Politics in the Gilded Age

MAIN IDEA	WHY IT MATTERS NOW	Terms & Names
Local and national political corruption in the 19th century led to calls for reform.	Political reforms paved the way for a more honest and efficient government in the 20th century and beyond.	• political machine • graft • Boss Tweed • patronage • civil service • Rutherford B. Hayes • James A. Garfield • Chester A. Arthur • Pendleton Civil Service Act • Grover Cleveland • Benjamin Harrison

One American's Story

Mark Twain described the excesses of the late 19th century in a satirical novel, *The Gilded Age*, a collaboration with the writer Charles Dudley Warner. The title of the book has since come to represent the period from the 1870s to the 1890s. Twain mocks the greed and self-indulgence of his characters, including Philip Sterling.
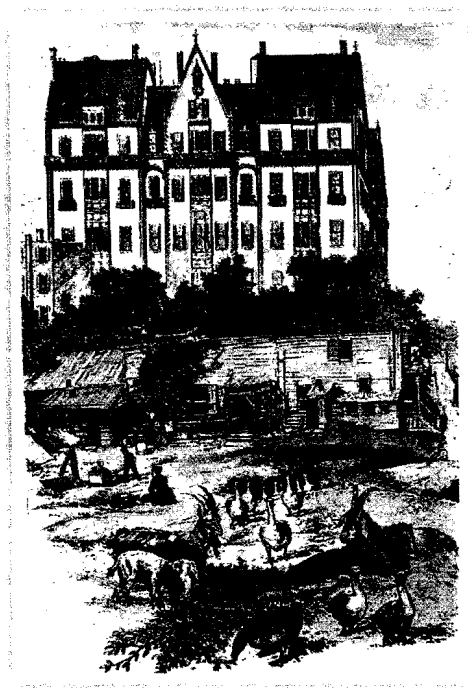
A PERSONAL VOICE
MARK TWAIN AND CHARLES DUDLEY WARNER

"There are many young men like him [Philip Sterling] in American society, of his age, opportunities, education and abilities, who have really been educated for nothing and have let themselves drift, in the hope that they will find somehow, and by some sudden turn of good luck, the golden road to fortune. . . . He saw people, all around him, poor yesterday, rich to-day, who had come into sudden opulence by some means which they could not have classified among any of the regular occupations of life."
—*The Gilded Age*

▲ A luxurious apartment building rises behind a New York City shanty-town in 1889.

Twain's characters find that getting rich quick is more difficult than they had thought it would be. Investments turn out to be worthless; politicians' bribes eat up their savings. The glittering exterior of the age turns out to hide a corrupt political core and a growing gap between the few rich and the many poor.

The Emergence of Political Machines

In the late 19th century, cities experienced rapid growth under inefficient government. In a climate influenced by dog-eat-dog Social Darwinism, cities were receptive to a new power structure, the political machine, and a new politician, the city boss.

THE POLITICAL MACHINE An organized group that controlled the activities of a political party in a city, the **political machine** also offered services to voters and businesses in exchange for political or financial support. In the decades after the Civil War, political machines gained control of local government in Baltimore, New York, San Francisco, and other major cities.

The machine was organized like a pyramid. At the pyramid's base were local precinct workers and captains, who tried to gain voters' support on a city block or in a neighborhood and who reported to a ward boss. At election time, the ward boss worked to secure the vote in all the precincts in the ward, or electoral district. Ward bosses helped the poor and gained their votes by doing favors or providing services. As Martin Lomasney, elected ward boss of Boston's West End in 1885, explained, "There's got to be in every ward somebody that any bloke can come to . . . and get help. Help, you understand; none of your law and your justice, but help." At the top of the pyramid was the city boss, who controlled the activities of the political party throughout the city. Precinct captains, ward bosses, and the city boss worked together to elect their candidates and guarantee the success of the machine. ⬤

THE ROLE OF THE POLITICAL BOSS Whether or not the boss officially served as mayor, he controlled access to municipal jobs and business licenses, and influenced the courts and other municipal agencies. Bosses like Roscoe Conkling in New York used their power to build parks, sewer systems, and waterworks, and gave money to schools, hospitals, and orphanages. Bosses could also provide government support for new businesses, a service for which they were often paid extremely well.

