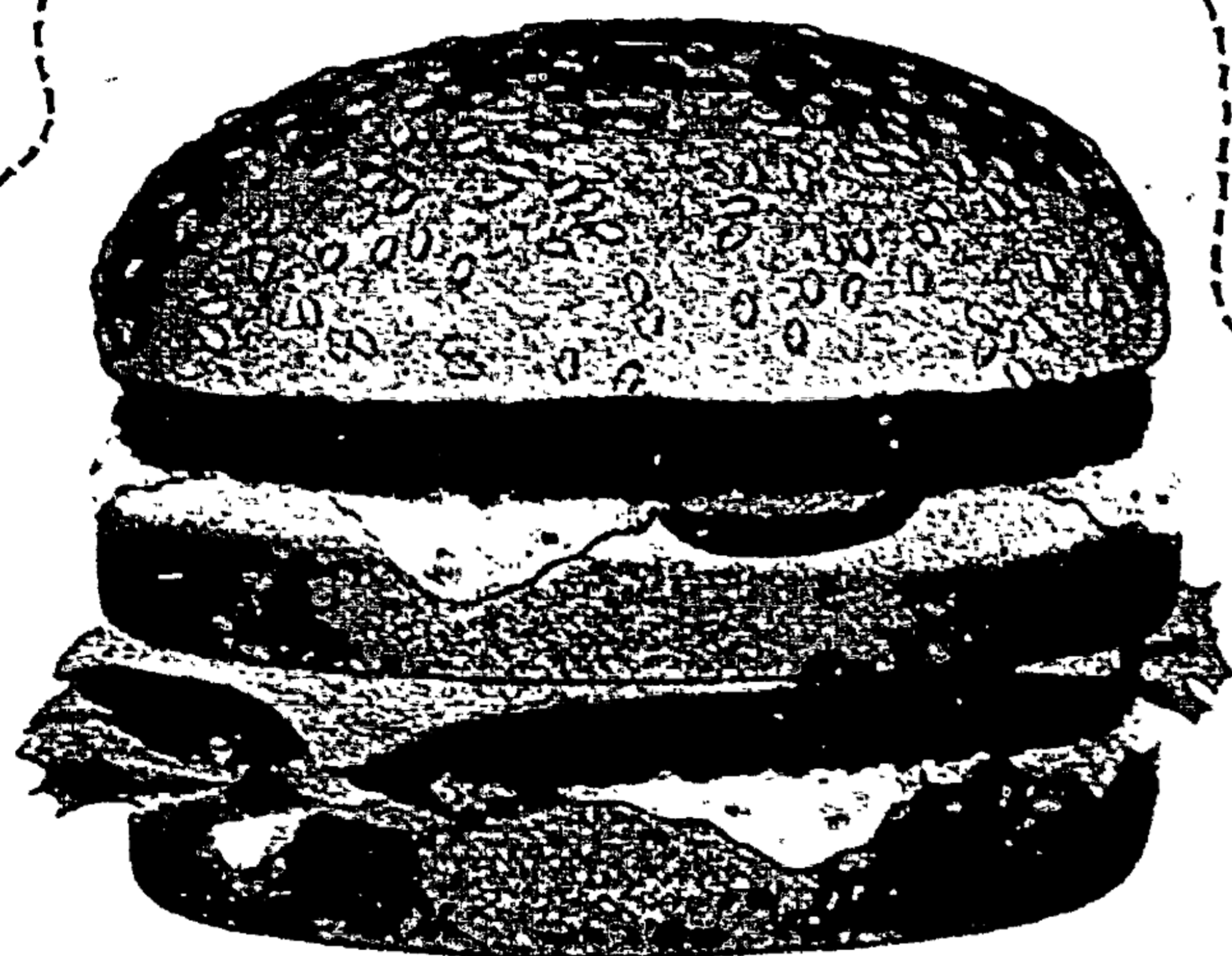
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MACHINE POLITICS

Urban

that no strong reform crusade has ever attempted to destroy them.

