

Assessing Political Machines

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Essential Question: What was the role of the political machine in turn of the century American society?

Contextual Essay

The rapid industrialization in America following the Civil War presented both opportunity and hardship to urban Americans. Immigrants flocked to cities looking for jobs and a better standard of living. City and local governments struggled to keep up with the demands of their rapidly expanding cities. Politicians sought to gain influence, wealth, and power taking advantage of the tumultuous time. It was during this chaotic time that political machines gained power and influence over America's largest cities. These political machines provided assistance to poor and immigrant city-dwellers while amassing large fortunes for those in charge. The political machine and its bosses served a vital purpose in turn of the century society by providing stability and aid during a time of rapid change when the existing social structure was unable to provide adequate assistance.

By 1870, 44% of the population of New York City was foreign born, with 21% being of Irish heritage and 16% from the German states (Mandelbaum, 1965). The city was growing rapidly, and expansion took precedence over repairing and improving the existing infrastructure (Mandelbaum, 1965). The growing industrialization and population presented new needs for city and local governments. Family networks gave way to new political parties, and the increasing working class needed someone to listen to them. Historian Seymour Mandelbaum (1965) remarked that "change was so rapid that it was impossible to find a stable point of equilibrium around which the distribution of power could fluctuate"

(p.4). This new distribution of power would evolve into the political machine, and these machines would run many of America's cities well into the twentieth century.

The turn of the century American city provided little outlet for poor and immigrant populations to voice concern and ask for help. The situation was ripe with "fertile soil from which political machines sprouted...." (Colburn & Pozzetta, 1976, p. 446). Immigrants especially had needs that included survival, help in understanding an unfamiliar government with unfamiliar laws, community, and friendship. In a society where social mobility was possible and desired, the machine provided means for upward movement to the disadvantaged (Colburn & Pozzetta, 1976). By the late nineteenth century, relief organizations in many cities had become out of touch with the needs of the poor. Many refused aid from charity organizations because of pride, while others avoided these groups because they felt impersonal and foreign to them. The poor and immigrants then turned to their only other option, the local election, precinct or ward captain that would provide assistance in return for their loyalty and vote. These local captains often came from the same country or area and provided a personal option rather than the impersonal institutional aid that was often strictly limited by finances and laws (Mandelbaum, 1984).

Political machines provided a variety of services to its loyal members. In return for their loyalty, precinct captains would provide "various welfare services [such as] a turkey at Christmas, a bucket of coal in the cold of winter, or a job in the city's public works department" (Tarr, 1984, p.66). Reformers often tried to win the poor away from machines, however the populations served most by machines often found traditional reformers to be ineffective. They did not truly understand the needs of lower class Americans like the party boss that often came from a similar background or national origin as those that he served. Even in places where reformers were able to successfully bring down a machine, that

machine often was resurrected once the city's lower class citizens realized that no other organization would help them in the way that the machine had (Colburn & Pozzetta, 1976). Machine leaders understood that voters came from specific neighborhoods and had specific needs. As Mandenbaum asserts, "the machine welds its link with ordinary men and women by elaborate networks of personal relations" (1984, p. 30). It was by serving these specific and unique needs that the machine won loyalty from the lower class and immigrant populations.

Immigrants and poor urban dwellers were not the only groups that benefited from political machines. Many of the nation's leading businessmen grew to rely on machines to help them maximize profit and secure lucrative contracts. Prominent reformer Lincoln Steffens admitted that "you cannot build or operate a railroad, or a street railway, gas, water, or power company, develop and operate a mine, or get forests and cut timber on a large scale, or run any privileged business, without corrupting or joining the corruption of the government. And that is so all over the country" (Mandelbaum, 1984, p.8). Many party bosses, such as Tammany Hall's George Washington Plunkitt, argued that there was a distinction between "honest" and "dishonest" graft. He went on record saying "Everybody is talkin; these days about Tammany men growin' rich on graft, but nobody thinks of drawin' the distinction between honest graft and dishonest graft.... There's an honest graft, and I'm an example of how it works. I might sum up the whole thing by sayin': 'I seen my opportunities and I took 'em'" (Kennedy & Bailey, 2002, p. 206).

