Political Parties, Platforms, and Key Issues

The Spoils System

The spoils system—the practice of rewarding faithful political party members with public jobs—began most blatantly during the administration of Andrew Jackson (1767–1845), increased in scope throughout the mid nineteenth century, and was finally challenged by the Pendleton Act of 1883.

How It Began

The early presidents, although frequently pressured by their followers to provide federal positions to those who had supported them, usually resisted. As John Quincy Adams (1767–1848), the sixth president, complained: "There is something so gross and repugnant to my feelings in this cormorant appetite for office, this barefaced and repeated effort to get an old and meritorious public servant turned out of place by a bankrupt to get in, that it needed all of my sense of the allowances to be made…to suppress my indignation." Soon though, presidents would not exhibit such scruples.

Claiming that office holding should be "plain and simple," Andrew Jackson began his administration by replacing large numbers of federal employees. He declared that a policy of rotating public workers would help to curb corruption and make officeholders more responsive to the will of the people. It also assured loyalty to the president and gathered party support for future elections. In 1832 William Marcy (1768–1857), the Democratic senator from New York, saw no need for justification when he explained Jackson's policy: "To the victor belongs the spoils." That is how the system got its name.

The presidents after Jackson generally followed his policies in making federal appointments. Although William Henry Harrison (1773–1841) pledged to reform the system during his campaign, he died after only a month in office. His successor, John Tyler (1790–1862), continued the spoils system. Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) used it effectively to gather support for both the Republican Party and the Civil War (1861–1865).

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Cartoon depicting a statue dedicated to Andrew Jackson's "spoils system." In it, Jackson rides a pig on a pedestal that reads, "To the victors belong the spoils." (c) Bettmann/CORBIS

Up to that time popular sentiment seemed to be that public office was a just reward for party loyalty. After Lincoln, however, the excesses of the spoils system changed public perception. The administration of Ulysses S. Grant (1822–1885) became synonymous with scandal, corruption, and patronage. Grant, at age 46, was then the youngest man to serve as president and was also politically inexperienced. He appointed loyal friends to federal jobs without regard for their experience or competence. Many of his closest

associates were corrupt. Several cabinet secretaries and other high-level officials became implicated in financial scandals. His secretary of war, William Belknap (1829–1890), accepted bribes for patronage jobs and became the first cabinet member ever to be impeached. Brigadier General Orville E. Babcock, Grant's trusted private secretary, and General John McDonald, an old friend Grant had appointed to a job with the Internal Revenue Service in St. Louis, were accused of conspiring with distillers of whiskey to avoid paying the government millions of dollars in taxes. Most famously, Grant's two vice presidents, Schuyler Colfax (1823–1885) and Henry Wilson (1812–1875), were implicated in the *Crédit Mobilier* scandal, which involved defrauding the government of more than $23 million during construction of the Union Pacific railroad.

Despite Grant's reputation for indiscriminate patronage appointments, the first civil-service reform bill was passed during his administration. It created the Advisory Board of the Civil Service, which administered the first civil-service exams in 1872. The board lasted only three years, however, because Congress did not provide funding.

Local Spoils

Federal jobs were not the only, or even the most pervasive, prizes of the spoils system. By the time Jackson took office, several states had well-developed systems of political patronage. New York is perhaps the best example.

After the American Revolution, many patriotic societies were founded to promote the political causes and economic interests of their members. One of them was New York's Tammany Society, founded in the 1780s. Initially, Tammany opposed the political faction headed by DeWitt Clinton (1769–1828), who would later become New York's governor. Clinton was a member of the Council of Appointment, which influenced the selection of candidates for a vast number of state, county and municipal positions. Clinton used his position on the council to dispense political patronage and, as a result, has generally been regarded as the founder of the spoils system in New York.

However, Tammany learned well from its opponent. It soon dominated the Democratic Party in New York City and often in New York state. It regularly delivered enormous majorities that influenced the outcomes of city, state, and even national elections. As a result of its power over elections, Tammany Hall—as it came to be known—controlled patronage employment in government and dispensed city contracts.

