

A Preliminary Review of the Format

By Steve Frangos
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PART 1

CHICAGO- Direct involvement of Greek immigrants in American politics began the moment they stepped onto these shores. Charting the exact forms those individual and collective political actions took can be read in a surprising number of articles, books, doctoral dissertations, and most certainly full-length academic studies. The enduring problem here is not the quality of thought evident in such publications, but rather one of overall integration. One explanation might be that the apparent scattered nature of these studies simply reflects the inherently diverse nature of modern politics.

Another take on this lack of overall integration is that specialists are hard at work producing thoughtful reflections, on say, the Greek Junta, the invasion and ongoing occupation of Cyprus, the Greek Lobby in Washington, the status of the Patriarchate, and other critical issues.

From that perspective, those who would synthesize this specialized material have not as yet folded it back into the broader field of Greek-American Studies. And for all intents and purposes, this seems the most accurate view of current events.

That said, we are still left with fundamental questions about how Greek immigrants learned about and became involved in the American political system. If their primary focus was to earn money and return home as quickly as possible, why bother to learn more than was necessary for that specific purpose? Tracking individuals and their actions is conceivable, given public records, but it is much easier to locate self-iden-



It was not always the case in American newspapers, but a April 7, 1895 full-page story in the Chicago Tribune with the above title illustration and the headline "Greece in Chicago" was intended to present the Greeks in a fair light.

tifying Greek political groups. By at least 1893, independent Greek-American Political Clubs began to form all across the United States. The clubs were a mixture of incorporated organizations and informal society gatherings. It is striking how many of those groups over time specifically chose the name Greek-American Political Club or an extremely close variant.

A quick chronological listing of just a dozen of these documented organizations includes: 1893 Democratic Greek Club (Chicago IL); 1894 Greek-American Independent Political Club (San Francisco, CA); 1905 Greek American Political Club (Los Angeles, CA); 1905 Greek Republican Club (Philadelphia, PA) 1908 Greek-American Political Club of Lowell, Massachusetts; 1912 Greek and Macedonian Political Club (Ft Wayne, IN); 1913 Greek-American Political Club (Seattle, WA); 1916 The Demosthenes Club (Omaha, NE); 1921 Greek-American Club (Bisbee, AZ); 1928 American Hellenic Republican Club of Massachusetts; 1934 The Greek-American Political Club (Butte, MT) and 1945 Biddeford-Saco Greek Political Club (the joint society for the nearby cities of

Biddeford and Saco in Maine. Certainly, that is just a thumb nail listing over a 50-year plus period.

More clubs and similar organizations undoubtedly formed among Greek communities around the nation.

It would seem from reading the available newspaper accounts that the Greek immigrants were merely following the established order of becoming a voting bloc and thereby gaining a collective voice in local politics. American political slang reflects the formation of these voting groups within major urban areas. The various political parties would gather these clubs together into one large political machine that "got out the vote" for specific candidates. This was most assuredly a two-way street.

I still hear stories, from various elderly Greek Americans, how the system worked. In Chicago the Ward Bosses would go to the apartments/residents of the faithful e.g., those within the machine and ask the clothes sizes and shoe sizes of the children. After the election boxes with clothes inside would arrive at the residents of the faithful. For shoes slips of paper were

on of Greek-American Political Clubs

given and the children, on appointed days, would go with their parents and be fitted for the right sized shoes. To receive all this clothing the parents had to go out and get the vote by hanging political brochures on door handles, attending rallies and other such election work. As I have been told if a Greek worked for the city of Chicago then this kind of volunteer political work was mandatory.

For the moment, within Greek-American Studies we do not even have the bare outlines of these kinds of Greek political clubs or groups. Part of this can be due to a form of community amnesia where an in depth historical knowledge is simply not known or available. Vanity and personal ties certainly also play into the kind of historical telescoping which leaves out, for whatever reasons, various historical events and figures.

This, then, is only a preliminary review of these Greek-American political clubs. Future research will undoubtedly bring more of those organizations to light. It appears that Greeks in Chicago were the first to form a Greek political club.

On October 14, 1892, a snide reporter for the New York Sun passed on the following: "It is said that there is or is to be a Greek Republican club in Chicago. A Greek in Chicago must feel blue enough to do anything. Think of a son of the Hellenes compelled to breathe soot and smoke instead of ever delicately marching through most pellucid air.' A Greek in Chicago must be about as wretched as a Parisian of the boulevards would be among the Esquimaux (Eskimos) or a cannibal at a vegetarian banquet." But the Greeks of Chicago already might have become part of the Democratic Party.

