

Selfish Alliances: How Elites Help Each Other (From Ancient Times to the 2020s)

Introduction

Throughout history, wealthy individuals, political leaders, and celebrities have formed tight-knit alliances to advance their own interests. Far from selfless charity, these relationships are often driven by mutual benefit and survival instinct. Powerful people tend to rely on their peers – “the person beside you” – because their own success (even survival in a competitive arena) depends on those allies. This pattern is analogous to biological principles: just as adjacent cells cooperate in an organism, or symbiotic species aid each other, elites support one another to thrive. Modern research and historical records both confirm that **life at the top is a game of alliances**, where each player “helps” others in order to help themselves ¹. In this report, we examine documented examples from ancient history to the 2020s of how rich people, politicians, and celebrities bolster each other for mutual gain, and we explore the scientific context that explains why these **elite networks** are fundamentally driven by self-interest.

Ancient and Medieval Precedents of Elite Alliances

One of the earliest formal systems of mutual aid among unequals was the **patron-client system** in ancient Rome. The relationship was hierarchical but **obligations were mutual**: a *patronus* (usually a wealthy, high-status man) served as protector and benefactor to his *cliens*, who in return owed loyalty, services, and political support ². The patron might provide legal defense, financial help, or career promotion for the client, while the client would vote for the patron in elections, accompany him in public, and even fight for him in war ³. Roman sources note that even two aristocrats of similar rank often described their alliance as *amicitia* (friendship) if it was a relationship of roughly equal, reciprocal benefit ⁴. In essence, **Roman elites maintained power through networks of support**, trading favors and influence in a way that benefited both sides.

A vivid example of elite mutual aid was the **First Triumvirate** (60–53 BCE), an unofficial pact between Julius Caesar, Marcus Crassus, and Pompey Magnus. These three most powerful men of Rome “*needed each other to get what they wanted*,” forming a private alliance to bypass the Senate and divide power between them ⁵. **They didn’t even particularly like or trust one another**, yet cooperated because each had assets the others required – Pompey had military might, Crassus had immense wealth, and Caesar had political populist appeal. By agreeing behind the scenes to advance each other’s agendas, they all rose higher than they could have alone, illustrating that even in the ancient world, **rivals could become partners in a mutually beneficial power grab** ⁵.

During the **Medieval and Renaissance** periods, similar patterns persisted globally. Monarchs often granted lands, titles, or monopolies to nobles and financiers in exchange for loans, armies, or political loyalty. In 15th-century Europe, for example, the influential banker **Jakob Fugger** became known as “the banker of kings” for financing the Habsburg rulers. Fugger’s loans and patronage helped Emperor Maximilian I and his grandson Charles V secure their thrones, **and in return Fugger received lucrative mining rights and trade privileges** ⁶. By **bankrolling political ambition**, he ensured policies favorable to his business, creating a symbiotic loop between the wealth of the merchant and the power

of the emperor. Similarly, powerful families like the Medici in Florence used their banking fortune to install their own members and allies in positions of church and state authority – effectively **a self-serving support system among the Renaissance elite**.

It is no coincidence that the very term “*nepotism*” originates from this era: it comes from *nepote*, Latin for “nephew,” referring to the common practice of popes in the Middle Ages and Renaissance elevating their “nephews” (often illegitimate sons or close kin) to cardinalships and other offices ⁷. Popes like Sixtus IV and Alexander VI notoriously **showered wealth and power on their family members**, ensuring the papal *nephews* would in turn protect the pope’s interests. What might have looked like pious patronage was in fact a strategy to keep power “*all in the family*.” Favoring one’s relatives (nepotism) or friends (cronyism) was understood as *normal practice* in courts and churches – a **means of survival for ruling families**. The powerful helped their own circle because those were the people who would reliably reinforce their position. In short, whether in a Roman patron’s household or a Borgia pope’s Vatican, **elites learned early on that helping an ally or kinsman was the surest way to help oneself**.

