

# **Gilded Age Politics**

by Sophia



#### WHAT'S COVERED

The social gospel, the settlement house movement, and the muckrakers provided support to the urban working class but, for the most part, their needs were ignored by the government. Many coped with the challenges of urban life by interacting with "machine politics." At the national level, the government was characterized by weak presidents and polarization over national issues like patronage, tariffs, and currency. Government efforts to address social concerns were minimal. Every day, Americans were largely left on their own.

This tutorial examines Gilded Age politics in three parts:

## 1. The Gilded Age and Political Scandals

In 1873, **Mark Twain** and Charles Dudley Warner coined the term **Gilded Age** with their novel, *The Gilded Age:* A *Tale of Today*, which satirized corruption in American society and politics after the Civil War.



#### Mark Twain

Celebrated American author who coined the term "Gilded Age" to refer to America in the late 19th century.



#### Gilded Age

A period in American history when materialism, the quest for personal gain, and corruption dominated politics and society.

The novel tells the story of a group of speculators who bribed congressmen in order to build a Southern railroad. It criticizes graft and bribery in local and national politics and ridicules the corrupt and foolish choices that speculators and politicians made to become rich.

Twain and Warner did not have to look far for inspiration. In 1872, 1 year before their novel was published, news of the **Crédit Mobilier of America Scandal**, which concerned the construction of the nation's first transcontinental railroad, was widely reported.



#### Crédit Mobilier of America Scandal

A scandal concerning the construction of the first transcontinental railroad.

Crédit Mobilier of America was a construction company affiliated with the French Crédit Mobilier banking company. The Union Pacific Railroad Company, which Congress created to build the transcontinental railroad, paid Crédit Mobilier to build it. However, Crédit Mobilier, which consisted mostly of stockholders in the Union Pacific Railroad, used the funds to buy Union Pacific Railroad bonds and resell them at a huge profit. Some members of Congress, as well as Vice President Schuyler Colfax, accepted money from Crédit Mobilier in exchange for stalling a government inquiry into the matter.

### 2. Machine Politics

The Crédit Mobilier Scandal revealed that the federal government, especially Congress, made backroom deals with large corporations that could paralyze the political process. Critics of Gilded Age politics also investigated local government, especially **machine politics**, for political corruption.



#### **Machine Politics**

The process in which citizens interacted with local politicians to work the "machine" of local politics to address needs in a ward, district, or neighborhood.

Every urban citizen, no matter their ethnicity or race, resided in a particular ward or district that was represented by a councilman, alderman, or other officials in city government. When everyday problems arose, like sanitation issues or the need for a sidewalk along a muddy road, citizens approached local officials to get the job done. Rather than work through sometimes-lengthy bureaucratic processes of city government, officials approached local political organizations to find faster and mutually beneficial solutions.

In New York City's "Little Italy" neighborhood, store owners express a desperate need for sidewalks in front of their stores to improve foot traffic. Knowing that such a request would likely get bogged down in bureaucratic red tape or ignored entirely at city hall, they approach a local political organization, or "machine." A district captain contacts the party "boss" and tells him about the problem. The boss contacts city politicians and urges them to appropriate the funds needed for the sidewalk. In exchange, the boss promises to get votes from his district for the city politician. Once the funds are appropriated, the boss uses most of them for sidewalk construction (i.e., pays one of his associates to do the job) and pockets the remainder. The sidewalk is finished more quickly than anyone had hoped, and citizens vote for candidates supported by the machine in the next election.

As this scenario shows, machine politics was not a neutral, or necessarily democratic, process. Favors were exchanged for votes. Votes were exchanged for fast, desirable outcomes. The solutions often cost more than necessary, since bosses received exorbitant amounts of money to complete jobs and kept much of it for themselves. This process is known as **graft**.



#### Graft

The financial kickback provided to city bosses in exchange for political favors.

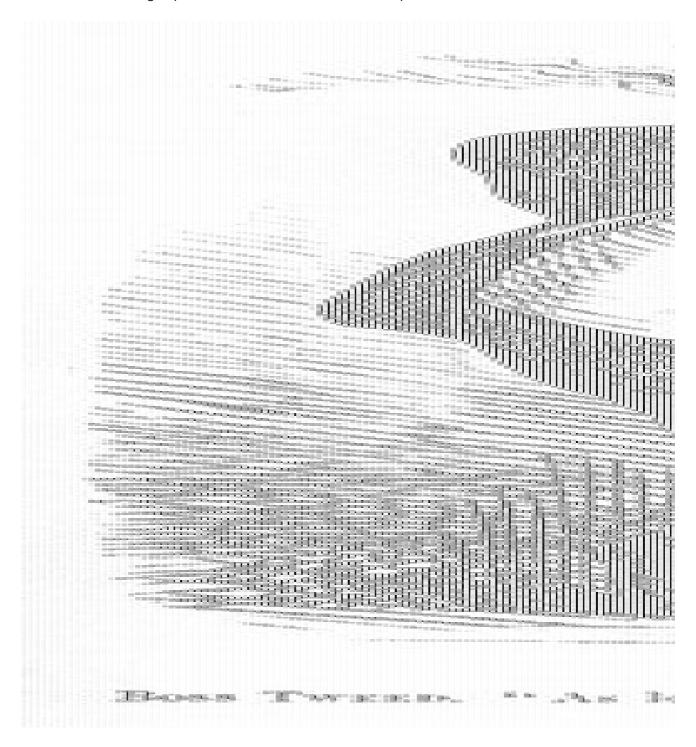
Among the most notable political machines of the Gilded Age was a Democratic organization known as Tammany Hall in New York, run by **William "Boss" Tweed**.

