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Endorsement of Tammany Hall-Style Politics Predicts Support for DOGE, Tariffs, and Attacks on Universities: Investigating Relationships Among the Plunkitt Personality Inventory, Populism, and U.S. Domestic Policy

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Abstract

The present study examines the "Plunkitt Personality Inventory" (PPI), a scale designed to measure support for the pragmatic, patronage-oriented, and adversarial political style associated with George Washington Plunkitt and Tammany Hall. The study investigates whether this orientation is distinct from populism and whether it predicts support for political attitudes associated with contemporary MAGA-style politics. Participants were 300 American voters recruited through Prolific. A condensed 12-item version of the PPI was administered alongside the Populist Orientation Scale (POPOR) and a self-report political orientation measure. Participants also rated agreement with five political statements concerning DOGE, universities, mainstream media, tariffs, and "Big Pharma." Reliability analyses, correlations, principal component analysis, and multiple regressions were conducted. The revised PPI demonstrated good internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.85$), with all factor loadings exceeding 0.40. The PPI was moderately correlated with right-leaning political orientation ($r = 0.392$, $p < 0.001$), but was uncorrelated with POPOR. Regression analyses showed that higher PPI scores significantly predicted stronger support for beliefs that DOGE uncovered corruption, elite universities should be held more accountable, and tariffs restore fairness to trade. In contrast, POPOR predicted skepticism toward mainstream media and "Big Pharma." Findings suggest that the PPI measures a political orientation distinct from general populism. The construct appears to reflect support for a "tough-guy" machine-politics style emphasizing patronage, loyalty, and pragmatic self-interest. The study argues that Tammany-style politics may provide a useful framework for understanding contemporary American political coalitions and the evolution of MAGA politics.

Keywords: Tammany Hall; patronage; personality; voters; DOGE; tariffs

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1. Introduction

E. C. Prichard (2025) developed a questionnaire designed to gauge participants' agreement with statements about politics and government that were derived from the recorded talks of infamous Tammany Hall politician George Washington Plunkitt (Plunkitt & Riordon, 1905/1995). The original purpose of the study was to compare and contrast the style of politics of Tammany Hall with those advocated for by the 16th-century Florentine theorist Niccolò Machiavelli. Prichard argued that, while the concept of Machiavellianism is widely used to mean "devious politics," studying Tammany Hall may offer a better model of how Americans practice and view pragmatic and amoral politics than exclusively studying the work of a 16th-century writer trying to ingratiate himself with the

Medici. After developing a 20-item scale, he found that his "Plunkitt Personality Inventory," or PPI, strongly correlated with the expressed intention to vote for Donald Trump over Joe Biden (who had not yet dropped out of the 2024 election as of the time of data collection) in the 2024 U.S. general election. A classic measure of Machiavellianism (Christie & Geis, 1970), a personality construct originally developed based on statements in The Prince, was not related to support for Trump over Biden. This was true despite a significant, albeit small, correlation between the PPI and the measure of Machiavellianism.

In order to make a case for why this finding may be of interest to political scientists and political psychologists, a brief refresher on what Tammany Hall was and why they were notorious is necessary. Tammany Hall was a political machine associated predominantly with New York City's Democratic Party from 1789 to 1967 and included such (in)famous figures as William Tweed and eventual New York governor and Democratic Party presidential nominee, Al Smith (Horner, 2024; Vaz, 2021). Horner (2024) provides social and historical context for the published talks of Plunkitt. Horner describes how Tammany transitioned from a predominantly Protestant organization to one that was largely associated with and run by Irish Catholics in the late 1800s. During that time, Irish immigrants found themselves in poverty in New York. Having escaped domination under the English, they found themselves economically dominated by the English and Dutch descendants of early American colonists. Tammany was able to consolidate power by turning Irish Americans into a powerful voting bloc.