Tammany Hall was the most notorious and successful political machine in the nineteenth century, and it held on to power well into the 1930s. The organization originated as a fraternal society in the late eighteenth century. Upholsterer William Mooney is credited with creating the organization in 1783 with the intention of helping poor New Yorkers

(Eaton, 1892). After Andrew Jackson's election to the presidency in 1828, the organization forged a strong connection to the Democratic Party. Tammany and the Democrats began soliciting immigrant political support in the 1830s, as many Whigs were nativists (Well, 2004). The Democratic victories in the election of 1869 linked Albany to Tammany Hall. This connection would remain in place for a good part of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Mandelbaum, 1965).

The most famous Tammany boss was William March Tweed, who served many prominent roles in the New York City government and was the Grand Sachem, or leader of the Tammany Club (Well, 2004). The son of a Scottish immigrant and working class father, Tweed attempted to save his father's business after his death. He and his brother Richard failed to maintain the business however, and William then moved into the arenas of politics and public service (Werner, 1932). Tweed began his career in public service as a fire company foreman. This company's symbol was a tiger, hence Tweed's nickname the "Tammany Tiger" (Well, 2004). Tweed first ran for office in 1850 and lost a position on the Board of Assistant Aldermen to John H. Webb, a successful builder. He served in the "40 Thieves" Board of Aldermen from 1852-1853 as a representative from the seventh ward (Werner, 1932). Tweed was elected to Congress in 1853 and served from 1853-1855 but did not care for life in Washington, DC. In 1857 he was elected to the Board of Supervisors, and he held this position until the new city charter was passed in 1870 that dissolved the board. The Board of Supervisors controlled nearly all of the city's infrastructure including public improvements, taxes, and many departments of the city government (Werner, 1932).

The so called "Tweed Ring" began as a social group at first, where prominent men including the mayor John T. Hoffman, Richard Connolly, comptroller, Peter Sweeny, a parks commissioner and successful lawyer, and A. Oakey Hall, who would later become mayor of

New York, met over lunch. The group quickly became political and began to assert its power over the city of New York (Werner, 1932). The Tweed Ring was able to control city and county elections due to its organization and appeal to the large poor and immigrant population of New York. Each ward had a representative that was in control of the ward. These representatives would instruct election officials how to ensure success for Tammany politicians both via legal and illegal means (Werner, 1932). Tweed and his cronies worked hard to win support from poor and immigrant populations. He “united the elements in a divided society in the only manner in which they could be united: by paying them off” (Mandelbaum, 1965, p.67). Werner acknowledges that “New York had suffered from rowdy and corrupt elections before Tweed and his associates were born, but the elections held under their auspices were corrupt on an unprecedented scale and frankly dishonest” (1932, p. 129).

Tweed and his associates worked hard to unite diverse groups within the city under Tammany Hall. The machine gave aid to the Roman Catholic Church, its schools and charities to the tune of \$1.5 million between 1869 and 1871. The Tweed Ring also encouraged labor unions and strikes (Mandelbaum, 1965). A large portion of Tweed and Tammany’s support came from immigrant voters, which constituted nearly 50% of New York City voters in the late 1800s. The 1870 census found that 4/9 of New York City’s population was foreign born. This large immigrant population made naturalization a tool to control elections, and “it was in the process of naturalization that Tammany Hall, under the leadership of the Tweed group perpetrated its greatest election frauds” (Werner, 1932, p.134). *The New York Tribune* reported that “citizens were made ‘at the rate of a thousand per day with no more solemnity than, and quite as much celerity as is displayed in converting swine into pork in a Cincinnati packing house” (Werner, 1932, p. 134). Judge George

Barnard was said to have worked from six pm until midnight granting naturalization papers that were used to gain support for Tammany in city and county elections (Werner, 1932).