## PEOPLE TO KNOW

#### William "Boss" Tweed

Leader of Tammany Hall in New York City, one of the most notable political machines of the Gilded Age.

Consider the following depiction of "Boss" Tweed and machine politics:



"That's What's the Matter," Thomas Nast, 1871

This political cartoon by **Thomas Nast** displays the control that Boss Tweed and Tammany Hall had over the election process in New York City during the Gilded Age. The caption quotes Tweed saying, "As long as I count the Votes, what are you going to do about it?" He stands next to a ballot box, which rests on a pillar labeled "In Counting There is Strength," which reflects accusations that Tammany Hall engaged in

miscounting votes and other forms of voter fraud to ensure that the machine stayed in power.



#### **Thomas Nast**

Noted illustrator who wielded significant influence and whose political cartoons challenged political corruption in the Gilded Age.



Given the accusations of corruption directed at Tammany Hall and other political machines, why did machine politics remain a staple of Gilded Age politics?

Thomas Nast, Mark Twain, and other critics of machine politics pointed out that the process was not transparent, was undemocratic, and was inefficient. However, working-class neighborhoods, populated by European immigrants, racial minorities, and rural migrants, were often ignored by city hall and the official bureaucracy. People in these neighborhoods had nowhere else to turn besides the machines. When dealing with a machine, they knew their problems would be addressed in return for their political support in future elections.

## 3. National Politics During the Gilded Age

Urban and rural residents also resorted to political machines and other political organizations because the federal government did not intervene in the lives of its everyday citizens during the Gilded Age.

As shown in the table below, every president elected from 1876 through 1892 won despite receiving less than 50% of the popular vote. Two of them—Rutherford B. Hayes (1876) and Benjamin Harrison (1888)—were elected even though they lost the popular vote.

Year	Candidates	Popular Vote	%	Electoral Vote
1876	Rutherford B. Hayes (Republican) Samuel Tilden (Democrat) Others	4,034,132 4,286,808 97,709	47.9% 50.9% 1.2%	185 184 0
1880	James Garfield (Republican) Winfield Hancock (Democrat) Others	4,453,337 4,444,267 319,806	48.3% 48.2% 3.5%	214 155 0
1884	Grover Cleveland (Democrat)  James Blaine (Republican)  Others	4,914,482 4,856,903 288,660	48.8% 48.3% 2.9%	219 182 0
1888	Benjamin Harrison (Republican) Grover Cleveland (Democrat) Others	5,443,663 5,538,163 407,050	47.8% 48.6% 3.6%	233 168 0
1892	Grover Cleveland (Democrat) Benjamin Harrison (Republican) Others	5,553,898 5,190,799 1,323,330	46.0% 43.0% 11.0%	<ul><li>277</li><li>145</li><li>22</li></ul>

This contributed to a series of weak presidents who owed their victories to partisan allies and powerful

relationships. They spent much of their time in office repaying those who got them elected.

Among the few political issues that Congress and the President routinely addressed during the Gilded Age were those associated with patronage, tariffs, and monetary policy.

#### 3a. Patronage

Each of the Gilded Age presidential administrations sought to retain the power to engage in widespread political patronage.



#### Patronage

The naming of friends and supporters to governmental posts

Given the close presidential elections of the Gilded Age, the maintenance of political machinery and the repaying of favors with patronage were crucial to all presidents, regardless of party affiliation. The process enabled those with political connections to occupy powerful positions in the government, regardless of their experience or skill. This compounded government inefficiency and created opportunities for corruption.

Events that followed the presidential election of 1880, which Republican James Garfield won by a narrow margin, pushed patronage into the spotlight. On July 2, 1881, less than 4 months into his presidency, Charles Guiteau shot Garfield in the back. Guiteau was a lawyer and a Republican. He had given several speeches in support of Garfield's election. Guiteau, who likely suffered from a mental illness, believed that he deserved to be appointed as an ambassador in return for the support he had provided to Garfield's election campaign. When his demands for an appointment were ignored, Guiteau resorted to assassination.