Drawing on the work of Orenstein (1980), Horner argued that the specific style of hardnosed politics they evolved was "centrifugal" as opposed to "centripetal." Centripetal politics is the ideal in representative democracy. The politician owes their position to the people and serves them out of a sense of duty and obligation. In centrifugal politics, the people feel they owe fealty to a leader who provides for them and who can punish them if they are disloyal. Tammany developed a system of bosses who may or may not have held elected office, but who were able to use their wealth and networks of resources to secure patronage jobs for their supporters. In addition, Tammany politicians and bosses openly saw their engagement in public life as an opportunity to enrich themselves off the public works projects they advocated for. In addition, Horner points out several other themes that can be readily found in Plunkitt's talks. I will highlight several below, drawing on my reading of both Horner's analysis and my own reading of Plunkitt's talks:

(1) Tammany politics are adversarial. Tammany politicians practiced negative partisanship, and Plunkitt uses colorful terms to describe Tammany's perceived enemies, including Republicans and the civil service.
(2) Tammany opposed civil service reform. Plunkitt openly expressed his belief that politicians ought to provide jobs for supporters and that patronage was important for politics. A professionalized civil service would prevent Tammany from using jobs as a reward for loyalty and would make it difficult for their working-class Irish American supporters to compete with college-educated Protestants who would be more prepared for civil service examinations.
(3) Plunkitt had a dim view of college education. Throughout his talks, Plunkitt argued that "college learning" is impractical. He argued that the kind of knowledge on civil service exams is not practical in everyday life and implied the exams were being used for gatekeeping purposes only.
(4) Honest graft is acceptable in politics. The phrase "honest graft" might be the most notorious phrase to come from Plunkett's talks. As stated earlier, he openly admitted to using insider knowledge about public works projects to profit by buying land and building materials using that knowledge.

These themes have reappeared in a big way with the political rise of Donald Trump and his Make America Great Again (MAGA) movement. The Trump era has been associated with negative partisanship (Masaru, 2021), attacks on civil service (Horwitz, 2022), growing hostility to higher education (Turnage, 2017), and a U.S. President refusing to shy away from ventures that enrich him despite his holding public office (Charter, 2026). There are eerie parallels between the style of politics that has come to dominate in the United States over the last 10 years and the politics of George Washington Plunkitt. But is that a coincidence? E. C. Prichard (2025) believed it was not. Journalist Tanenhaus (2025) has drawn connections between Trump and the style of politics that dominated New York City as the Trump family established themselves as wealthy real estate owners in the city. In his chapter, Prichard found a direct correlation between scores on the PPI and planned support for Trump.

The hypothesis is that the Trumps had to learn to navigate Tammany-style politics in order to be allowed to get into the New York real estate market. The principles of patronage, loyalty to bosses, skimming wealth off the top of major (and sometimes publicly funded) projects, and adversarial politics would have been instilled in the young Donald Trump while he was growing up as a New York City Democrat in the 1950s and 1960s. With his rise in Republican politics in the 2010s, he imported a style of old-school Democratic urban politics into the national Republican Party. He reshaped the Republican Party as a kind of machine with himself as the boss. Jobs are for loyal supporters, and institutions that resist the centrifugal politics of Trump are either undermined or remade around his preferences.

If this is the case, Tammany-style politics is a particular American brand of hardnosed and quasi-populist politics that needs to be understood in its own right. In other words, the Tammany brand of politics is not just Machiavellianism with an 1890s mustache. It is not just populism. It is something that has characteristics of both, but is also a product of urban America. The creation of the PPI is meant to provide evidence that Tammany thinking is common among Americans and predicts their voting patterns and the politics they support.

The present study has several purposes. The primary aim of the paper is to investigate the relationship between endorsement of Tammany Style politics and support for second term policies put forth by the Trump administration. A secondary goal is the refinement of the PPI. E. C. Prichard (2025) published the original scale as a pilot study, which was part of a larger anthology project (E. C. Prichard & Strong, 2025). However, the final scale has several redundant items and has only been investigated in one sample. This study will administer a shorter version of the scale, provide factor loadings for the shorter version, and provide a measure of internal reliability for the new scale. Second, this study aims to show that the PPI is distinct from populism. Trump's politics have been described as populist (e.g., Gusterson, 2017), and Horner (2024) described Plunkett's talks as having a populist bent. However, it is hypothesized that the PPI will be correlated with, but distinct from, a measure of populist political orientation (Roccato et al., 2019). Populism and the PPI are also expected to correlate with five statements that are hypothesized to reflect the Tammany-style machine politics of the MAGA movement. These statements will reflect support for the Department of Government Efficiency (Samaras, 2026), attacks on universities (Casey, 2025), support for tariffs (Klomp, 2025), skepticism of mainstream media (Lee & Hosam, 2020), and skepticism of mainstream medicine (The Lancet, 2025).

