

**“The Questionable Virtues of the Medici:  
Party Politics in Machiavelli’s *Florentine Histories*”**

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Machiavelli reminds us that it’s only recently that “party” has come to mean an organized group of like-minded people dedicated to the advancement of a common political agenda through democratic participation. His stern warnings in the *Discourses* that republics must guard against development of parties reflects an altogether different history of the term: partisanship once meant loyalty to a particular ‘big’ man, or clique of *grandi*, to whom one was bound by intimate ties of personal obligation. Party affiliation was thus nothing less than a form of private power, and one that assisted *grandi* in their incessant efforts to convert republics into principalities.

This paper explores Machiavelli’s thinking about party politics via his convoluted, but fascinating and richly rewarding, analysis of Medici power in the *Florentine Histories*. In the *Histories*, Machiavelli traces the political ascendancy of the Medici family to the decisive superiority of their party, i.e. their vast clientele of supporters, defenders, and other ‘friends’ who could be relied upon to advance Medici interests whenever possible. Not only was the Medici party bigger than any of its rivals – it was also broader, more disciplined, and more resilient. Machiavelli traces the supremacy of the Medici party to the extraordinary *virtù* of the Medici themselves, who used a hard-won reputation for virtue, in the conventional sense, to bind others to them. Instead of enforcing the submission of actual or potential subjects, the Medici convinced their fellow Florentines to accept and voluntarily enact their own domination, in the form of party membership; and they did so by performing morally praiseworthy actions, which the Medici used to elicit morally appropriate responses in others like gratitude, esteem, and deference. Thus Machiavelli’s critical view of parties contributes to a host of broader arguments about the nature of princely power, the rhetorical dimensions of princely *virtù*, and the danger to republican liberty posed by conventional social virtues.