The New York Printing Company, owned by Tweed printed 105,000 blank applications and 69,000 certificates of naturalization during this period. Tammany Hall covered the court fees (Werner, 1932). It was the control of this particular group that gave Tammany its comprehensive power. Tweed and Tammany had its men working in all aspects of the city and county governments especially during elections. Tweed was said to have admitted that “the ballots made no result; the counters made the result...” (Werner, 1932, p. 130).

By the late 1860s, Tweed and Tammany Hall had amassed a large base of power within New York City and county politics. The power originated in the Board of Supervisors, which had the advantage of functioning outside of the public eye. The Board of Supervisors, of which Tweed was a powerful member had the authority to appoint election officials or “inspectors”, as well as appoint other officials. Tweed himself testified that he once paid Republican Peter P. Voorhis \$2,500 to be absent on the day that election officials were appointed by the board (Werner, 1932). As the 1860s progressed, Tammany Hall and Tweed’s ring decided to get rid of the Board of Supervisors. Tweed was serving in the New York state senate at the time and understood the importance of consolidating power in New York in order to continue benefitting from the rapid expansion in the city. Tweed stated that “I found it was impossible to do anything there [Albany] without paying for it, and money had to be raised for the passage of bills up there; that was the way the Ring first became organized, to pay for bills to protect ourselves in the city” (Werner, 1932, p. 112).

In 1870 Tweed and his associates abolished the Board of Supervisors and other city commissions replacing them with new city departments created by a new charter. This new

charter allowed the mayor to appoint department heads, which directly benefited Tweed, the Superintendent of Public Works (Mandelbaum, 1965). At one time during his career, Tweed was simultaneously the Superintendent of Public Works, County Supervisor, state senator, Grand Sachem of Tammany Hall, Chairman of the Democratic-Republican General Committee of the City of New York, and the supervisor of the county court house (Mandelbaum, 1965). From 1867 to 1871 city taxes decreased and city debt increased by \$60 million. Most of the city development was paid for with city bonds held by savings and trust banks controlled by Tammany Hall (Mandelbaum, 1965). Mandelbaum charges that "...Tweed made the public treasury his own. Just as he paid others, he charged the city handsomely for his services" (1965, p. 75). The city was given unlimited borrowing power to improve the water and sewage system, and these projects further lined the pockets of the Tweed Ring and Tammany Hall. It is estimated that \$40-100 million was "stolen" in the form of kickbacks and rebates given to Tammany Hall contractors (Mandelbaum, 1965).

By mid 1870, rumors of the high amount of city debt began to circle within the city. Bankers grew nervous and began to refuse to endorse city securities as they could not be guaranteed that the money would be used to fund the projects for which it was intended. A banking crisis loomed on the horizon, and many New Yorkers and American politicians worried that European countries would refuse to lend money to the US because of the egregious abuse of power by Tammany Hall (Mandelbaum, 1965). In July, 1870, county auditor James Watson died and was replaced by James O'Brien, a man with a vendetta against Tammany Hall. O'Brien worked tirelessly to expose the fraud that had occurred under the Tweed Ring during the previous decade. *The New York Times* printed a report on the city's books on July, 8, 1871, and reports continued in the paper throughout the month of July as more and more excess was revealed (Mandelbaum, 1965). Cartoonist Thomas Nast

criticized Boss Tweed and his cronies in *The New York Times* (Well, 2004). By mid October, 1871 the Tweed Ring was pretty much dead. Samuel Tilden, head of the Democratic Committee and August Belmont, Democratic national party chairman lead the attack on the Tweed Ring, and Tweed was arrested on October 26, 1871. Despite his admittance of fraud and his testimony that money from public works projects went directly into his pockets and those of his friends, many of his poor supporters continued to stand by him. They believed that he had “fallen into a trap set by the rich” (Colburn & Pozzetta, 1976, p. 449). Tweed managed to escape to Spain only to be extradited, and he died in a New York prison in 1878 (Colburn & Pozzetta, 1976).