It was not only money that motivated city bosses. By solving urban problems, bosses could reinforce voters' loyalty, win additional political support, and extend their influence.

IMMIGRANTS AND THE MACHINE Many precint captains and political bosses were first-generation or second-generation immigrants. Few were educated beyond grammar school. They entered politics early and worked their way up from the bottom. They could speak to immigrants in their own language and understood the challenges that newcomers faced. More important, the bosses were able to provide solutions. The machines helped immigrants with naturalization (attaining full citizenship), housing, and jobs—the newcomers' most pressing needs. In return, the immigrants provided what the political bosses needed—votes. ⬤

"Big Jim" Pendergast, an Irish-American saloonkeeper, worked his way up from precinct captain to Democratic city boss in Kansas City by aiding Italian, African-American, and Irish voters in his ward. By 1900, he controlled Missouri state politics as well.

▲ A corrupt 19th-century boss robs the city treasury by easily cutting government red tape, or bureaucracy.

A PERSONAL VOICE JAMES PENDERGAST

"I've been called a boss. All there is to it is having friends, doing things for people, and then later on they'll do things for you. . . . You can't coerce people into doing things for you—you can't make them vote for you. I never coerced anybody in my life. Wherever you see a man bulldozing anybody he don't last long."

—quoted in *The Pendergast Machine*

Municipal Graft and Scandal

While the well-oiled political machines provided city dwellers with services, many political bosses fell victim to corruption as their influence grew.

ELECTION FRAUD AND GRAFT When the loyalty of voters was not enough to carry an election, some political machines turned to fraud. Using fake names, party faithfuls cast as many votes as were needed to win.

Once a political machine got its candidates into office, it could take advantage of numerous opportunities for **graft,** the illegal use of political influence for personal gain. For example, by helping a person find work on a construction project for the city, a political machine could ask the worker to bill the city for more than the actual cost of materials and labor. The worker then "kicked back" a portion of the earnings to the machine. Taking these kickbacks, or illegal payments for their services, enriched the political machines—and individual politicians.

Political machines also granted favors to businesses in return for cash and accepted bribes to allow illegal activities, such as gambling, to flourish. Politicians were able to get away with shady dealings because the police rarely interfered. Until about 1890, police forces were hired and fired by political bosses.

THE TWEED RING SCANDAL William M. Tweed, known as **Boss Tweed,** became head of Tammany Hall, New York City's powerful Democratic political machine, in 1868. Between 1869 and 1871, Boss Tweed led the Tweed Ring, a group of corrupt politicians, in defrauding the city.

One scheme, the construction of the New York County Courthouse, involved extravagant graft. The project cost taxpayers $13 million, while the actual construction cost was $3 million. The difference went into the pockets of Tweed and his followers.

Thomas Nast, a political cartoonist, helped arouse public outrage against Tammany Hall's graft, and the Tweed Ring was finally broken in 1871. Tweed was indicted on 120 counts of fraud and extortion and was sentenced to 12 years in jail. His sentence was reduced to one year, but after leaving jail, Tweed was quickly arrested on another charge. While serving a second sentence, Tweed escaped. He was captured in Spain when officials identified him from a Thomas Nast cartoon. By that time, political corruption had become a national issue.

Vocabulary
extortion: illegal use of one's official position to obtain property or funds
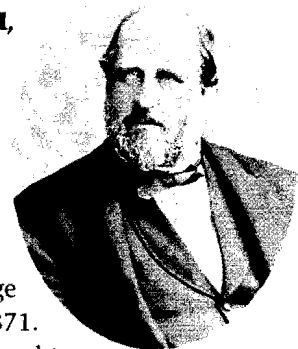
▲
Boss Tweed, head of Tammany Hall.