Tammany continued to gain strength by helping immigrants to get food, fuel, and jobs. In exchange, the newly naturalized citizens were often willing to vote for their benefactors and overlook the graft and corruption that characterized Tammany Hall's operations. As the immigrant population increased, so did the power of Tammany Hall.

By 1872, however, the more flagrant abuses of the spoils system had led many politicians to start pressuring for reform. William M. "Boss" Tweed (1823–1878), then leader of Tammany Hall, had gained immense power over the Democratic Party in New York City, controlling party nominations and political patronage and using it to amass a personal

fortune. Samuel Tilden (1814–1886), a reformer and state Democratic chairman, gathered evidence of Tweed's corruption and successfully spearheaded his prosecution. Reform politics began gaining strength.

National Reform

By the 1870s the call for reform of the spoils system was a regular part of electoral politics on both the local and national level. Grant had unsuccessfully supported a competitive-exam system for civil-service jobs. Rutherford Hayes (1822–1893), his successor, issued executive orders to achieve moderate reforms. For example, one such order forbade federal civil servants from taking an active role in politics. Hayes also won a long battle with New York Senator Roscoe Conkling (1829–1888), a fellow Republican, over the state's patronage appointments, which gave the reform movement new impetus.

When James Garfield (1831–1881), the next president, took office, the members of his party were battling over cabinet appointments and the distribution of federal patronage. He, like Hayes, rejected Conkling's expectation that electoral support would give Conkling a say in dispensing patronage. Shortly after this political victory over the spoils system, however, Garfield was shot by a disappointed office seeker.

This shocking event mobilized the reformers. The new president, Chester Arthur (1829–1886), had benefited from the spoils system and had always supported it. However, once he was president, Arthur began investigating abuses in the civil service, especially in the granting of contracts at the post office. In his first address to Congress he called for reform of the civil service, including the use of competitive civil-service exams.

Congress, too, was moved to reform the civil service and control some of the more flagrant abuses of the spoils system. In 1883 it passed the Pendleton Act, which required competitive exams for appointees to federal offices. This civil-service system, however, still had many congressional opponents, particularly a faction of the Republican Party known as the Stalwarts. They relied upon the spoils system to maintain power and accused the Mugwumps—the Republican faction that advocated reform—of elitism in requiring competitive exams for public jobs. The party's split on the issue contributed to the electoral victory in 1884 of a Democrat, Grover Cleveland (1837–1908).

The Pendleton Act established a bipartisan Civil Service Commission to oversee the operations of the civil-service system. The law also allowed presidents to transfer federal jobs into the civil-service system, providing protection for the current officeholders and limiting the jobs available for future patronage appointments. The portion of federal workers who were civil-service employees rose from about fourteen percent in 1883 to about forty percent in 1900. The Pendleton Act had effectively created a new career bureaucracy.

The spoils system, however, continued for many federal, state, and local offices. After the imprisonment of Tweed, Tammany Hall returned to power under the rule of John Kelly

(1822–1886), and later Richard Croker (1843–1922), who in 1901 was investigated for corruption. The control of Tammany Hall over New York City government, exercised most effectively through the spoils system, was not effectively diminished until the 1930s.

Some historians argue that the spoils system was not completely objectionable, for it made government office available to a broad range of citizens—many of whom might not otherwise have been able to serve the public—and increased the government's responsiveness to the needs of voters. Most observers argue, however, that the efficiency and integrity of the civil service was an effective way to stop the abuses of political patronage.

Sidebar: Show

Sidebar: Hide

Boss Tweed

William Marcy "Boss" Tweed (1823–1878) was both the best known and most reviled figure in New York City politics during the Gilded Age. He came to symbolize the corruption of an entire era. As the head of Tammany Hall—the control center of the city's Democratic political machine—Tweed ruled the patronage system that awarded city jobs and contracts based on party loyalty. He profited by it enormously and was eventually prosecuted for it.

Tweed was born in New York City and was known, even as a child, as an unquestionable leader. He left school the age of eleven to serve several apprenticeships and, by seventeen, was working for his father as a bookkeeper. In 1848 Tweed joined a volunteer fire company—firehouses were frequently centers of political activity—and began his political career. He became a local alderman and then, from 1853 to 1855, served in the U.S. House of Representatives.

