

Politics in the Gilded Age

I. Political Corruption during Gilded Age

a. Grant's Administration

- i. *Credit Mobilier scandal* – Union Pacific RR officials impoverished the RR company by forming Credit Mobilier construction company and overpaying themselves. Bribed members of Congress and Grants administration to block investigation.
- ii. *"Whiskey Ring"* – Whiskey distillers paid graft to federal officials rather than pay excise tax on their liquor
 1. Grant helped exonerate his own secretary who was involved
- iii. Sec of War William Belknap took bribes from suppliers to Indian reservations—he later resigned

b. Boss Tweed (Tammany Hall)

- i. Ran Democratic party "machine" in NYC—highly organized at grassroots level
 1. rewarded followers with city jobs
- ii. Used bribery and graft to run NYC and keep Democrats in power
- iii. Cartoonist Thomas Nast chronicled Tweed's corruption
- iv. Tweed eventually died in jail

II. Political Culture

- a. Politics provided a source of identity, a means of livelihood, and a form of entertainment
- b. Patronage—giving jobs to loyal supporters—was a strong motivation for party loyalty
 - i. Party bosses doled out jobs in exchange for support
 1. \$\$\$
- c. Political affiliation as source of identity
 - i. Republicans were split:
 1. "Stalwarts" – led by Roscoe Conkling, supported patronage
 2. "Half Breeds" – led by James G. Blaine
 3. "Mugwumps" – Reform-minded Republicans who deplored the spoils system and advocated civil service reform

III. Presidential Politics

- a. James Garfield (1881)– assassinated**
 - i. Death crystallized desires for civil service reform**
- b. Chester A Arthur (1881-1885)**
 - i. *Pendleton Civil Service Act (1883)***
 - 1. Established permanent Civil Service commission
 - 2. Created merit system for federal jobs—required exams
 - 3. Prohibited federal jobholders from contributing to political campaigns (dried up major source of party bosses' revenue)
- c. Grover Cleveland (1885-1889)**
 - i. Many Republican reformers (Mugwumps) left party to join Democrats (which they soon regretted this after learning Cleveland had fathered an illegitimate child)**
 - ii. “Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion” line at Blaine rally costs him election-Cleveland wins!**
 - iii. Fought to lower tariff—cost him 1888 election**
- d. Benjamin Harrison (1889-1893)**
 - i. Dependent and Disability Pensions Act (1890) expanded Union veterans' pension coverage**
 - ii. The Republican Congress enacted the first federal regulation of large business corporations, the Sherman Antitrust Act (1890)**
- e. Grover Cleveland (1893-1897)**
 - i. Panic of 1893**
 - 1. Caused by overbuilding, speculation, labor disorders, agricultural depression, and low gold reserves in Treasury
 - 2. Cleveland allows gov't to borrow \$\$\$ from J.P. Morgan