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Participants and Data Collection

Participants were 300 American voters (M_{Age} = 39.36) recruited using Prolific. The study was completed on 4 June 2025. Participants were paid $2.00 (U.S.) to complete the study. Participants using Prolific read a description of the study that included language

indicating the study had been approved by the University of Arkansas at Monticello Human Subjects IRB and that clicking on the link and beginning the study would be understood to be implied informed consent. The link took participants to a survey administered via Microsoft Forms. Upon completing the study, participants were given a code, entered the code on Prolific, and were paid $2.00 within 24 h. All participants answered all questionnaires in the same order. Several attention checks were added to ensure that participants read the questions.

2.2. Instruments

PPI. As stated in the introduction, this paper uses a condensed form of the Plunkitt Personality Inventory (PPI) originally developed by E. C. Prichard (2025). The initial scale had several redundant items. The scale used in this paper consists of the 12 non-redundant items from the factor analysis published by Prichard. Upon close inspection of the chapter, several items appeared twice, but slightly reworded. For example, in the original chapter, participants received "How essential do you believe patronage is in politics?" and "How essential do you think political patronage is?" Where such instances were discovered, the second instance was not used as an item in this study. For the 12 items used in this study, Cronbach's Alpha = 0.85. This indicates good internal reliability. Table 1 contains the final scale. In addition to the items, it also displays the factor loadings from a PCA extracted using SPSS version 23. Because of the small sample size, the factor loadings should be interpreted with caution. However, it should be noted that none of the loadings fall below 0.400, and only two loadings fall below 0.550. It is highly recommended that any future research incorporating the PPI as a measure use the version published in this paper [Table 1].

Table 1. Plunkitt Personality Inventory.

Item	PCA Factor Loadings
How essential do you believe patronage is in politics? (1 = Not Essential at All, 7 = Very Essential)	0.628
To what extent do you value political alliances and partnerships? (1 = Not Valuable, 7 = Very Valuable)	0.564
How beneficial do you consider political machines to be? (1 = Not Beneficial, Highly Beneficial)	0.733
How acceptable do you find political favors and exchanges? (1 = Completely Unacceptable, 7 = Complete Acceptable)	0.785
To what extent do you agree with the concept of "honest graft" in politics (1 = Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree)	0.668
How acceptable is it to use public funds for personal gain in politics? (1 = Completely Unacceptable, 7 = Completely Acceptable)	0.598
How beneficial do you view the relationship between business and politics to be? (1 = Not Beneficial, 7 = Highly Beneficial)	0.661
How effective do you consider traditional political strategies to be? (1 = Not Effective at All, 7 = Extremely Effective)	0.615
How important do you think loyalty is in politics? (1 = Not Important, 7 = Extremely Important)	0.416
How acceptable do you find political nepotism? (1 = Completely Unacceptable, 7 = Completely Acceptable)	0.537
How acceptable is the use of favors in political negotiations? (1 = Completely Unacceptable, 7 = Completely Acceptable)	0.601
How acceptable is it to use political influence for personal gain? (1 = Completely Unacceptable, 7 = Completely Acceptable)	0.593

POPOR. The present paper used Roccato et al.'s (2019) 12-item Populist Orientation Scale (POPOR) as a measure of populism. Because the original scale was developed for an Italian sample, references to "Italy" and "Parliament" were changed to "The United States" and "Congress." However, internal reliability for this scale was low in the current sample, Cronbach's Alpha = 0.145. It might be that the nature of populism is considerably different in the United States as compared to Italy. Another change, in addition to changing references to "Italy" and "Parliament," was the use of a 1 to 10 Likert-type scale in the present study as opposed to the 1 to 5 scale used in the original paper. While it is not clear why these changes, which seem minor, would result in such poor internal reliability, they are the only two modifications made to the scale and should still be noted as potential

contributors to the low Cronbach's Alpha. Whatever the case may be, interpretation of any of the present sample's results that include POPOR as a measure should be undertaken with great care.

Political Orientation. As opposed to directly asking about support for Donald Trump per se, as E. C. Prichard (2025) did in his chapter, the present paper is more concerned about a style of politics as opposed to support for a particular politician or candidate per se. Trump is a Republican, but Tammany Hall was Democratic. Most of the criterion items are statements about policies that could be construed as populist, and which are associated with the present American administration. A scale asking about political orientation was included as a third predictor variable to test for whether the PPI and Populism are correlated with support for specific policies independent of political orientation. The scale was a simple 1 through 7 scale, in which 1 was anchored on "Very Left Leaning" and 7 was anchored on "Very Right Leaning."