Analyzing **Political Cartoons**

"THE TAMMANY TIGER LOOSE"
Political cartoonist Thomas Nast ridiculed Boss Tweed and his machine in the pages of *Harper's Weekly.* Nast's work threatened Tweed, who reportedly said, "I don't care so much what the papers write about me—my constituents can't read; but . . . they can see pictures!"

SKILLBUILDER Analyzing Political Cartoons
1. Under the Tammany tiger's victim is a torn paper that reads "LAW." What is its significance?
2. Boss Tweed and his cronies, portrayed as noblemen, watch from the stands on the left. The cartoon's caption reads "What are you going to do about it?" What effect do you think Nast wanted to have on his audience?

   SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R24.
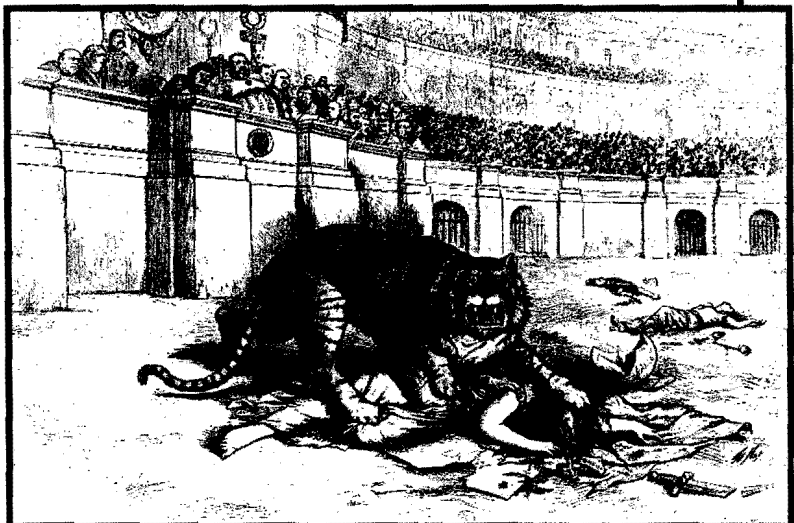
Civil Service Replaces Patronage

The desire for power and money that made local politics corrupt in the industrial age also infected national politics.

PATRONAGE SPURS REFORM Since the beginning of the 19th century, presidents had complained about the problem of **patronage,** or the giving of government jobs to people who had helped a candidate get elected. In Andrew Jackson's administration, this policy was known as the spoils system. People from cabinet members to workers who scrubbed the steps of the Capitol owed their jobs to political connections. As might be expected, some government employees were not qualified for the positions they filled. Moreover, political appointees, whether qualified or not, sometimes used their positions for personal gain.

Reformers began to press for the elimination of patronage and the adoption of a merit system of hiring. Jobs in **civil service**—government administration—should go to the most qualified persons, reformers believed. It should not matter what political views they held or who recommended them. 🔮

REFORM UNDER HAYES, GARFIELD, AND ARTHUR Civil service reform made gradual progress under Presidents Hayes, Garfield, and Arthur. Republican president **Rutherford B. Hayes,** elected in 1876, could not convince Congress to support reform, so he used other means. Hayes named independents to his cabinet. He also set up a commission to investigate the nation's customhouses, which were notorious centers of patronage. On the basis of the commission's report, Hayes fired two of the top officials of New York City's customhouse, where jobs were controlled by the Republican Party. These firings enraged the Republican New York senator and political boss Roscoe Conkling and his supporters, the Stalwarts.

When Hayes decided not to run for reelection in 1880, a free-for-all broke out at the Republican convention, between the Stalwarts—who opposed changes in the spoils system—and reformers. Since neither Stalwarts nor reformers could win a majority of delegates, the convention settled on an independent presidential candidate, Ohio congressman **James A. Garfield.** To balance out Garfield's ties to reformers, the Republicans nominated for vice-president **Chester A. Arthur,** one of Conkling's supporters. Despite Arthur's inclusion on the ticket, Garfield angered the Stalwarts by giving reformers most of his patronage jobs once he was elected.