Alliances in the Early Modern and Industrial Era

As societies became more complex, the alliances among elites also evolved, often veiled under the guise of business transactions or statecraft. **Political patronage** – awarding offices, contracts, or honors to supporters – became a hallmark of governance in many states. Rulers continued to rely on wealthy patrons for funds, and those wealthy individuals relied on rulers for profitable opportunities. For instance, **British monarchs in the 17th–19th centuries granted monopoly rights** to favored trading companies or colonial ventures (like the East India Company), enriching private investors who, in turn, bolstered royal treasuries and political agendas. These arrangements were not charity; they were **calculations of mutual benefit**: the Crown expanded its empire and income, while the financiers gained protection and markets.

By the **19th century’s Gilded Age**, the nexus of money and politics in industrializing nations was unmistakable – and often scandalous. In the United States, big industrialists (railroad tycoons, oil barons, steel magnates) routinely worked hand-in-glove with elected officials to rig the system in their favor. Bribery, campaign contributions, and insider deals were tools of the trade. One notorious example was the **Crédit Mobilier scandal** of 1872, in which executives of the Union Pacific Railroad created a *phony* construction company (Crédit Mobilier of America) and then **bribed members of Congress with stock shares** to prevent government oversight of their inflated railroad building contracts ⁸ ⁹. The scheme funneled millions in illicit profits to the railroad’s insiders and friendly politicians – a literal payoff for both sides. When exposed, it implicated even the Vice President of the United States in taking these kickbacks ⁸. This scandal showed how **business elites helped politicians get rich, and politicians returned the favor by lining the pockets of those businesses** with public funds. As one contemporary newspaper observed, it “*shows that corruption does exist in high places*” and warned that without vigilance, the government would be “*sold out to some giant railroad or other monied monopoly*.” ¹⁰

Corruption and “**machine politics**” thrived in many cities during this era. Political bosses like New York’s **William “Boss” Tweed** ran urban political machines that exchanged jobs, contracts, and favors for votes and payments. Local businessmen who contributed to Boss Tweed’s Tammany Hall, for example, often received municipal contracts or franchises in return. It was an open secret that “**you pay to play**” – essentially, **politicians and plutocrats forming a club of mutual back-scratching**. Such arrangements were essentially **elite alliances masquerading as governance**: the city or state was governed not strictly by law, but by an informal coalition of interests greased by money. The *spoils*

system (rewarding loyalists with government posts) and patronage networks meant that **government positions themselves became currency** to reward those who helped the powerful.

An illustration symbolizing political patronage: a hand emerging from Big Ben (UK Parliament) grasps a hand offering cash. In Britain, all major parties have long been accused of awarding seats in the House of Lords to wealthy donors – a practice critics dub “cash for honours.” Such elite reciprocity has been documented for over a century. In the early 1900s, British Prime Minister Lloyd George was caught selling peerages for party donations, prompting laws against the outright sale of honors ¹¹ ¹². Yet the tradition continues in subtler form. A recent analysis found **dozens of major political donors** who were later given life peerages or knighthoods by UK parties in power ¹³. One striking case was that of businessman Rami Ranger: after his initial applications for a peerage were denied, he donated about £1.4 million to the Conservative Party, and soon **he was awarded a seat in the House of Lords** ¹⁴. Once ennobled, however, Ranger rarely spoke or participated – suggesting his *true* contribution (and qualification) was the money he gave, not legislative expertise ¹⁵ ¹⁶. **All three major UK parties have for decades granted peerages to financial backers** in this way ¹⁷. The donors gain prestige and influence as lawmakers for life, and the party gains funding – a quintessential quid pro quo. As a Labour lord lamented in 2021, such patrons “bring this house into disrepute” by obtaining honors through wealth rather than merit ¹⁸. The practice underlines that **even the honors system can be a tool for elite mutual benefit**: political leaders reward those who fill their coffers, binding wealthy individuals to them in a supportive role while giving those individuals a stake in the political game.