In Tweed’s absence, reformers tried to seize control of the city only to learn how difficult it was to accomplish anything without corruption and graft. Mandenbaum observed that “replacing the big pay-off required massive investments in a communications network and in the techniques for dealing with complex data” (1965, p. 87). As the new city leaders kept a careful eye on the city’s books, New York City’s infrastructure was reaching a crisis point. Water shortages, road problems and threats of violence by unpaid city workers plagued the new government (Mandelbaum, 1965). Tammany Hall would regain its grip over the citizens of New York City and remained an influential organization until the election of Fiorello LaGuardia as mayor of New York in 1934.

The Tweed Ring and Tammany Hall are just one example of the role of the political machine in urban America at the turn of the century. The city of Philadelphia experienced its own struggle with political corruption during the late 1800s garnering it the nickname of “the most corrupt and contented city” by reformer Lincoln Steffens as well as “the worst governed” (McCaffrey, 1992, p. 437). Philadelphia saw the consolidation of power occur during a period in which the city saw substantial increases in the number of immigrants

entering the city (McCaffrey, 1992). Philadelphia, however, was not controlled by the Democrats but by a handful of rich Republicans.

James McManes was an Irish immigrant who emigrated to Philadelphia in 1830 at the age of 8. He had become a prominent Republican by 1860 and served on the Board of Education. After helping Andrew Curtin gain the nomination for governor of Pennsylvania, McManes was named the Bank Inspector of Philadelphia. He was elected to the board of gas trustees, a very powerful group in 1865 and remained on the board until it was abolished in 1887 (McCaffrey, 1993). The Gas Trust was accused of charging too much for inferior services. The trust however managed to control the city's councils by employing Republican Party loyalists in city departments. Lord James Bryce observed that "nearly all the municipal offices were held by their nominees" (McCaffrey, 1993, p. 29). Within a few years, McManes had become powerful enough to be deemed a "king" by many. Historian Harold Zink reported that "Republican nomination conventions followed 'King' James' orders because he controlled the organization or machine which sent the delegates to the conventions" (McCaffrey, 1993, p. 30). McManes also had a strong influence over the city Tax Department, which was charged with collecting \$10 million in unpaid taxes. The tax collector received a 5% commission on his collections (McCaffrey, 1993).

McManes did not have sole control over Philadelphia however, he competed for power with William Stokley, a Republican politician that gained prominence as a member of the Common Council and later president of the Select Council. He was also elected mayor in 1871 (McCaffrey, 1993). Stokley played a large role in Philadelphia politics mostly in part due to his role on the city's Buildings Commission. Stokley and his commission partners would buy land in west and north central Philadelphia, and then have the city pay for improvements, which would increase its value (McCaffrey, 1993). The difference between

Philadelphia's Republican machine in the late 1800s and Tammany Hall was that McManes and Stokley did not consolidate their power but rather fought against each other for ultimate control of the city's projects and purse strings. The Republican Party remained splintered in Philadelphia throughout the late nineteenth century, and Stokley and McManes only maintained intermittent control (McCaffrey, 1993).

The city of Chicago also experienced conditions in the late nineteenth century that made it ripe for the organization and growth of machine politics. Between 1871 and 1893, land and population exploded in the city of Chicago. The city's population grew from about 300,000 in the early 1870s to over one million by the late 1890s, and in 1890 nearly 80% of the city's residents had parents that were foreign born. As the 1890s progressed most of these immigrants would come from areas in central and eastern Europe (Tarr, 1984). The city was divided into 35 wards and each ward was represented on city council by two aldermen, and one representative on the Democratic and Republican Central Committee. The city was further divided into state senatorial districts with each electing one senator and three representatives to the Illinois General Assembly (Tarr, 1984). The political machines would then divide up these districts and nominate three candidates so they had a controlling interest in the state legislature. The leader of each ward may or may not have held an elected position but would most likely at least have a post on a county committee or council. Just as in New York and Philadelphia, the city government could not keep up with the rapid growth in development and population in the late 1800s. As the city grew in size, new land was incorporated into the preexisting order, overlapping authority between city, county and state organizations, resulting in fragmenting power (Tarr, 1984). It was the political machines that were able to consolidate and use this fragmented power. The party boss and political machine became the place to go to for a building contract, license, job or