Criterion Measures. The five criterion measures are included with the three predictors in Table 2. Participants were asked about their level of support for various positions that could be construed as populist and which are associated with the United States' present administration. All measures used 1–7 scales. The means and standard deviations for all measures can be found in Table 2.

Table 2. Measures and Their Descriptive Statistics.

Measure	Mean	Standard Deviation
PPI	43.93	12.03
Populism	65.16	9.94
How Would you rate your political orientation from 1 (Very Left Leaning) to 7 (Very Right Leaning)?	4.13	1.96
Rate your level of agreement with the following statement from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree): The Department of Government Efficient (DOGE) has uncovered a lot of corruption.	4.20	1.99
Rate your level of agreement with the following statement from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree): Recent policy changes will force elite universities to be more accountable with money.	4.60	1.88
Rate your level of agreement with the following statement from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree): Mainstream Media's Biases have caused its decline.	4.98	1.64
Rate your level of agreement with the following statement from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree): Tariffs will restore fairness to global trade.	3.80	2.03
Rate your level of agreement with the following statement from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree): "Big Medicine" and "Big Pharma" often withhold findings that will hurt profits.	4.84	1.72

3. Results

Before proceeding to the main analysis, a simple correlation analysis was carried out to examine the correlations between the three predictor variables. The purpose of this analysis was to ensure that the simple measure of political orientation did not overlap with the other two measures to such a high degree that scores on the PPI and PROPOR would end up simply being alternative measures of a right-leaning orientation. Table 3 is the correlation matrix. While right-leaning political orientation statistically correlates with both measures, the correlation coefficients are weak to moderate. This suggests that being more right-leaning is associated with higher scores on POPOR and the PPI, but all three variables are still distinct measures. Tables 4–8 display the results from regression analyses regressing each of the five criterion measures onto the 3 predictor measures. It is important

to remember that a higher value on the political orientation measure indicates a participant has self-reported being more right-leaning.

Table 3. Correlations Between Predictors.

	Political Orientation	Populism	PPI
Political Orientation	1.00	0.168 **	0.392 ***
Populism	0.168 **	1.00	−0.086

** Significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed), *** Significant at 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Table 4. Criterion: The Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) has uncovered a lot of corruption.

Predictor	B	SE	ß	*p*
PPI	0.039	0.009	0.236	<0.001
Populism	0.015	0.010	0.077	0.109
Political Orientation	0.459	0.053	0.451	<0.001

Overall Model: $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.356$.

Table 5. Criterion: Recent policy changes will force elite universities to be more accountable with money.

Predictor	B	SE	ß	*p*
PPI	0.038	0.008	0.241	<0.001
Populism	0.038	0.010	0.092	0.071
Political Orientation	0.354	0.053	0.369	<0.001

Overall Model: $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.280$.

Table 6. Criterion: Mainstream Media's Biases have caused its decline.

Predictor	B	SE	ß	*p*
PPI	−0.010	0.008	−0.073	0.239
Populism	0.030	0.009	0.181	0.002
Political Orientation	0.155	0.052	0.185	0.003

Overall Model $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.075$.

Table 7. Criterion: Tariffs will restore fairness to global trade.

Predictor	B	SE	ß	*p*
PPI	0.041	0.009	0.241	<0.001
Populism	−0.012	0.010	−0.061	0.203
Political Orientation	0.484	0.054	0.466	<0.001

Overall Model $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.360$.

Table 8. Criterion: "Big Medicine" and "Big Pharma" often withhold findings that will hurt profits.

Predictor	B	SE	ß	*p*
PPI	−0.016	0.009	−0.115	0.061
Populism	0.043	0.010	0.249	<0.001
Political Orientation	0.081	0.054	0.092	0.138

Overall Model $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.088$.