On November 26, 1892, in a

Chicago Tribune news report of a political rally at the First Ward Republican club we learn: "Just before adjournment, John Polites said he wished to put in a word on behalf of the Greeks residing in Chicago. He said they now want to vote the Republican ticket. This is the first time the Italians and Greeks have showed [sic] a desire to affiliate with Republicans." Polites was an early leader among



This illustration from the April 7, 1895 article was labeled: "A Modern Spartan."

the Greeks of Chicago, but his full involvement within the community has yet to be offered in full detail.

Then on November 6, 1894, "The meeting of Republican Greeks at No. 144 Michigan street was adjourned early last night owing to the sudden death yesterday morning of John Williams, the most prominent leader of his countrymen in Chicago. There were 300 Greeks present. The meeting was called by Mr. Williams and was in

tended to counteract the work of the Democratic ward heelers, who had started a Democratic Greek club, and held several meetings [boldly claiming] 90% of the Greek vote. At the brief meeting held last night, it was demonstrated the claim was false. J. C. Palamaris, who presided, said all the speeches made at the meeting in the Greek language had been in favor of the Republican Party, and the meetings were Democratic in name only. The Greeks were almost solidly Republican, and a careful canvass had shown there would be 500 votes cast by them for the straight Republican ticket."

Since the 1880s, the Greeks in Chicago had become a growing presence along the streets and waterways of the city. As would be the custom for American newspapers around the nation once the local Greek immigrants had reached a certain level of prominence in the city, a full-page story or series of stories would appear.

On April 7, 1895, the Tribune ran the full-page story, "Greece in Chicago." Five line-drawings, duplicating photographs in newspaper was not possible in 1895, accompany the lengthy account. Demographics, neighborhoods, occupations are all presented. Also, politics and a good deal of denigrating Wop-English so often reproduced by native-born American reporters during this era. Still, in the end this news report is intended to present the Greeks in a fair light, no matter its failings in that regard. Without question, Greeks involved in Chicago politics influenced the new views held of the local Hellenes. This was a fact not lost on other Greek communities scattered around the nation.

Legal Issues Result in Creation of Ea

By Steve Frangos
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PART 2

CHICAGO- How did the Greek workers, who arrived between 1880 and 1920, learn about the American political system? Unquestionably, the first level of involvement was in the workplace and pertained to legal matters. Much of the early writings on Greek workers addresses their lack of knowledge concerning business permits and licenses. Misunderstandings due to a lack of English, street fights, and gambling among Greeks forms another often recorded triad of offenses. Police graft, miscounting weight and hours by railroads and factories, and other intentional crimes by Americans against Greek workers sees limited discussion. One has to look for these American instigated crimes to find documented reports on them. When these crimes do see mention they are usually dismissed as happening to all the newly-arrived immigrant working class, not just Greeks.

This may seem far removed from the daily politics. Yet, it is only logical to examine the exact manner in which a society governs its general population on a daily basis. It is the collective actions of publicly-sanctioned figures, from policemen to aldermen to mayors, that collectively constitute the very definition of politics in action. Politics is most often understood as the art or science of influencing people's beliefs on a civic or individual level. In this vein modern political discourse frequently focuses on democracy and the relation-

tics. In a democracy this relationship is the manner in which the average citizen voter chooses (or is influenced in their choice) between candidates for government officials and how these same voters make decisions about public policy.

So, once Greeks realized, in the early 1890s, that they could (or believed they could) influence local politicians (and so their policies) they began to form political clubs. The formation, development and influence of these early Greek-American political organizations is not yet fully understood.

Greeks entered a preexisting political system. One has to be a citizen to vote. Obvious perhaps, but not so in Greek-American history. An undetermined number of Hellenes residing in North America wanted to remain Greek and did so to their dying day. Many Greeks, therefore, never became citizens. The tensions between living in America while retaining one's self-understanding as a Greek remain the core question for social interaction between all Greeks to this day. The pressures and counter pressures of making a life in the United States continues to crisscross a wide array of Greek beliefs and values.

This tension can be seen in the fact that at the same historical moment when Greeks formed these political clubs other Greeks took direct action and manned the barricades in the American labor movement. The use of Greeks as strike breakers, a concept they learned about in this country, dominates a great deal of the documentation on Greeks in the American



1890s and early 1900s. Greeks were leading figures in the American labor movement and even frequently died in the extremely violent clashes between big money interests and the average worker. The complex and situation-specific responses to how Greeks from the 1880 to 1920 era responded to the society around them is at the very core of the issues around Greeks and politics in North America.

