

Problems of the Gilded Age Defined

Spoils System

In the politics of the United States, a **spoils system** (also known as a **patronage system**) is a practice in which a political party, after winning an election, gives government jobs to its supporters, friends and relatives as a reward for working toward victory, and as an incentive to keep working for the party—as opposed to a merit system, where offices are awarded on the basis of some measure of merit, independent of political activity.

The term was derived from the phrase *"to the victor belong the spoils"* by New York Senator William L. Marcy, referring to the victory of the Jackson Democrats in the election of 1828, with the term spoils meaning goods or benefits taken from the loser in a competition, election or military victory

Corruption

Political corruption is the use of powers by government officials for illegitimate private gain..

Forms of corruption vary, but include bribery, extortion, cronyism, nepotism, gombeenism, parochialism patronage, influence peddling, graft, and embezzlement. Corruption may facilitate criminal enterprise such as drug trafficking, money laundering, and human trafficking, though is not restricted to these activities. Misuse of government power for other purposes, such as repression of political opponents and general police brutality, is also considered political corruption.

Political Machines and Political Bosses

Political Machines were organized groups of dishonest politicians. Their goals were to get members of their group elected to political positions and then use those positions to gain wealth. Political Machines were controlled by **Political Bosses**. One of the most infamous Political

Bosses was William Tweed (*“Boss” Tweed*) who controlled New York City’s government (Tammany Hall Political Machine).

Political Bosses depended on the votes of new immigrants to keep their officials in power. With this understanding, Political Bosses and machine supporters would oftentimes meet new immigrants with help such as finding a job, a place to live etc. in exchange for their votes on election day. Bosses would also use fraud as a way to ensure victory in elections. Many times, immigrants were asked to vote multiple times in various locations, using different names to ensure that the machine’s official won.

Through their dishonest behaviors, political bosses could demand bribes of their community and oftentimes mishandled government funds which made them fairly wealthy. In his time as political boss, “Boss Tweed”, managed to steal over \$1 million from New York City.

Monopolies and Trusts

At the turn of the century the rise of Big Business led to the introduction of new business tactics such as the creation of **monopolies** and **trusts**. Owning a monopoly meant owning 95% or more of an industry. Entrepreneurs such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, using cutthroat tactics aimed at securing monopolies and eliminating competition, gained considerable wealth and power.

While theoretically monopolies and trust could have resulted in improved conditions for workers, higher wages and improved manufactured goods for consumers, the reality was that with no reason to improve conditions, pay or product, sweatshops developed and prices oftentimes increased.

As monopolists gained money and power, they also gained influence in politics, corruptly influencing many government decisions during the time period.

Tenements

The creation of **tenements** occurred as the wealthy moved out of the cities and millions of immigrants moved in. Tenement buildings were housing facilities, usually occupied by poor immigrants, lacking basic amenities such as lighting and plumbing. The crowded, unsafe and unsanitary conditions were disease-ridden fire hazards.

Factory Conditions

Laborers including men, women and children in the late 1800s and early 1900s oftentimes found themselves working in **sweatshops**. Long hours, low pay and oftentimes dangerous conditions were commonplace. Tragedies such as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire highlighted the dangers of working in the sweatshops.

Increasing Gap Between the Rich and the Poor

As men like Vanderbilt, Morgan and Rockefeller gained millions in wealth and threw lavish parties where guests received cigars wrapped in one-hundred dollar bills, many Americans continued their life in factories and sweatshops with little hope of the future changing. During this time period, very few people found themselves in a “middle class”. Few were rich and many were poor.

Inequalities

America continued into the 20th Century as a nation founded on the idea that “All men are created equal” but failed to truly adopt that policy. Racism, sexism, and nativism were integrated into America’s economic, social and political life. Immigrants, women and African Americans were paid less than white males. Women were still not allowed to have a political voice. African American men, while given the right to vote with the 15th amendment, still struggled to exercise that right due to poll taxes, literacy tests and segregation.