Ultimately, however, the survival of machine style politics depends on a certain kind of electorate: people in need of individual or group services which they cannot obtain through the employment of their own limited resources. And the kinds of people who are most likely to have such needs are none other than the urban poor.

These urban poor traditionally have been the clientele of the political machine—not only for material benefits, but also for something perhaps equally important: prestigious recognition of their heritage and their accomplishments.

In the four cities under consideration — Providence, Central Falls, Pawtucket, Woonsocket — the 1960 census showed high proportions of such groups, as the accompanying table illustrates.

While there is an obvious relationship between the presence of such groups and the strength of the Democratic machines, the two factors are not necessarily in direct proportion to each other. For although the Providence population is in some ways better off financially, professionally and educationally than the people of



THE 1966 City Council in Central Falls, one of four cities where the political machine thrives.

poor oil the gears

the three other cities, it is in Providence that the machine survives most strongly.

Old loyalties die hard in Providence. Since 1894, only two Republicans have been elected mayor of the city. Interestingly enough they were of Irish descent, as has been every other mayor since 1913. Clearly there are ethnic as well as party loyalties at work, and both are ingrained in the city's political structure.

Many supporters of the Providence party are traditional Democrats who were brought into the fold during the Depression. That economic disaster had a tremendous impact here,

and many of the voters who were realigned because of it still back the machine, out of habit if not gratitude.

The machine, in its turn, can still offer a whole range of favors and services. The coal bucket and the Christmas turkey may be out of date, but patronage jobs are not. According to one estimate, there are more than 2,800 such jobs in Providence which can be bestowed at the pleasure of the party organization. That should mean at least 2,800 votes on election day, and, counting the families and friends of these workers, probably a great many more.

As a rule, the patronage jobs are

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Socio-Economic Characteristics of Major Urban Centers in Rhode Island

Urban Area	Occupation		Education		Income			Stock	Renter
	*LBC	**UWC	Under 5 yrs.	Over 12 yrs.	Under \$3,000	Over \$10,000	Foreign		
Central Falls ...	60.7%	8.6%	21.8%	2.5%	10.1%	6.0%	54.9%	74.5%	
Pawtucket ...	49.9%	14.1%	13.2%	4.5%	16.2%	9.9%	46.1%	52.4%	
Providence ...	49.0%	21.5%	5.3%	6.8%	21.9%	10.3%	43.9%	64.9%	
Woonsocket ...	63.8%	12.2%	20.8%	3.1%	19.6%	7.0%	50.5%	66.6%	

The following definitions based upon categories used in the census volume were employed: *Lower blue collar includes all "operatives" and "kindred" workers; **Upper white collar includes all "professional" and "managerial" workers; Foreign stock includes all foreign born and those born of foreign and mixed parentage.

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March 21, 1971

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BARRINGTON — Hamilton Hall, 85 Roffee Street, Mondays 9:30 AM and 8 PM	KINGSTON — Holiday Inn — US 1 and Route 138 Tower Hill Road Mondays 5:30 PM and 7:30 PM	WESTERLY — YMCA, 95 High Street, Thursdays 7:30 PM
BRISTOL — VFW, Hope Street, Tuesdays 8 PM	NEWPORT — 16 East Main Road at 2 Mile Corner, Tuesdays 9:30 AM and 8 PM, Wednesdays 8 PM, Thursdays 8 PM	WEST WARWICK — (Arctic), 1225 Main Street Tuesdays 8 PM
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MACHINE POLITICS It rolls on and on

—which complete and help maintain the Democratic and ethnic chains of power.

It can be said with some assurance, then, that the political system in Providence functions in much the same way as the old-time urban machines once did.

Patronage, favors, good organization all combine to produce an efficient political setup which serves its urban-poor clientele, not to mention its elected officials.

It is ultimately an old style of politics, the politics of wakes and push-carts, conceived and born of power to the neglect of issues. One may not agree with its goals or methods, but one can hardly escape the fact that it exists, and will continue to exist, in Providence and the other Rhode Island cities where the urban electorate and the machine politician find it to their mutual advantage. □

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