In terms of these Greek-American political clubs we know that by 1894, a collective of Chicago Greeks had formed a not-for-profit Illinois corporation. The next such organization, for which documentation readily exists, is in San Francisco. In November 1894, the Greek-American Independent Political Club is recognized as holding a regular meeting where it publicly endorsed a whole roster of local candidates for city offices. Only two of this club's officers James Spencer the president and Peter Constantines the secretary are

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Early Greek-American Political Clubs



In 1900, another of these San Francisco organizations the Greek-American Republican Club was formed. This organization first met at the Pythian Castle and then the B'nai B'rith Hall. Noting these locations is important since they chart the local social networks of San Francisco through which the local Greeks then moved. The strictly social aspects of all these political organizations, American as well as Greek cannot be over emphasized. Not only were political questions dealt with at these club meetings but also the enjoyment of associating with friends, Greek and otherwise. In the news accounts describing the Greek-American Republican Club, from 1900 onwards, one frequently hears of visiting public speakers, torch light parades, marching bands, street rallies, banquets and raucous attendance at all these expressly political events.

The unique fusion of Greek and American elements seen in the following news account il-

lustrates the balancing act that virtually all Greek organizations attempted to achieve. In all things Greek there is always an exception and certainly in the case of Greek organizations devoted to keeping its membership ethnically Greek they would (and do) reject any form of Americanization. Of course the case can be made that in responding to American forms and ideals they are still being directly influenced by them. But that is another story.

In citing this January 15, 1901, San Francisco Call news account we must note another Greek historical alteration. In the Julian calendar, that Greeks of the 1890s followed, New Year's Day fell on January 6th.

"The Greek-American Republican Club celebrated its first anniversary last night and honored the advent of the Greek new year in a general reunion and banquet at Druids' Hall, on Sutter street. This club is now perhaps the most influential society of its kind in the city. It has more than 600 active members, and is organized not simply for political purposes, but for the improvement, encouragement and advancement of its members, among whom are numbered some of the most influential members of the local Greek colony.

"The banquet last night was in every way a success. The members and guests were welcomed by President N. Valianos, who delivered in Greek an address which was frequently applauded. The speaker congratulated the club upon the progress which it had made, and urged the members to greater efforts of union and organization.

A.G. Kosta, the vice president, also spoke briefly but eloquently on the need of organization. Speeches were made by E. Antoniadis, Alex Feros, and M. D. Vanvales. O. C. Pratt, the legal advisor of the club, complimented the members upon the progress which they had made and counseled them to further efforts in their own behalf. During the evening Greek instrumental and vocal music was rendered."

A large banquet at an exclusive venue, speeches given in Greek and English, followed by Greek music and, presumably, dance. Sounds like a typical Greek-American gathering anywhere in the nation. Certainly the Greek-American Independent Political Club and the Greek-American Republican Club were never the only Greek organizations in San Francisco. By the 1950s, at the very least, the United Greek-American Societies of San Francisco had formed.

In reviewing the existence of Greek American political clubs, we are not only extending the current vistas of Greek-American history. In asking how early Greek immigrants first learned about local American political workings, we are exploring the very manner in which our ancestors mastered the social networks upon which America is based. No mean feat for persons so stereotypically depicted as unlettered peasants. Clearly more has always been involved with the individual and collective advancement of Greeks in North America than as so far been allowed.

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Democrats or Republicans? Looking

By Steve Frangos

Part 3

It is still unclear whether it was base competition or cool calculated politics that have most influenced the historical development of Greek-American political organizations. Whatever future research may reveal, one point is beyond question, once Greeks began to form political clubs, they just couldn't stop. Whether the collective of Greeks being surveyed is small or large does not matter. As time went on new clubs were established.

Curiously this proliferation of clubs is not always fully documented in Greek-American historical accounts. Apparently these divisions within the individual communities has resulted in a kind of institution amnesia. The history local Greeks recall or report upon is of the group the speaker (or their ancestors) is associated with, not necessarily the whole constellation of Greek-American organizations found in any given locale. Details of specific political moments in local Greek-American sources, except in their broadest outlines, are exceedingly rare. This is in startling contrast to American published accounts, which are rich in political details concerning the actions and remarks of specific individual Greeks as well as the political positions and actions of local Greek-American organizations.