Another notable feature of the modern era is the “**revolving door**” between government and industry. It is commonplace for high-ranking officials and legislators to leave office and immediately take lucrative jobs lobbying or consulting for corporations – and likewise for industry leaders to be appointed to top government posts. This revolving door creates a tight **support system among the governing elite and the business elite**, effectively erasing the line between the two. Critics point out that regulators may go easy on companies they aim to work for later, and companies hire ex-officials precisely to **exploit their connections inside government** ¹⁹ ²⁰. For example, a regulator might approve a policy favorable to an industry, then soon receive a high-paying executive post in that same industry – a delayed payoff for the favor. From the defense sector to finance, the pattern is rampant. In the U.S., as of 2023, a stunning **80% of retiring four-star generals** went on to work in the defense industry ²¹. These generals-turned-consultants leverage their insider knowledge and contacts at the Pentagon to help military contractors secure contracts, while the promise of a plush post-retirement job motivates current officials to keep those contractors happy. It’s a **sympiotic cycle**: the government grants contracts or lenient regulation to firms, and those firms later “**take care**” of the officials with positions or payouts. Academic studies have described this revolving door as a system of “*reciprocated privileges*” between public servants and private firms ²² ¹⁹. In plainer terms, **elites on both sides are scratching each other’s backs** – not out of friendship, but because each expects to gain from the other’s influence.

By the mid-20th century, sociologists like **C. Wright Mills** were writing about the “*power elite*” – a merging of corporate, political, and military leadership into one interwoven class, whose members move fluidly between top roles in each sphere. Research continually finds that wealthy interests and organized elites have disproportionate sway on policy compared to ordinary citizens ²³. In many countries, a small elite network sets the agenda, and **they maintain that status by cooperating to each other’s benefit**. Nowhere was this more stark than in certain post-colonial or authoritarian states, where the line between political power and wealth is effectively nonexistent: for example, in Russia of the 1990s, a handful of businessmen (the “oligarchs”) allied with President Boris Yeltsin to bankroll his 1996 re-election campaign. In exchange, Yeltsin’s government sold off state assets to them at fire-sale prices – the infamous “**loans-for-shares**” scheme ²⁴ ²⁵. This deal “*was structured so that Yeltsin’s victory was a strong interest of the investors involved,*” since they would only get their shares after he won

²⁶ . It worked: Yeltsin kept power with their media and money support, and the oligarchs became billionaires practically overnight. In essence, a few ambitious men divided Russia's wealth among themselves by **helping the president in return for treasure – a brutal but clear alliance of self-interest**. The arrangement persisted into the 2000s as those oligarchs remained influential under Putin (albeit at his mercy), exemplifying how political leaders and ultra-rich figures can become partners in profiteering. Similar patterns occurred elsewhere: **crony capitalism** in many developing nations meant rulers enriched a circle of business cronies who, in turn, kept the ruler in power through funding or media control. The specifics vary, but the underlying biology is the same – **power feeds power**.

21st Century Elite Networks and Celebrity-Political Symbiosis

In the 21st century, globalization and technology have changed how elite networks operate, but not their fundamental nature. Today's **billionaires and politicians** are often entwined in what observers call a “*shadow economy*” or “*incestuous*” network of influence. Investigative projects like the **Pandora Papers (2021)** pulled back the curtain on how deeply politicians and tycoons collaborate to shield their wealth and power. The Pandora Papers – a massive leak of offshore financial records – revealed that **35 current or former national leaders and over 330 public officials worldwide had connections to secret offshore companies and trusts**, often alongside private billionaires and even criminals ²⁷ ²⁸ . Far from cracking down on tax evasion havens, many powerful lawmakers were *personally* using them. In other words, “*many of the power players who could help bring an end to the offshore system instead benefit from it*”, keeping it alive to serve their own interests ²⁸ . The investigation described a “*shadow economy that benefits the wealthy and well-connected at the expense of everyone else*.” ²⁹ Politicians helped billionaires hide assets; billionaires helped politicians (and themselves) by funding campaigns or projects through opaque channels. This global exposé underscored that **elite cooperation transcends borders** – a president in Africa or Asia might secretly partner with multinational corporations or Western financiers to siphon national wealth, each side gaining (money or access) while their publics lose out.

