

Political Machines

(1)

Between 1865 and 1900, cities grew rapidly with the arrival of a large number of immigrants. At the same time, the middle and upper classes were moving to the suburbs, resulting in a changing urban and political landscape. Politicians and city officials were faced with responding to the pressures of **urbanization** by providing improved services in the areas of electricity, sewage disposal, police and fire protection, and transportation. Many cities grew to be supported—and often manipulated—by political machines, which were unofficial organizations associated with a particular political party. The political machine had control over party nominations, money and votes. Secret ballots weren't widely used in elections, so machine leaders possessed enormous influence over elected officials, leading to tremendous opportunities for the abuse of power.

(2)

Perhaps the most well known example of machine politics was Tammany Hall, headquarters of the Democratic Party in New York City. The head of Tammany Hall in the 1860s and 1870s, William “Boss” Tweed, exemplified the corruption of machine politics by using graft, bribery, and rigged elections to defraud the city of hundreds of millions of dollars. Although some of this money was used to create public jobs that helped people and supported the local economy, most went into construction projects that were based on greatly inflated expenses. Construction contractors and most others doing business in the city were forced to give kickbacks to Boss Tweed in order to stay in business. Boss Tweed, like many political bosses, amassed a huge fortune as a result of such kickbacks and bribes. Political machines also wielded power by controlling government patronage jobs that were used to reward loyal party workers.

What's going on?

(3)

Some would argue that machine politicians were corrupt, while others would say that they provided a needed service by helping new immigrants with jobs, housing, and naturalization. Urban immigrants, who were likely to be poorly educated and unfamiliar with the political process, tended to support these politicians in elections because they provided such vital services. The following excerpt from an 1889 talk given by one of Tweed's politicians illustrates how followers were recruited:

What tells in holdin' your grip on your district is to go right down among the poor families and help them in the different ways they need help. I've got a regular system for this. If there's a fire in Ninth or Tenth or Eleventh Avenue, for example, any hour of the day or night, I'm usually there with some of my election district captains as soon as the fire-engines. If a family is burned out I don't ask them if they are Republicans or Democrats, and I don't refer them to the Charity Organization Society, which would investigate their case in a month or two and decide if they are worthy of help about the time they are dead from starvation. I just get [housing] for them, buy clothes for them if their clothes were all burned up, and fix them up until they get things runnin' again. It's philanthropy, but it's politics too—mighty good politics. Who can tell me how many votes one of those fires brings me? The poor are the most grateful people in the world, and, let me tell you, they have more friends in their neighborhoods than the rich have in theirs ...

Another thing, I can always get a job for a deservin' man. I make it a point to keep on the track of jobs, and it seldom happens that I don't have a few up my sleeve ready for use. I know every big employer in the district and in the whole city, for that matter, and they ain't in the habit of sayin' no to me when I ask them for a job.

Riordan, W. (1905). *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*. New York, NY: McClure, Phillips.

What's going on?

How does this relate to what you have read already?

(4)

While many blamed the rise of corrupt political machines on the influx of urban immigrants, muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens made the argument that businessmen kept political machines functioning. It was their greed and hunger for government contracts and special privileges, he believed, that corrupted urban politics:

He is a self-righteous fraud, this big business man. He is the chief source of corruption, and it would be a boon if he would neglect politics ... The business man has failed in politics as he has in citizenship. Why? Because politics is business ... The commercial spirit is the spirit of profit, not

patriotism; of credit, not honor; of individual gain, not national prosperity; of trade and [bargaining], not principle.

Steffens, L. (1948). *The shame of the cities*. New York, NY: P. Smith. (Original work published 1904.)

(5)

Tweed’s corruption was exposed by articles in *The New York Times*, *Harper’s Weekly* magazine, and most memorably by Thomas Nast’s editorial cartoons. Tweed was convicted for stealing between \$25 million and \$45 million from New York City taxpayers and eventually died in prison.

What’s going on?

How does this relate to what you have read already?

What is the overall message of the passage?

What questions do you have?