

## Urban Political Machines

**Instructions: Read the excerpts from the primary source documents then answer the questions that follow. Use complete sentences in your answers.**

1. An army led by a council seldom conquers: It must have a commander-in-chief, who settles disputes, decides in emergencies, inspires fear or attachment. The head of the Ring is such a commander. He dispenses places, rewards the loyal, punishes the mutinous, concocts schemes, negotiates treaties. He generally avoids publicity, preferring the substance to the pomp of power, and is all the more dangerous because he sits, like a spider, hidden in the midst of his web. He is a Boss.

Lord James Bryce

2. Have you ever thought what would become of the country if the bosses were put out of business, and their places were taken by a lot of cart-tail orators and college graduates? It would mean chaos. It would be just like takin' a lot of dry-goods clerks and settin' them to run express trains on the New York Central Railroad. It makes my heart bleed to think of it.

George Washington Plunkitt

3. The Alderman...bails out his constituents when they are arrested, or says a good word to the police justice when they appear before him for trial; uses his "pull" with the magistrate when they are likely to be fined for a civil misdemeanor, or sees what he can do to "fix up matters" with the State's attorney when the charge is really a serious one. Because of simple friendliness, the Alderman is expected to pay rent for the hard-pressed tenant when no rent is forthcoming, to find jobs when work is hard to get, to procure and divide among his constituents all the places which he can seize from the City Hall....

The question does, of course, occur to many minds, Where does the money come from[?]...He...sells out the city franchises...he makes deal with the franchise-seeking companies...he guarantees to steer dubious measures through the [City] Council, for which he demands liberal pay....

Jane Addams

4. Boss Magee's idea was not to corrupt the city government, but to be it; not to hire votes in councils, but to own councilmen; and so, having seized control of his organization, he nominated cheap or dependent men for the select and common councils. Relatives and friends were his first recourse, then came bartenders, saloon-keepers, liquor dealers....

Businessmen came almost as cheap as politicians, and they came also at the city's expense....The manufacturers and the merchants were kept well in hand by little municipal grants and privileges....

Lincoln Steffens on corruption in Pittsburgh, 1904

5. The civil service of the government has become a mere instrument of partisan tyranny and personal ambition, and an object of selfish greed. It is a scandal and reproach upon free institutions, and breeds a demoralization dangerous to the perpetuity of republican government. We therefore regard such thorough reforms of the civil service as one of the most pressing necessities of the hour; that honesty, capacity, and fidelity, constitute the only valid claims to public employment....

Liberal Republican Platform, 1872

6. Boss Tweed Political Cartoons



1. Were urban political machines evil?
2. What functions did they serve?
3. Which groups opposed the political machines? Why?