

NJS Presents**Research Notes*****The Real “Stolen Election”: Frank Hague and New Jersey’s 1937 Race for Governor*****By Joseph M. Murray****DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v10i1.353>

“Research Notes” allows scholars to share their works in progress (or update prior works) and solicit feedback from others in the New Jersey history community. All are welcome to contribute—simply send submissions for inclusion in future issues to the editor.

Since publication of the article “The Real ‘Stolen Election’: Frank Hague and New Jersey’s 1937 Race for Governor” in the Winter 2023 issue of *New Jersey Studies*, a number of points have been refined to supplement the original research. This note summarizes key additions, including some period photographs unavailable until now, to be included in an updated edition for future release. The article argues that the gubernatorial election of 1937 was, as historian Alfred Steinberg puts it, “the biggest vote swindle of Hague’s career” and that Republican Lester H. Clee lost to A. Harry Moore due to institutionalized voter fraud in Hudson County.¹ Bolstering this interpretation is the contrarian stance taken by incumbent Governor Harold L. Hoffman in relation to his party’s allegations that a machine-corrupted election altered the outcome of the race. The Republican governor’s actions in the lead-up to and aftermath of the 1937 election exhibit a willingness to be in the thrall of Democratic state boss and Jersey City mayor Frank Hague.

Governor Hoffman exemplifies what is meant by “Hague Republican,” the term applied to those members of the opposite party who were captives of or collaborators with Hague’s Democratic machine. Hoffman’s indifference to the defeat of his party’s candidate is matched only by his distance from GOP claims of a stolen election. First, as senior member of the state

¹ Alfred Steinberg, *The Bosses* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 60.

Board of Canvassers, the body that officially validates election results, Hoffman raised no objection to certifying A. Harry Moore as governor-elect, notwithstanding pending legal action by Republican leadership to dispute Hudson County's election returns. Second, Hoffman declined to endorse or assist GOP efforts to investigate Hudson voter fraud. In fact, in his farewell address, the exiting governor exhorted GOP lawmakers to concede the election, imparting that Moore's vote count "indicates a degree of confidence that should be accepted by members of the legislature."²



New Jersey Governor Harold L. Hoffman. Courtesy ACME News Pictures.

If A. Harry Moore was a Hague puppet, which was the campaign slur of the day, then Hoffman was the boss's lackey. A rising star within the GOP, at 39 years old Hoffman was the state's youngest elected chief executive, serving from 1935–1938. But his misguided meddling in the sensational Lindbergh kidnapping case, coupled with policy missteps and an eccentric

² "Hoffman Telling Clee," *Jersey Journal*, January 12, 1938.

personality, quickly cast him a divisive figure. To Arthur Vanderbilt's Clean Government Republicans, the governor was a pariah for acceding to the boss on numerous patronage appointments and for levying an unpopular state sales tax.³ Years later, in 1954, Hoffman confessed in a deathbed letter that he had embezzled over \$300,000 from state funds during his time in office. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that Hague was intimately aware of Hoffman's misdeeds and used the threat of exposure to blackmail him into submission.⁴



Franklin D. Roosevelt (left) seated with Mayor Frank Hague (second from right) during the president's 1936 campaign stop in Jersey City. Courtesy abcdvdvideo.com.

By January 1938, at 62 years of age, Hague was the potentate of New Jersey politics. His Hudson County Democratic operation evolved far beyond the typical urban machine. Encompassing both political parties, it functioned more like a politico-economic syndicate, giving Hague a virtual monopoly over state government and the political muscle to bend to his will governors, judges, the legislature, law enforcement, and, crucially, the election apparatus

³ Steinberg, *The Bosses*, 60.

⁴ See Jon Blackwell, "1954: The Governor Was a Thief," *The Capital Century*, <http://www.capitalcentury.com/1954.html>.

of the state's second most populous county. Historian Donald Rogers, whose comprehensive research explicates the genesis of the *Hague v. Committee for Industrial Organization* Supreme Court case, implies that Hague's war on organized labor might have been devised to distract from the stolen election furor. A tempting interpretation, but it is equally plausible the mayor's anti-Red hysteria was a symptom of unrestrained hubris, or, as described by this writer, "bossism on steroids." Hague's methodically constructed, kleptocratic regime prospered from lavish federal patronage and lucrative waterfront racketeering, which, when nourished by a symbiotic relationship with FDR's White House, could effectively disable opponents, launder votes and, as the 1937 election shows, commandeer the state's democratic process.

Joseph M. Murray is a historian and filmmaker who participates in webinars and symposia relating to New Jersey political history, often in collaboration with the New Jersey Room of the Jersey City Public Library. His article "Bosses & Reformers: The Jersey City Victory Movement of 1957" was published in New Jersey History in 1985, receiving that year's William A. Whitehead Award. Further research into bossism and machine politics in Jersey City led to production of a three-part documentary series on New Jersey Democratic boss Frank Hague and the successor Hudson County political machine of John V. Kenny. Murray earned a dual-major BA (English literature and history) from New Jersey City University, an MA in European history from New York University, and a master's certificate in contract management from George Washington University. Born and raised in Jersey City, he lived in Asia for more than 25 years. His business career spans companies such as AT&T, Lucent Technologies, the UK start-up Sarantel, and Schneider Electric. Returning to the United States in 2016, he relocated his family from Singapore to Flower Mound, Texas, where he operates as a global media talent and vocational historian.