Yet one question persists: why so many organizations? Ego, or the neverending conflict between Greeks, is almost too easy an answer to a much more subtle game. Let us present some of the organizations, their membership and then consider what is sug-

gested by the evidence.

Chicago, the home of the first-recorded Greek-American political club, serves as a perfect example of this overall social process. In 1890, according to Illinois census figures, there were 698 Greeks in the city of Chicago. On April 7, 1895 the Chicago Tribune's survey article on the city's Greeks estimates their overall population to have been 2000, "and the few who are not saloon-keepers, barbers, and restaurant keepers are in the fruit business." With the omission of Greek-owned candy stores and as varnish makers (a holdover it seems of many Greek sailors' days aboard wooden ships) that is an accurate listing of businesses and trades.

The New York Sun reports on October 14, 1892, there was "a Greek Republican Club in Chicago." Then, inexplicably, nearly a year later, the Chicago Tribune printed that local Greek community leader John Polites said "Greeks now want to vote the Republican ticket (November 26, 1893)." The reporter of that account immediately went on to say "this is the first time the Italians and the Greeks have shown the desire to affiliate with the Republicans."

We hear again of the resolve and sure purpose of that Greek club on November 6, 1894. A meeting held of the Republican Greeks gathered some 300 individuals. The meeting had been called to counteract the work of Democratic ward heelers, who had held several meetings. A "heeler" is Chicago political slang for one of the members of the political machine whose job it was to consistently monitor the political conditions in the neighbor-

hood wards by literally walking through them on a daily basis. On this occasion the Democrat heelers claimed 90% of the Greek vote was now Democratic. John Palamaris, who presided at the meeting said all the speeches made at those Democratic events in the Greek language, "had been in favor of the Republican part and that the meetings were Democratic in name only." Palamaris went on to report that a careful canvass had shown there would be 500 votes cast by them for the straight Republican ticket." This seems to have been a critical juncture for Greek voters in Chicago. On April 28, 1895, at the new organization the Cook County Republican Club at Chicago was incorporated.

Events moved quickly from that point. On August 15, 1895 at Chicago City Hall a meeting of the various Greek political clubs nearly became a riot. The West Side Greek Democratic Club along with the North Side Greek Democratic Club were challenging the mayor's office concerning who could serve as official translator in city trials. In Chicago during that period, political appointments followed party politics. With that successful challenge on November 5, 1900 a news account sees publication concerning a "newly formed Greek-American Republican Club."

What follows is an almost yearly creation of new political clubs. A short list of those Chicago Greek-American political organizations would have included (but most certainly was never limited to) The Achaian League, American Association of the Greek Community of Chicago, Greek American Republican League, the Greek Political Club of Chicago,

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at the Early Greek-Am. Political Clubs



Greek immigrants put their political liberty to good use.

the Nineteenth Ward Greek Political Club, the Twenty-seven Ward Greek Political and Educational Club and the United Greek American Republican Organization of Cook County, Illinois. As we can read in the news reports of the day non-Greek politicians do not mind or care about how many of these organizations existed. Politics in Chicago were (and remain) extremely pragmatic. If the Greeks could deliver the votes then that is all that mattered. If they couldn't that was a

fact freely discussed in the press as well.

No one doubts the influence of Greeks in American politics. On February 3, 1921 in the New York Tribune, we hear that "Constantine said he had no information that the United States soon will recognize him, but added he was naturally hopeful such action would be taken. He said he was glad to see that President-elect Harding had expressed friendly sentiments toward Greece in a communication to a Greek-Amer-

ican Republican club." Other such examples abound.

What we need to attend to in the future is the situational formation of these Greek-American organizations into large and small groups as expressions of the every changing political landscape. International, national and neighborhood specific issues all see expression through these various organizations.

When speaking of the history of Greeks in the United States, we are not automatically limited to the events and circumstances surrounding the local church. Nor at the same time should we ever address Greeks actions in North America from an exclusively Greek perspective. We must come to understand the reasoning and choices Greeks made in the United States concerning the world in which they lived.

Identifying the full array of Greek-American political or civic organizations is important, then, for several reasons. First, we learn something of the specific issues that concerned each group and so we must conclude the wider Hellenic membership. Second it is a means by which to judge the public involvement and civic development of individual Greek-Americans in communities around the nation. Next, by close study of these groups we can chart the strategies Greeks employed to directly influence the wider society. And as important as all the rest we can hear something of the changing notions non-Greeks held of the Greek collectives in their midst. Our historical past, as Greek-Americans, is not isolated from the mainstream of American history but the very substance by which it is composed.