Garfield's shooting and the subsequent capture of the assassin, Charles Guiteau, are depicted in this newspaper illustration.



Garfield clung to life for 2 months after the assassination attempt but died when his wounds became infected.

Garfield's assassination provided his vice president—and successor—Chester Arthur, with an opportunity to reform the patronage system. In 1883, he signed into law the **Pendleton Civil Service Act**, the first significant antipatronage law in American history.



#### Pendleton Civil Service Act

Created the Civil Service Commission, which determined those federal jobs subject to civil service examination and those that remained subject to patronage.

The act created the Civil Service Commission, which listed all government patronage jobs and then set aside 15% of the list as appointments to be determined through a competitive civil service examination. To prevent future presidents from undoing this reform, the law declared that they could add jobs to the list, but could not move civil service jobs back into the patronage column.

#### 3b. Tariffs

In addition to civil service, President Arthur took action to reformtariffs.



#### **Tariffs**

Taxes on international imports to the United States.

Tariffs were a controversial topic, and a source of partisan debate, throughout the Gilded Age. American companies desired high tariffs, which forced Americans to buy domestically produced goods rather than imports. Federal legislators who supported high tariffs appeared to be accommodating the wishes of big business. Lower tariffs, which reduced prices and lowered the cost of living, were favored by many working-class families and farmers.

Out of concern for these latter groups, Arthur created the U.S. Tariff Commission in 1882 to investigate whether high tariffs were necessary. Despite his concern, and the commission's recommendation for a 25% rollback in most tariffs, the most Arthur could accomplish was legislation that lowered tariff rates by 5%.

Subsequent presidents also struggled to reform tariffs. President Grover Cleveland, who in 1884 earned the distinction of being the first Democrat elected to the White House since 1856, agreed with Arthur that tariffs were too high, and were clearly designed to protect big domestic industries at the expense of consumers. Influential businessmen and industrialists continued to insist that the United States must maintain high tariffs to protect American industries.

During the 1888 presidential election, the Republicans countered the Democrats' nomination of Cleveland for a second term by nominating Benjamin Harrison. Cleveland narrowly won the popular vote, but Harrison rode the coattails of several businessmen and party bosses to win the key states of New York and New Jersey, where party officials emphasized Harrison's support for a high tariff. As a result, Harrison won the electoral vote and the election.

After Harrison's victory, the United States returned to higher tariffs. The McKinley Tariff (named for its sponsor, Ohio Congressman William McKinley) raised some rates as high as 50%—the highest tariff in American history to date. High rates protected American businesses, including large industries like iron and steel, and made it appear that the federal government only supported corporations, not the interests of everyday citizens.

#### 3c. Monetary Policy

Patronage and tariffs were popular subjects of discussion in political circles during the Gilded Age, but no issue was more relevant to working-class Americans and farmers than monetary policy, specifically the debate regarding gold and silver.

In 1873, the federal government demonetized silver. This meant that U.S. currency could only be backed by gold. This policy, known as the "gold standard," benefited railroad barons and other prominent businessmen who engaged in foreign trade. At the same time, it pushed many farmers and working-class Americans into debt.

As a result, farmers pressured lawmakers to establish a bimetallic standard, in which American currency would be backed by gold and silver. Doing so, they believed, would put more money into circulation and increase inflation, which would raise prices for their goods and help them get out of debt.

In 1890, Congress responded by enacting the Sherman Silver Purchase Act.



#### **Sherman Silver Purchase Act**

Required the U.S. Treasury to mint more than four million ounces of silver coins each month.

The Act did little to improve the monetary situation. Fearing that silver-backed currency and investments were worth less than those backed by gold, many investors exchanged bank notes backed by silver for those

backed by gold. This severely depleted the nation's gold reserve and reduced the money supply instead of expanding it. The silver that the Treasury minted did little to circulate more cash through the economy, which meant that the prices for farmers' goods did not increase, and they remained unable to pay off their debts.

The lack of effective federal monetary and tariff reform led those who needed reform the most—farmers and laborers—to take matters into their own hands, and led to attempts to take control of the political process in the mid-1890s.



#### **SUMMARY**

Those who criticized the late 19th century in the United States as a Gilded Age pointed to corruption and inefficiency in government to support their claims. Local and regional politics, and the bosses who ran the "machines," controlled much of the American governmental system through graft and bribery. Citizens who interacted with political machines did so because solutions to their problems were more likely to come from local bosses than through official government processes. Government at the federal level during this period was characterized by weak presidential administrations, hampered by issues that included patronage and monetary policy.

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#### **TERMS TO KNOW**

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