During the 1850s and 1860s Tweed steadily exerted more influence over New York City politics, becoming a member of the city's Board of Supervisors, serving in key administrative posts, and assuming leadership of Tammany Hall.

Tweed was in charge of nominations and party patronage, so he filled offices with associates who would support his schemes. For example, he had contractors submit excessive bills for work they did for the city; the extra cost would be kicked back to Tweed and his cronies. For a time the "Tweed Ring," which included the mayor, controlled the city absolutely and defrauded the taxpayers of at least $30 million. In 1868 Tweed became a state senator and increased his influence in the state, selecting both the governor and many of the legislators.

Tweed's connections unraveled when other politicians, such as Samuel Tilden (1814–1886) and Horatio Seymour (1810–1886), began to agitate for reform. The *New York*

Times published evidence of Tammany graft, revealed by a new county bookkeeper. Cartoons by Thomas Nast (1840–1902), graphically portraying Tweed's corruption and greed, had perhaps the most powerful impact of all. As Tweed himself said, "My constituents can't read, but, damn it, they can see pictures!"

In 1871 a Committee of Seventy was formed to fight Tweed and Tammany Hall. Most of the committee's candidates were elected—although Tweed was also reelected to the state senate. Eventually he was arrested and charged with larceny and forgery. The first trial resulted in a hung jury; Tweed was convicted in the second trial. Originally given a twelve-year sentence, he was released after serving one year.

Arrested again on a civil warrant, Tweed escaped to Spain. He was eventually extradited and returned to jail in New York. He died there on April 12, 1878. Tweed's corrupt tenure as the boss of Tammany Hall and his dramatic public downfall helped move governments on all levels away from political patronage.

Political Cartoons in the Gilded Age

The Gilded Age is often considered to be the golden age of the political cartoon. The graphic commentaries on current issues, party politics, elections, and well-known figures both represented the beliefs of the era and molded its opinions.

Although political cartoons had become a recognized form of commentary by the eighteenth century, certain factors contributed to their popularity and power during the Gilded Age. An increase in newspaper and magazine circulation provided an environment in which the cartoon could flourish. New York alone had more than fifty-four magazines, and lower postal rates and widening railroad access promoted greater distribution of these publications. In addition, cartoons could very effectively reflect the battles and promote the causes within the intense partisan politics of the Gilded Age, even to an audience with limited reading abilities.

In this fertile atmosphere, several magazines and cartoonists were particularly influential. Perhaps the most famous Gilded Age cartoonist is Thomas Nast (1840–1902), well known for creating the images that continue to this day to represent the two major political parties—the donkey for the Democrats, and the elephant for the Republicans. Nast was first celebrated for his illustrations in*Harper's Weekly* that conveyed the miseries of the Civil War. But as political battles replaced military confrontations, Nast's drawings became cartoons that reflected his views of the corruption and greed in the political arena. He was most noted for the cartoons that lampooned William Marcy "Boss" Tweed (1823–1878), the infamous political chieftain of New York's Tammany Hall, a center of power for the Democratic Party. Nast's cartoons eventually led to Tweed's downfall.

Another important cartoonist was Joseph Keppler (1838–1894), who co-founded several humor magazines, most notably *Puck*. Keppler caricatured many of the political figures

of the day, including Ulysses Grant (1822–1885) and Rutherford Hayes (1822–1893). He also regularly lampooned the supporters of women's suffrage and labor unions.

The cartoons of the Gilded Age not only expressed political and social opinions, but reflected the attitudes and prejudices of the age. Denigrating images of women, Chinese, African-Americans, Irish, and Native Americans represented the beliefs of the white, Protestant, middle-class majority, and were typically used by Gilded Age cartoonists. These political cartoons, communicating powerful ideas in a direct and often humorous way, echoed both the dynamism and the limitations of the Gilded Age, supporting reform while perpetuating stereotypes and appealing to a large audience while preserving the attitudes of the more privileged few.