Democratic countries are not immune to these alliances; the mechanisms are just somewhat more regulated (or more cleverly concealed). In the United States, **big donors and Super PACs** wield enormous influence. Politicians frequently tailor policies to please their largest benefactors – for instance, enacting tax cuts that benefit billionaire donors, or deregulating industries after intensive corporate lobbying. In return, those donors pour millions into re-election campaigns and politically aligned advocacy groups. It's a **mutually reinforcing cycle** of money and policy. Academic data shows that economic elites and organized business groups have substantially more impact on U.S. government policy than average citizens do ²³ . Indeed, many billionaires don't just support politicians – they *become* politicians. A recent study found that **over 11% of the world's billionaires have held or run for political office**, an extraordinarily high rate of political ambition in the ultra-rich class ³⁰ . These billionaire-politicians often seek top positions (presidents, prime ministers) and have a strong track record of winning elections ³¹ . They tend to lean pro-business and conservative in ideology, and unsurprisingly, they thrive especially in environments where money can buy clout more directly (the study found billionaire political participation is **much higher in autocracies than in democracies** ³²). This trend blurs the line between money and power: it's no longer just alliances across a divide – **wealth and political office are increasingly united in the same individuals**. Whether it's a media mogul like Silvio Berlusconi becoming Prime Minister of Italy, or a real estate billionaire like Donald Trump winning the U.S. presidency, these cases illustrate that the rich may help themselves to power and then help their peers maintain it. Under their leadership, the “**government of the people**” risks **tilting into a government of the wealthy, by the wealthy, for the wealthy** – essentially an elite pact writ large.

In modern authoritarian states, the symbiosis can be even starker: rulers grant a slice of the economy to loyal oligarchs or military generals, who in turn ensure the ruler's security and wealth. For example,

Chinese “princelings” (children of Communist Party leaders) have become business tycoons, leveraging family connections; in exchange, they staunchly support one-party rule that secures their enterprises. In the Middle East, oil-rich monarchies often partner with global corporations and lavishly court influential Western ex-leaders to legitimize their regimes – a form of cross-border elite alliance (think of former officials receiving consulting deals or foundation donations from Gulf states). These arrangements underscore a reality: at the top, **elites often identify more with each other across countries than with their own masses**, and they will cooperate to preserve a system that benefits them all.

A relatively new dimension of elite cooperation in the 21st century involves **celebrities and pop culture figures** in the political arena. In an age of mass media, celebrities hold tremendous sway over public opinion, and politicians have increasingly enlisted that power – forging alliances that are *part PR strategy, part mutual promotion*. Celebrities endorse candidates, appear at rallies, and speak out on policy issues, effectively **“lending” their fan base to politicians**. In return, celebrities gain a platform for their causes and a burnished reputation as socially engaged figures (and sometimes literal political favors or appointments). This dynamic has been described as a **“reciprocal and symbiotic” relationship between politicians and stars** ³³. Politicians, especially in democracies, seek the *buzz* and youth appeal that actors or musicians can deliver, while those celebrities use the association to **bolster their own image with politically active fans** ³⁴.

