

Corruption in Politics

Cities in the Gilded Age were excesses of opulence and grinding poverty.

Needy citizens wanted city leaders to deal with issues such as better sewers, cleaner water, new infrastructure, garbage collection, efficient ways of getting around, better schools, as well as better care for the sick and needy.

They also wanted good jobs.

Government officials did not have the resources, personnel or talent to deal with problems plaguing cities.

Out of this swamp emerged the Political Boss. A political boss did not necessarily hold an elected office. However, the boss did control a political party.

The people and institutions the bosses controlled were called a political machine.

For the bosses to control a city and keep their power, they needed to keep the people who vote, happy.

They often targeted the new immigrants for their support. So many immigrants were desperate and impoverished.

But Bosses could get things done. To maintain support of their needy constituency a boss could use his power to grant jobs, subsidize hospitals, provide social services such as more orphanages and better hospitals. They could even increase teachers' pay

Sometimes the bosses would feed the immigrants so they could receive the votes. They would take the leaders of local neighborhoods and give them good city jobs to convince the people of the neighborhoods to remain loyal.

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How did the bosses get the support and money that not only supported their political base, but the lavish lifestyles of the boss?

The bosses teamed up with big business. Bosses would award, say a bridge builder with a contract. In return, a Boss might get a kickback (money from the contractor) or seats on the Board of the company where the Boss had largest voting interest.

A Boss might have full authority over the awarding of city contracts. In that way, the Boss set budget for projects then hired workers who he overpaid.

A Boss might work with state or national politicians to funnel more money to projects in return for kickbacks.

So, a Boss was skillfully able to build a coalition of businessmen, politicians, and voters, especially in big cities like New York and Chicago.

A Boss was expert in skirting legal matters, knowing how city government operated, had access to muscle in case some convincing was needed.

Many of the activities from the political machine were illegal.

They would often break their own laws if it served them.

They not only awarded contracts to legal business but also to illegal business such as gambling and prostitution rings. They would then keep a percentage of the profits from these illegal businesses.

Bosses also practiced widespread voter fraud. A Boss would gather votes by including fake names on the voter lists. These would include the names of children, dogs and the deceased.

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Those served by a political machine were reminded to 'vote early and vote often.'

Translation: they could vote as many times as they wanted.

One district in New York had reported they received more votes than it had residents.

Probably the most well know of the political bosses was William "Boss" Tweed.

He came to power in New York's Tammany Hall and ruled New York for twelve years. Tammany Hall was the HQ of New York City's Democratic political organization.

Tweed remained in power by taking care of the poor and was well known for handing out turkey's and coal at Christmas time to his supporters.

He was also extremely corrupt and swindled the public out of millions of taxpayer dollars which went to Tweed, his associates, and the projects the Boss supported.

Many learned of the corruption in Tammany Hall because of the political cartoonist Thomas Nast.

Those who could not read could understand the cartoons which exposed Tweeds corruption.

In 1876, an attorney named Samuel Tilden convicted Tweed on over 200 charges of corruption. The Boss who had lived in a mansion, now resided in the city prison.

Tweed ended up escaping from prison, worked as a sailor and escaped to Spain.

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Someone in Spain recognized Tweed from one of Nast's cartoons and he was sent back to prison where he died in 1878.