

Politics in the Gilded Age

BEFORE YOU READ

In the last section, you read about the problems that residents faced in America's growing cities.

In this section, you will read about the people and organizations that controlled the nation's major cities and how reformers tried to end corruption.

AS YOU READ

Use this diagram to take notes on the achievements of these presidents regarding patronage and tariffs.

PRESIDENT	ACHIEVEMENTS
<i>Chester Arthur</i>	<i>Pendleton Act—reformed civil service</i>
<i>Grover Cleveland</i>	
<i>Benjamin Harrison</i>	

TERMS AND NAMES

political machine A group that controlled a political party

graft Illegal use of political influence for personal gain

Boss Tweed Head of New York City's powerful Democratic political machine

patronage The giving of government jobs to people who had helped a candidate get elected

civil service Government administration

Rutherford B. Hayes 19th president of the United States

James A. Garfield 20th president of the United States

Chester A. Arthur 21st president of the United States

Pendleton Civil Service Act That implemented merit system in civil service hiring

Grover Cleveland 22nd and 24th president of the United States

Benjamin Harrison 23rd president of the United States

The Emergence of Political Machines

How did political machines control the cities?

During the late 1800s, many cities were run by a **political machine**. This was an organized group, headed by a city boss, that controlled the activities of a political party in a city. The machine offered services to voters and businesses in exchange for political or financial support.

The boss controlled city government, as well as jobs in the police, fire, and sanitation departments.

Bosses also controlled city agencies that granted licenses to businesses, and funded construction projects. By controlling the cities' finances, and by solving problems for voters, bosses won loyalty and influence. Furthermore, many bosses were immigrants who had worked their way up in politics. They could speak to the immigrants in their own language, helping them to find jobs and housing. In return, the immigrants pledged their votes.

1. Name two ways in which political machines held power.

Municipal Graft and Scandal

How were political bosses corrupt?

Political machines provided city dwellers with vital services. But as they gained power, many bosses became corrupt. They became rich through **graft**, or the illegal use of political influence for personal gain. To win elections, some bosses filled the list of *eligible* voters with the names of dogs, children, and people who had died. They then used those names to cast votes for themselves.

Another illegal practice was the *kickback*. Workers on city construction projects would charge a higher price for their service and then “kick back” part of the fee to the bosses, who were also taking *bribes* from businesses in return for allowing illegal or unsafe activities.

One of the most powerful political bosses was William Marcy Tweed, known as **Boss Tweed**. He became the head of Tammany Hall, New York City’s most powerful Democratic political machine. The Tweed Ring was a group of corrupt politicians led by Boss Tweed.

Thomas Nast, a political cartoonist, made fun of Tweed in newspapers. Eventually, the public grew outraged by Tweed’s corrupt practices. Authorities broke up the Tweed Ring in 1871. Tweed and many of his followers were sentenced to prison.

2. Describe two forms of corruption practiced by political bosses.

Civil Service Replaces Patronage

How was civil service reformed?

For many decades, presidents had complained about the problem of **patronage**. This is the giving of government jobs to people of the same party who had helped a candidate get elected. As a result, many unqualified and corrupt workers were hired.

Reformers wanted to end the patronage system. They called for a merit system, in which jobs in **civil service**—government administration—would go to the most qualified people, regardless of their political views.

President **Rutherford B. Hayes** attempted to reform civil service, but when some members of the Republican party objected, Hayes decided not to run for reelection in 1880.

The party quickly divided over the issue of patronage hiring. The Stalwarts opposed changes in the patronage system. The reformers supported changing the system. The party eventually settled on an independent candidate, **James A. Garfield**, who won the presidential election but turned out to have ties to the reformers. Shortly after being elected he was assassinated by a Stalwart.

Garfield’s vice-president, **Chester A. Arthur**, succeeded him. Despite being a Stalwart, Arthur turned reformer when he became president. He pushed through a civil service reform bill known as the **Pendleton Civil Service Act** of 1883. This act created a civil service commission to give government jobs based on merit, not politics. It helped reform the civil service.

However, the Pendleton Act had mixed results. More qualified workers did fill government positions. But because politicians had no jobs to offer, they had trouble seeking money from supporters. As a result, some politicians turned to wealthy leaders for financial support. This strengthened the ties between government and business.

3. Describe two effects of the Pendleton Act.

Business Buys Influence

What happened to tariffs?

Political reformers in the late 1800s also addressed the issue of tariffs. A tariff is a tax placed on goods coming into or going out of a country. Most Americans believed that tariffs were necessary to protect U.S. industries from foreign competition. But tariffs did cause prices to rise.

For 12 years tariffs were a key issue in presidential elections. President **Grover Cleveland**, a Democrat, tried, but failed to reduce tariffs. In 1890, Republican President **Benjamin Harrison**, who was supported by big business, signed the McKinley Tariff Act into law, raising tariffs to their highest level ever. Cleveland defeated Harrison in 1892 but was unsuccessful in reducing tariffs.

4. Which two presidents raised tariffs?