Celebrities and politicians often form symbiotic alliances. Above, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris embraces music superstar Beyoncé at a 2024 campaign rally – a high-profile example of mutual promotion. Celebrity endorsements in politics are not new – as early as 1920, film stars like Al Jolson endorsed U.S. presidential candidates. But today, with social media amplifying every message, the impact is greater and more direct. For instance, pop icon **Taylor Swift’s public endorsement** of candidates and causes has mobilized swaths of young voters who might otherwise tune out politics ³⁵ ³⁶. In 2024, Beyoncé herself appeared onstage to introduce Kamala Harris at a Houston rally, drawing a huge crowd and media attention to Harris’s campaign ³⁷ ³⁸. Such star-studded events give politicians cultural relevance and free publicity, while the stars earn goodwill and “seriousness” by aligning with civic issues. As Columbia Political Review noted, *“politicians use celebrities’ fan bases to gain attention...and celebrities use politicians to bolster their own image”* ³³. It’s a trade: **influence for credibility, audience for agenda**. Even when celebs claim *“I’m not here as a celebrity”* but as a concerned citizen (as Beyoncé did, stressing she spoke “as a mother” about freedom) ³⁹, the fact remains that her star power was the draw that gave the message its reach.

This phenomenon extends beyond elections. Once someone like a Hollywood actor or sports star invests political capital in a politician, they often gain informal access or advisory roles. Governments sometimes appoint celebrities as cultural ambassadors or members of advisory committees – roles that **honor the celebrity and leverage their popularity for the state’s soft power**, a mutually beneficial arrangement. On the flip side, politicians often become celebrities in their own right, cultivating personal “brands” with help from entertainment media. The line between the two realms has blurred: a reality TV star can become president, and a politician can host a late-night show or garner fandom akin to a pop star. Some commentators warn that this *“fusion of politician and celebrity”* can distract from substantive policy ⁴⁰ ⁴¹. Yet it persists because it works – both sides gain. The politician taps into new demographics and emotional connection; the celebrity gains political clout and perhaps policy influence on issues they care about. It is, at its core, **another elite coalition**, just with more glitter.

Notably, these alliances are *reciprocal* but not necessarily equal. Often, one party clearly benefits more. For example, a superstar’s endorsement might do far more for a struggling candidate than whatever small favor that candidate could later return. Still, the logic of self-interest pervades: the celebrity might be angling for a future appointment or simply the satisfaction of advancing a cause that enhances their

legacy. In other cases, the politician clearly gains votes while the celebrity gains publicity – different currencies, both valuable. The key point is that **each party expects to get something out of the cooperation**. As one analysis observed, this increased reliance on celebrity approval forces politicians to court famous influencers “*rather than their constituents*,” skewing priorities ³³. From the celebrity’s side, taking a political stand can be risky to their brand – they likely only do it when the *personal* upside (principled reward or public image boost) outweighs the risk. Thus, even activism has an element of calculated self-interest; truly “altruistic” activism without career considerations is rare in high-stakes arenas.

Whether we look at the cozy ties between tech billionaires and regulators, the donor-“honoree” relationship in party politics, or the hashtag activism of pop culture icons allied with campaigns, the pattern holds: **people with power and influence often join forces in ways that reinforce each other’s status**. They form what amounts to an exclusive support network – the classic “*old boys’ club*” (now sometimes including women and celebrities, but operating on the same clubby principles). These networks can be informal (social circles, Davos meetings, charity galas where deals are whispered) or formal (cross-appointments, boards, and committees). Crucially, *trust* within these elite circles is high, because members know **they share similar stakes**. A billionaire CEO and a senator might seem to have different jobs, but each knows the other can provide something invaluable – and that binds them more strongly than any ideological differences might divide them. The CEO might host fundraisers and provide economic boosts in the senator’s district; the senator might champion legislation that benefits the CEO’s industry. Both benefit; *the cost is borne by outsiders* (like competitors or the general public) who weren’t in on the deal.

The Science of Self-Serving Cooperation

Why do such alliances consistently occur across vastly different cultures and eras? Science suggests it’s partly because **human nature – like all life – is wired for self-preservation, often through cooperation**. While at first glance “helping each other” sounds altruistic, evolutionary biology reveals that cooperation frequently arises as a strategy for selfish gain. In fact, **evolution favors cooperative behavior when it increases the survival chances of the co-operators** relative to others. This principle underpins both nepotism (helping one’s kin) and reciprocal alliances (helping unrelated allies), and it can be observed from animal behavior to human society.

