

Political Machines

- I. Election of 1880
 - A. No major issues dividing them. Agree to continue to ignore the Southern question; neither oppose the use of force to end the Great Uprising of 1877; neither voice any major opinion on foreign policy.
 - B. No campaigning, no personal appearances by either candidate.
 - C. Yet *huge* turnout, parades, etc. Why?

- II. Mr. Burr's Vision
 - A. 1794—Democratic-Republicans form—Tammany Hall now becomes central part of a national political party.
 - B. Originally founded as a sort of a collecting society—"Tammany" is the name of a mythical Indian chief, and the Tammany society was going to collect natural objects from around the country, when it was founded in 1786.
 - C. NY Democrats have a real visionary: Aaron Burr, a really underhanded genius at political campaigns.
 - 1. Burr has a new view: political parties useful things, because you can use them to make sure your candidates get elected.
 - 2. Burr does things like having party workers visit the homes of every single voter whose name he can find
 - 3. Also, has voters gets around property requirements by making poor people joint owners of the tiny amount of property that each of them owns.
 - 4. As a result, the Democrats win New York, and therefore they win the election of 1800, and Burr becomes Vice President.
 - 5. *Burr, by the way, is going to run for governor in 1804—Hamilton opposes him determinedly, and that makes all the difference.
 - 6. * Burr challenges Hamilton to a duel, and in 1804, the two men meet in New Jersey. July 11, 1804, Aaron Burr shoots Alexander Hamilton, who dies. Burr flees the city, tries to raise an army to overthrow the government.

- III. What concerns us is Burr's vision: Political machine—the idea of an organization designed specifically to win votes.

- A. Very pragmatic, non-idealistic, approach to politics, which is a central aspect of political machines.
 - B. Good a time as any for a definition: Political machines, basically, boil down to politics without ideals, politics played as a really dull board game.
 - C. Essential job, not to pursue political ends, but rather to win votes and elections.
 - D. In New York, the most important site for all this, this task is taken up by Tammany Hall.
- IV. Tammany Changes
- A. Irish immigrants showing up in massive numbers in 19th century (beginning in 1820s, especially).
 - B. How do we get immigrants to vote for us?
 - C. What do they need?
 - 1. Jobs--Patronage
 - 2. Housing
 - 3. Cash
 - D. By 1840s, Tammany Hall actually has representatives down at the docks to greet immigrants, as sort of official Welcome to America, here's a job, vote for us.
- V. Certainly not Burr's exact vision, but again—the idea behind a political machine is an organization that gets people elected.
- A. Historians very mixed on this function of Tammany—remember, no welfare system, no social security of any sorts. This is the only safety net.
 - B. At the same time, it is corruption. Got to be a little uneasy about it.
- VI. Good reason for the uneasiness.
- A. In 1851, William Tweed, chairmaker, and a lot of other small businessmen get together and take over Tammany Hall. Although there are a couple of years when he's not in charge, for most of the 1850s and pretty much all of the 1860s, Tweed is running New York City.
 - B. We can't forget, there are some positive effects to what he does. Most important, shortly after the NYC Draft Riot, Tweed is the one who makes sure that there will be no more draftees taken from NYC.

- C. And secures the land for the Metropolitan museum of art, while building lots of new hospitals for poor New Yorkers.
 - D. But lots of graft, in all forms.
 - E. Bribery
 - 1. Also, police department—such as it is—is barely functioning: basically allows an epidemic of muggings, allows gambling houses to function, and lots of three-card monte, etc.
 - 2. Additionally—and finally—fire department basically stops functioning, because City Council can't afford to offend the firemen, who are still leaders of the gangs and therefore really important to city's politics.
 - 3. Basically, supporters of Tweed and Tammany get free reign in the city.
 - F. Patronage.
 - 1. My favorite example: Tweed adds twelve people to each street maintenance crew, for instance, as “manure inspectors”.
 - G. And, of course, kickbacks.
 - 2. Favorite example: Someone offers them 50,000 for the exclusive right to collect dead animals from the streets (will then hire out to neighborhoods and individuals).
 - 3. City turns down the offer. Instead offers the money to a guy who they'll have to pay \$63,000 a year.
 - 4. Also, begin to increase construction kickbacks. County courthouse built in the late 1860s costs twice as much as the state of Alaska.
 - H. All in all, lots of theft.
Some estimates calculate that Tweed and his followers stole around \$200 million from New York City, and certainly the city's debts rise, to something like \$130 million by the time Tweed leaves office.
- VII. Thomas Nast
- A. Cartoonist for Harper's Weekly.
 - B. Not a great guy. His answer to why Tweed's in office? Voters are dumb.
 - C. 1870-71—Decides to break the Tweed Ring.

1. But it works: gets lots of attention from all sorts of people, including Samuel Tilden, a young lawyer who quickly becomes the Democrats' big anti-corruption activist.

D. Tilden goes on to run for President in 1876, leading to what, of course?...

VIII. But in the meantime, January 1873—The tide has turned. William Tweed is placed on trial for fraud. And the jury can't convict him.

IX. Eventually, after a long series of trials and lack of convictions and re-arrests, Tweed is sentenced to life in prison.

X. By that time, Tweed has fled, going to Cuba and then getting on a boat to Spain.

XI. Gets to Spain, and Spanish officials have copies of some of Nast's cartoons; they recognize him, arrest him, and send him back, where he winds up in jail for the rest of his life.

XII. Important note: Tammany not so easily conquered.

1. Really outlasts, taking on new bosses, until the 1930s, when Fiorello LaGuardia is able to at least silence it for a couple of decades.
2. But in some ways that's the point of a political machine—to allow a party to have a lasting presence

XIII. Lots of other machines, and lots of types:

A. Boss Frank Hague

1. Becomes Mayor of Jersey City in 1917; stays in office until 1947.
2. Winds up making a fortune, despite only collecting a salary of around \$7000 a year—lots of bribes, kickbacks, etc.
3. In the process, uses force against any opposition—1937 Norman Thomas shows up in Jersey City to campaign, and Hague, a Democrat and big Roosevelt supporter, runs Thomas out of the city.

B. Also, Boston—that's where we get the Kennedys from, really.

C. But maybe the most famous political machines, outside of New York City, are in the South.

1. Memphis: E.H. Crump
2. Solid South

3. Crump, himself a Democrat, actually allows blacks and Republicans alike to vote, so long as they vote for him.
 4. Oddly enough, because of this position, and because he continues to support all sorts of civil improvements in Memphis, Crump is able to forge the first and maybe the only biracial coalition in the American south.
 5. Winds up essentially running Memphis from 1900 right up until the 1940s.
 6. Odd thing, somewhat like Tweed, winds up doing a lot to help the city, especially building up the fire department and the city infrastructure.
- D. Most famous boss ever, arguably more famous than Tweed, was Huey P. Long.
- E. Master of patronage and kickbacks—essentially, he'll give people patronage jobs, and then they'll give a percentage of their salaries right back to him.
- F. But at the same time as he's doing this, he takes major steps to try to limit corporate power, and as you'll see at a later seminar, I'm sure, he becomes a major voice in the New Deal era.

XIV. The point?

- A. Political machines bad or good?
- B. Maybe that's not the point.
- C. Maybe the point is instead, what do they tell us about American politics?
 1. Disenfranchisement a serious problem, both real and felt.
 2. People who are disenfranchised, who are not given their due, will find supporters somewhere.
 3. Maybe Aaron Burr's vision of democracy really *was* kind of idealistic—in Burr's vision of democracy, poor people, minorities, immigrants, actually do wind up with people to speak for them.