The analyses support several conclusions. First, a right-leaning political orientation was modestly correlated with each of the other predictor variables. The PPI and POPOR were uncorrelated. Important for the purposes of this paper are the relationships between

the predictor variables and the outcome variables uncovered by the regression analyses. Both the PPI and the political orientation were related to endorsing the belief that DOGE uncovered corruption, endorsing the belief that elite universities are being held more accountable, and endorsing the belief that tariffs will restore trade balance. Although political orientation was the stronger of the two predictors in these analyses, the PPI still independently accounted for a significant proportion of the variance across these three measures. The POPOR and political orientation were significantly related to the belief that mainstream media is causing its own downfall by being biased, and only the POPOR was correlated with endorsing the belief that "Big Medicine" and "Big Pharma" are hiding results.

4. Discussion

Contrary to the original prediction, the PPI was not correlated with POPOR. Both, however, were correlated with a right-leaning orientation among a sample of U.S. voters. Importantly, both the PPI and POPOR were correlated with different outcome variables. The PPI was correlated with support for DOGE, support for reining in universities, and support for tariffs. POPOR was correlated with skepticism toward "mainstream media" and "big medicine."

Interpretation of results incorporating POPOR should be done with care, as the internal reliability was low. However, it does seem to be measuring something distinct from the PPI. It is here tentatively proposed that POPOR, though flawed, is measuring some kind of general populist orientation. The PPI is measuring support for a particular brand of "tough guy" machine politics that sees wealthy figures like Donald Trump and Elon Musk as the kind of wealthy people who may make a buck off power, but who will also enrich their supporters and reward their followers. What is interesting, in the present paper, is that the PPI and POPOR were unrelated, but they both correlated with a right-leaning orientation.

A possible explanation is that these results could shed light on the current coalition that makes up MAGA. While there is almost certainly some overlap, perhaps the populist conspiracists of QAnon (Cohen, 2022) and working-class Trump supporters (Devinatz, 2017) represent groups with distinct centers. Those with the populist orientations might be the ones suspicious of mainstream media and medicine. Those with high scores on the PPI might be like Plunkitt's working-class supporters of the late 1800s. They are willing to overlook patronage and a little honest graft as long as the big boss is doing something for them. One way to study these ideas in future research would be to investigate the relationship among the PPI, perceptions of policy, and a measure of political conspiracism. Measures of conspiracist thinking are readily available (e.g., Brotherton et al., 2013). Future research could test the extent to which conspiracist voters and Plunkitt-type voters overlap or are distinct. The items relating to the mainstream media and "big pharma," might be more related to a general conspiracist outlook than a pro-patronage, pro-political machine outlook.

If the above explanation is correct, it is unusual that the PPI, and not POPOR, was related to support for putting pressure on universities. One might expect populists and conspiracists to see universities as elitist and the home of conspiracies to indoctrinate students and carry out suspect research. However, as mentioned in the introduction, Plunkitt expressed disdain for college and the college-educated. Horner (2024) interpreted this disdain through ethnic and class lenses. The college-educated were perceived, by Plunkitt, as the descendants of the English who were using civil service exams and degrees as gatekeeping. From the perspective of Tammany supporters, a degree from Harvard or Columbia did not make someone qualified to be a civil servant. The degree gave English and Dutch American Protestants in New York City an excuse to lock Catholic Irish Americans and immigrants out of jobs. It is worth pointing out that, from 1949–2007, a disproportionate

number of high-ranking American political figures came from just 13 universities, one of which is in the United Kingdom (Kurtz & Simon, 2007). Perhaps today, as over 100 years ago, the gatekeeping role of elite universities makes them a little-pitied target when a "big boss" type of politician aims to take them down a peg.

These possibilities should be explored in future studies. The present paper presents a refined version of the PPI and the intriguing possibility that understanding Tammany Hall may be important for understanding present American politics. The PPI should be incorporated as a tool in future studies that try to delineate what groups make up the Trump coalition and to project how American politics will continue to evolve post-Trump.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and was reviewed and approved by the University of Arkansas at Monticello IRB. The IRB reference number was 2025:SSBS1002. It was approved on 3 June 2025.

Informed Consent Statement: This research has been approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Arkansas at Monticello. This study consists of a series of anonymous questions about your views on political leadership, five current political issues, and basic demographics. Your responses will be anonymous and will be used to tabulated aggregated results. By selecting "I Agree" you are confirming you are a U.S. citizen eligible to vote and that you consent to participate in the research.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available in Kaggle at https://www.kaggle.com/datasets/ericprichard/plunkitt-personality-inventory-data, accessed on 18 November 2026 (E. P. Prichard, 2026).

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