Biologically, nepotism is rooted in *kin selection*: the idea (formulated by William Hamilton) that an organism can pass on its genes not only by reproducing, but by helping close relatives (who share many of those genes) to survive and reproduce. Among social animals – including early humans – **favoring relatives was literally a “biological necessity” for gene survival** ⁴². An individual who sacrificed for their offspring or siblings would still see their genetic legacy continue. Thus, evolution **hard-wired nepotistic tendencies** into social species. In human terms, this translates to strong instincts to protect and favor one’s family or clan. Early human tribes likely practiced nepotism and “**kinship alliances**” as a means of survival ⁴² – we cooperated intensely with those closest to us by blood. This helps explain why nepotism in leadership (kings passing power to sons, officials appointing relatives) has been so common historically: it *feels natural* to trust and empower one’s own kin. While modern governance views nepotism as unfair, our innate bias hasn’t vanished. Even today, the prevalence of political dynasties (Kennedys, Gandhis, Bhuttos, etc.) and family-run business empires suggest that **people still leverage blood bonds as a reliable support system** – one that serves the family’s interest first and foremost. As the Encyclopædia Britannica wryly notes, nepotism persists because it can ensure loyalty and continuity, though it may undermine meritocracy ⁴³ ⁴⁴. In short, **helping one’s own remains a fundamental survival strategy**, whether in wolf packs, honeybee hives, or human cabinets.

What about cooperation beyond family? Here enters the concept of **reciprocal altruism**, introduced by biologist Robert Trivers. This is the mechanism by which organisms (and people) help non-relatives, with the expectation that the favor will be returned in the future. It's essentially "*I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine*" – a principle that describes everything from vampire bats sharing blood meals to **billionaires sharing political clout**. Reciprocal altruism explains alliances among unrelated individuals who recognize that they can each do better by working together than alone, as long as cheaters are kept in check. Dawkins, in *The Selfish Gene*, famously noted that "*cooperation and mutual assistance can flourish even in a basically selfish world.*" ⁴⁵ All that's required is that the cooperators get **more net benefit** than they give away. If both sides win, the alliance stabilizes. In game theory terms, life often resembles an Iterated Prisoner's Dilemma – the best long-term strategy is *Tit for Tat*, meaning cooperate on the first move and then replicate your partner's last move thereafter (reward cooperation with cooperation, punish betrayal with betrayal). This mirrors real elite relationships: *if you support me now, I'll support you later; if you double-cross me, expect retaliation or an end to favors*.

Scientists describe reciprocal altruism as a kind of **time-delayed symbiosis**. One partner helps another, and later the roles reverse ¹. As Trivers put it, "*Reciprocal altruism can also be viewed as a symbiosis, each partner helping the other while he helps himself.*" ¹ The only twist is the *time lag* – you have to trust that your ally will return the favor in the future. In stable social groups (whether a troop of primates or the "**club**" of **global elites**), individuals who reliably reciprocate favors will prosper, and those who defect or act purely selfishly will be ostracized or lose support. Elites often have the luxury of repeated interactions and long-term relationships, which are exactly the conditions where reciprocal altruism thrives. They attend the same conferences, sit on the same boards, rotate through the same offices – giving ample opportunity to build trust ("this tycoon funded my campaign last year, I will ensure his project gets approved this year"). Over time, a norm develops: **help your peers when they need it, and bank on them helping you when you need it** ¹. Indeed, social scientists have noted that **reputation and expected reciprocity** are key enforcers among powerful circles: an elite donor, for example, gives generously not just out of ideology but knowing that generosity earns a *reputation* for influence which politicians will later reward ⁴⁶ ⁴⁷.

