

Overview: Gilded Age Politics

What were the effects of becoming 'modern' on the United States?

Following the Civil War national and local governments managed the extreme changes of immigration, urbanization, and industrialization by becoming incredibly corrupt. This time period of corrupt American politics is known as the Gilded Age taken from a book by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. The book was a devastating critique of the state of American democracy, not surprising since Twain's comments about Congress include, "Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself."

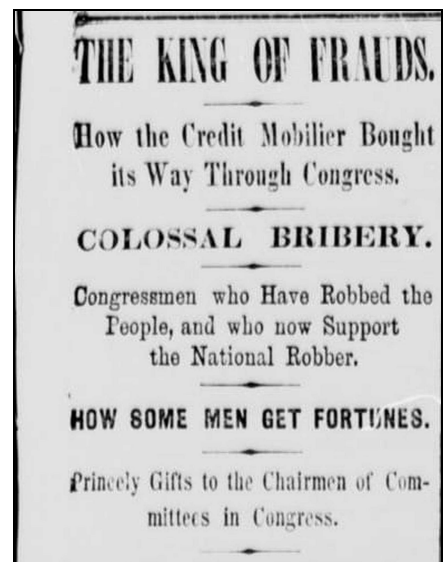


At the local level, in urban environments there was a new political organization formed during the Gilded Age: the political machine. This is an organization that works to win elections so that it can continue to exercise power. The most infamous of these political machines was New York's Tammany Hall. George Plunkitt became famous writing a book describing the way New York City's government actually worked, but the most famous of the machine bosses was William "Boss" Tweed. Tweed basically ran New York's municipal government throughout the 1860s & '70s. His best known feat explains how a political machine works. A new county courthouse was being constructed which was estimated to cost \$250,000, but ended up costing \$13,000,000 by the time it was finished. The costs included \$180,000 for 3 tables and 40 chairs, \$1.5 million for lighting fixtures, and \$41,000 for cleaning supplies. The standard kickback was that Tammany Hall received \$2 for every \$1 a contractor received. So for the 3 tables and 40 chairs, Tammany Hall received \$120,000 and the contractor \$60,000.

Now, this is terrible for the taxpayer. But political machines also provided valuable services to immigrants and the urban poor. As Plunkitt explained, Tammany could help families in need: "I don't ask whether they are Republicans or Democrats, and I don't refer them to the Charity Organization Society...I just get quarters for them, buy clothes for them if their clothes were burned up, and fix them up until they get things running again." In return for this assistance, Plunkitt and the political machines expected those that they helped to vote for them in upcoming elections.

If this didn't work, Tammany Hall and other machines could also resort to less savory methods to stay in power. Tammany would find bearded men to vote, take them to a barber and shave off the beard, have them vote again, then shave their mustache and have them vote a third time. The machines could also use violence and intimidation. A Tammany Hall member is quoted as saying, "It was wonderful to see my men slug the opposition to preserve the sanctity of the ballot."

Corruption wasn't limited to urban municipal governments; it also occurred at the national level. President Ulysses S. Grant had a number of embarrassing accusations of corruption during his presidency. One of the most famous was dubbed "The King of Frauds" by *The New York Sun*. It involved a construction company that did most of the road building for the Union Pacific Railroad. The first problem was that the construction company, Credit Mobilier, was overcharging the public for construction costs and taking the excess money as profits for the company. Second, it bribed Congressmen. Congressman Oakes Ames (R-MA) was found guilty of giving bribes but no one was ever found guilty of receiving them. This did not help Congress' reputation.



Despite the widespread corruption, some national reform legislation did pass during the Gilded Age. The Civil Service Act of 1883, passed after President Garfield's assassination by a disgruntled office-seeker, created a merit system for 10% of

federal employees, who were selected by competitive exams, rather than political favoritism. This had an unintended effect because American politicians were now much more dependant on donations from businesses rather than from grateful political appointees.

In 1890 the Sherman Antitrust Act forbade combinations and practices that restrained trade but it was difficult to enforce against monopolies like U.S. Steel. It was used more often against labor unions which were interpreted by the Supreme Court to restrain trade in their lobbying for workers' rights.

Overall, the national Congress was unable to bring about effective legislation to respond to the growing changes occurring throughout the nation. State and local governments expanded their responsibility for public health and welfare. Cities invested in public works and education. Some northern states provided protection for workers, which reform was less developed in the South. In the west, farmers became politically motivated because they were having such a difficult time making a living.

In the 1870s, farmers formed the Grange Movement to put pressure on state governments to regulate railroad rates and warehouse charges. Railroads were monopolistic: they owned the track going through town so it was difficult for farmers to negotiate fair shipping prices. The Grange Movement transformed into the Farmer's Alliance Movement which pushed for economic cooperation between farmers in order to raise prices for their food and livestock. The biggest idea of the Farmer's Alliance was the Sub-Treasury Plan. In this idea, farmers could store their grain in government warehouses and buy seed and equipment at low-rate government loans using their crops as collateral. This would allow farmers to bypass banks, the other bugbear for farmers after the railroads.



Eventually, these farmers and their supporters grew into a political party, the People's Party, or Populists. In 1892, they put forth a national convention in Omaha which had some progressive planks including: the Sub-Treasury Plan, the graduated income tax, government control of the currency, the right for laborers to form unions, and free coinage of silver to produce more money. All of these ideas did eventually happen except for the final one.

The Populist Party was primarily a party of the Midwest and West. It granted women the right to vote and Wyoming became the first state to grant female suffrage in the nation. And although the Populists' ideas favored broad appeal, the free coinage of silver kept most urban laborers away from the party because it would cause inflation and make it more difficult for them to purchase food and consumer goods. In 1892 and 1896 they won electoral votes in the national election and their most famous leader was William Jennings Bryan. Bryan was a masterful orator and his most famous speech, The Cross of Gold speech is considered one of the finest examples of rhetoric in American history. In 1896, Bryan was nominated as the presidential candidate of both the Democrat and Populist Party resulting in a crushing victory for the Republican candidate, William McKinley. The 1896 election is considered a turning point in American electoral history and is considered the first

modern presidential election. The business classes gave McKinley's campaign an unprecedented \$10 million and was the death knell for the Populist Party.

The corruption in government, both federal and local, continued and journalists, called muckrakers began exposing it to a mass audience via national and local newspapers. And even though the Populists as a political party were defeated, their ideas became mainstream and were incorporated into the Democratic and Republican Parties. These ideas would be enforced during the Progressive Era.