On July 2, 1881, as President Garfield walked through the Washington, D.C., train station, he was shot two times by a mentally unbalanced lawyer named Charles Guiteau, whom Garfield had turned down for a job. The would-be assassin announced, "I did it and I will go to jail for it. I am a Stalwart and Arthur is now president." Garfield finally died from his wounds on September 19. Despite his ties to the Stalwarts, Chester Arthur turned reformer when he became president. His first message to Congress urged legislators to pass a civil service law.

The resulting **Pendleton Civil Service Act** of 1883 authorized a bipartisan civil service commission to make

MAIN IDEA

Analyzing Causes

🔮 How did patronage contribute to government incompetence and fraud?

appointments to federal jobs through a merit system based on candidates' performance on an examination. By 1901, more than 40 percent of all federal jobs had been classified as civil service positions, but the Pendleton Act had mixed consequences. On the one hand, public administration became more honest and efficient. On the other hand, because officials could no longer pressure employees for campaign contributions, politicians turned to other sources for donations.

Business Buys Influence

With employees no longer a source of campaign contributions, politicians turned to wealthy business owners. Therefore, the alliance between government and big business became stronger than ever. Ⓓ

HARRISON, CLEVELAND, AND HIGH TARIFFS Big business hoped the government would preserve, or even raise, the tariffs that protected domestic industries from foreign competition. The Democratic Party, however, opposed high tariffs because they increased prices. In 1884, the Democratic Party won a presidential election for the first time in 28 years with candidate **Grover Cleveland.** As president, Cleveland tried to lower tariff rates, but Congress refused to support him.

In 1888, Cleveland ran for reelection on a low-tariff platform against the former Indiana senator **Benjamin Harrison,** the grandson of President William Henry Harrison. Harrison's campaign was financed by large contributions from companies that wanted tariffs even higher than they were. Although Cleveland won about 100,000 more popular votes than Harrison, Harrison took a majority of the electoral votes and the presidency. He signed the McKinley Tariff Act of 1890, which raised tariffs on manufactured goods to their highest level yet.

In 1892, Cleveland was elected again—the only president to serve two nonconsecutive terms. He supported a bill for lowering the McKinley Tariff but refused to sign it because it also provided for a federal income tax. The Wilson-Gorman Tariff became law in 1894 without the president's signature. In 1897, William McKinley was inaugurated president and raised tariffs once again.

The attempt to reduce the tariff had failed, but the spirit of reform was not dead. New developments in areas ranging from technology to mass culture would help redefine American society as the United States moved into the 20th century.

③ ASSESSMENT

1. TERMS & NAMES For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

•political machine	•patronage	•James A. Garfield	•Grover Cleveland
•graft	•civil service	•Chester A. Arthur	•Benjamin Harrison
•Boss Tweed	•Rutherford B. Hayes	•Pendleton Civil Service Act	

MAIN IDEA

2. TAKING NOTES
In a chart like the one shown, list examples of corruption in 19th-century politics.

Corruption
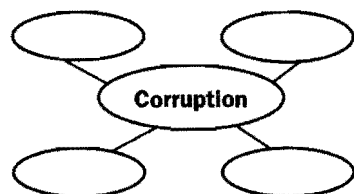
CRITICAL THINKING

3. EVALUATING LEADERSHIP
Reread the quotation from James Pendergast on page 474. Explain whether you agree or disagree that machine politicians did not coerce people.

4. ANALYZING CAUSES
Why do you think tariff reform failed? Support your response with evidence from the chapter.

5. HYPOTHESIZING
How do you think politics in the United States would have been different if the Pendleton Civil Service Act had not been passed?
Think About:

• the act's impact on federal workers

• the act's impact on political fundraising

• Republican Party conflicts