The biological lens even helps explain why **someone tends to value the ally next to them over those above or below their "rank"**. In evolutionary terms, cooperation is most likely to evolve among individuals who are *equals or alternates* in helping each other (e.g., two mid-ranking animals teaming up can beat a top-ranking one). Those vastly above you may not need your help; those below you may not be able to help you. Thus, **alliances often form between peers** – in human elites, a billionaire and a president may see each other as peers who can trade favors, whereas a billionaire gains less by allying with a random poor voter. This echoes the user's assertion that "*the person beside you is more important than anyone else for your survival.*" In socio-political hierarchies, "beside you" can be interpreted as *within your inner circle or status group*. Truly, one's immediate colleagues or peer competitors often hold the keys to one's advancement or downfall. That's why CEOs care deeply about what their fellow board members and industry leaders think (and cut deals accordingly), and why politicians care about their party leaders and top donors more than the average constituent. It's a hard truth, but the **biology of social competition** suggests each individual will prioritize support from those whose actions most impact their own status.

Interestingly, while cooperation is advantageous, it is ultimately driven by *selfish* reasons at the gene or individual level. As Dawkins and others have argued, **there is no contradiction between selfishness and cooperation** – if helping someone today means *I* gain a greater benefit tomorrow, then my "selfish genes" are all for it ⁴⁸. For example, primatologists observe that apes will form coalitions to overthrow an alpha male; two beta males teaming up can succeed where each alone would fail, and then they share the spoils of higher status. Similarly, political factions or business cartels form when each member realizes they can get *more* by banding together than competing ruthlessly. These alliances last

only as long as they are profitable to all involved. The moment one partner is seen as a liability or a leech, the others may cut them off – which again is predicted by reciprocal altruism theory (cheaters or non-contributors get expelled from the cooperative). This dynamic can be seen in politics when, say, a donor's scandal makes them radioactive – their political friends quickly distance themselves; or when a politician in power no longer delivers favors – donors abandon them for a new rising star. **Alliance stability is maintained by continued mutual benefit.**

Neuroscience even shows that humans get psychological rewards (like dopamine releases) from cooperative interactions, especially when trust is established. We genuinely *feel good* about an ally we've helped, who helps us in turn. This reinforces the behavior. Over millennia, these impulses have scaled from small hunter-gatherer bands to vast socio-economic systems. But the underlying impulse – *"I'll help you now so that you (or someone) will help me later"* – remains a driving force. It manifests in modern society as **networking, patronage, dynastic politics, endorsements, lobbying pacts** – all sophisticated terms for what biology might simply call *mutualism*.

In summary, scientific perspectives (from evolutionary biology, psychology, and sociology) all converge on the idea that what might appear as noblesse oblige or camaraderie among the elite is often grounded in strategic self-interest. **Life feeds on life:** to thrive, one often relies on the labor or support of others. And **life also supports life** – but usually *with strings attached*. That rich philanthropist funding a senator's favorite charity might also be expecting legislative favors in return (a *reciprocal exchange*). The senator isn't blind to this – they often oblige because their own position depends on keeping such patrons happy. It's a **biotic system** of give-and-take that has persisted from ancient organisms to modern organizations.

Conclusion

From emperors and popes to presidents and CEOs, history demonstrates that **the powerful rarely act alone**. They form webs of alliances – sometimes explicit, sometimes tacit – that allow them to consolidate and expand their power. What changes over time are the forms (marriage alliances of royal houses have given way to mergers of multinational companies, and royal patronage has morphed into political fundraising), but not the underlying logic: *you help me, I'll help you*. This report surveyed how, across eras and continents, **elites consistently help each other for their own benefit**. Whether it was Roman patrons and clients swapping protection for loyalty ², Renaissance financiers bankrolling monarchs for monopolies ⁶, Gilded Age tycoons bribing senators for contracts ⁸, or today's billionaires and politicians exchanging money and influence in complex dances of lobbying and legislation ¹⁹ ²⁸ – the pattern is clear. Even the glitzy synergy of celebrities and politicians in the media age follows the same rule: each side *leverages the other* for personal gain (be it votes or image) ³³.