other welfare. Because the party bosses controlled campaign money, they also controlled the candidates (Tarr, 1984).

The Democratic Party in Chicago was controlled by Roger C. Sullivan and John P. Hopkins, while William Lorimer ran the Republicans. All of these men came from lower class families, Sullivan and Lorimer immigrant parents, and all three of these men had to support their families at a young age. These experiences helped Chicago's immigrants and lower class relate to the leadership of the party bosses. They came from the same place, went through the same trials and hardships. They also helped these men figure out what was important to the city's urban dwellers so that they could provide it for a price. Although Sullivan and Lorimer both lacked a formal education, both held elected office at one point and many party posts throughout their careers. Lorimer served as a congressman from 1894-1900 and a senator from 1909-1912. Sullivan served as the Cook County Probate Court Clerk from 1890-1894, and Hopkins was the mayor of Chicago from 1894-1895. These men also held large stakes in companies that provided city services as well as important banks. Lorimer owned two construction companies, and Sullivan and Hopkins shared leadership of the Chicago and Great Lakes Dredging and Dock Company. Sullivan also served as president of the Ogden Gas Company, and many of his stockholders were city officials (Tarr, 1984).

Many Chicago politicians and city officials also held controlling shares in the city's most powerful banks. John Walsh, a notable Chicago banker also had connections in important groups such as the West Park Board and Chicago Sanitary District board. He owned two newspapers, the *Chicago Herald* and the *Chicago Chronicle*, as well as held controlling interests in railroads and other companies. Walsh's banks held a large amount of public deposits, and many of the city's politicians and officials were shareholders (Tarr,

1984). Just as party bosses used the unprecedented growth of the late 19th century to line their pockets in New York and Philadelphia, Chicago bosses capitalized on the needs of the burgeoning city.

The rapid growth and expansion of America during the late 19th century made its cities a fertile breeding ground for corruption and machine politics. While many political machines and party bosses focused in increasing their own personal incomes, they also provided necessary services and aid to the city's poor and immigrant populations. These people often felt that they had no one to turn to besides their local machine affiliate, and this dependence created loyalty that helped the machine hold onto control for decades. Without the political machine, many immigrants and poor urban Americans would not have survived or advanced in society. One can argue that the corruption inherent in these organizations and their leaders make this era a dark spot in the history of American self-governance. However, these machines and their leaders filled an important role in American society at the time, a role that traditional local government was unwilling or unable to fill.

REFERENCES

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This source discusses machines throughout history with a focus on their purpose and function in society. The resource is especially helpful for teachers of all grade levels including the college level, as it addresses key ideas, concepts and themes that should be pulled out of the topic to present to students to help their understanding of machines and the time period.

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This source provides comprehensive details about the leaders of one of the most powerful and lasting political machines in history. The book provides important information regarding Boss Tweed, his colleagues and downfall.

Eaton, D. B. (1892). The Degeneration of Tammany. *The North American Review*, 154(424), 297-304.

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The Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project. (n.d.) Teaching Eleanor Roosevelt Glossary – Tammany Hall. Retrieved from <http://www.gmu.edu/~erpapers>.

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Werner, M.R. (1932). *Tammany Hall*. New York: Greenwood.

This comprehensive work discusses the history of Tammany Hall, from its origins to its downfall. It covers Tweed and the Tweed Ring in much detail.