Crucially, these elite collaborations are **not typically driven by malice or a secret cabal (as conspiracy theories would have it)**, but rather by a convergence of interests that is often plain to see. As one saying goes, *"It's not a conspiracy, it's a consensus."* People of power naturally gravitate toward others with power; they understand each other's pressures and needs, and thus can negotiate mutually beneficial arrangements. In many cases they don't even need to speak – the norms of their class or group dictate the help they give each other. For example, a former regulator joining a corporate board doesn't need to overtly say *"I'll help you evade rules"*; it's understood that her very presence and network are valuable to the company, and she in turn expects loyalty and compensation. These practices can certainly cross into unethical territory (e.g. outright corruption, nepotistic incompetence, policy captured by plutocrats), but even when legal, they raise questions about fairness and merit in society. After all, if the game is being played by a tight club of elites trading favors, **where does that leave the**

ordinary person? Often, unfortunately, on the outside looking in. Policies that favor the rich, barriers to entry for outsiders, and hereditary advantages are the byproducts of these self-serving networks.

Yet, as this analysis shows, one cannot simply moralize away this phenomenon – it has deep roots in how human (and even animal) social dynamics work. The instinct to rely on “people next to you” – your kin, your allies – is primal. The philosopher-laureate of evolution, Richard Dawkins, urged that while we are born with *selfish* tendencies, we also have the intellect to recognize them and possibly *redirect* them ⁴⁹. Understanding that **“life eats life”** and that elites will usually act in their own survival interest is the first step. The next is figuring out how to **create systems of accountability and transparency** so that these alliances do not undermine the greater good. Throughout history, reform movements have risen to challenge the excesses of elite mutual aid (be it anti-nepotism laws, anti-trust regulations, campaign finance reform, etc.). Such efforts implicitly acknowledge the pattern: left unchecked, those at the top will keep enriching each other (*“life supports life”* at the top of the food chain) ²⁸. Balancing this requires conscious effort and institutional checks.

In closing, the record from ancient times to the present confirms the user’s core idea: *the person beside the elite is often more important to them than anyone else*, because **their survival and success may depend on that ally**. Caesar knew it; medieval popes knew it; today’s billionaires and politicians know it. What might look like generosity or unity among the powerful can often be explained by *“enlightened selfishness.”* As evolutionary theory and real-world evidence both attest, **selfish survival strategies can produce cooperative behavior** ¹ – whether among cells in an organism or individuals in an oligarchy. Appreciating this reality can give us a more nuanced understanding of history and power. It reminds us that when we see a politician and a billionaire smiling together at a summit, or a pop star and a president on a stage, **each is calculating what the association gains them**. The survival game continues, and in that game, cooperation is key – but usually, it’s *cooperation for the sake of self-interest*. The challenge for society is to channel that cooperative energy towards broader benefit, rather than just allowing elite circles to perpetuate themselves.

Sources: Historical and contemporary examples, as cited, from academic studies, investigative journalism, and evolutionary biology insights support this analysis. Notable references include documentation of Roman patronage ², the First Triumvirate alliance ⁵, Jakob Fugger’s financing of the Habsburgs ⁶, the Crédit Mobilier corruption scandal ⁸ ⁹, Britain’s “cash-for-honours” donor-peerage pattern ¹⁴ ¹³, the revolving door phenomenon in Washington ¹⁹ ²¹, the Pandora Papers exposing elite collusion offshore ²⁸, the celebrity-politician symbiosis in U.S. elections ³³ ⁵⁰, and scientific explanations of nepotism and reciprocal altruism ⁴² ¹. These diverse sources all point to the same conclusion: **alliances among elites are a timeless and global feature, rooted in the pursuit of mutual advantage – a trait as genetic as it is political.**

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