



## The Rise of the Political Machine

The rapid industrialization and urbanization of the late nineteenth century sparked a slew of serious domestic problems: dangerous working conditions, political corruption, crime, unemployment, poverty and crime. Cincinnati and Dayton, along with most other cities in the United States, suffered from these problems.

As industrial life grew so too did the cities. Between the Civil War and 1900, many aspects of modern city life emerged—slums, trash, air pollution, health problems, and traffic jams. Many people from rural areas and from other countries around the world moved to the city in hopes of finding jobs and wealth. Because of this sudden influx of immigrants and migrants, many of the older residents who could afford it moved to the suburbs and used streetcars, cable cars, and electric trolleys to commute. Those who remained in the cities were generally less wealthy; and before long, the old residential neighborhoods declined. People crowded into apartments, homes and cheaply built tenements. Because of the lack of sanitation and the crowded conditions, disease-ridden slums developed. Landlords often neglected to improve housing conditions and demanded high prices which prevented the poor from improving their situation.

As a result, a division between the wealthy and the poor emerged, both socially and politically. Out of this clash came city political machines. Political machines were unofficial organizations designed to keep a particular part or group in power. Usually a single, powerful political boss served as the leader. Sometimes the boss held office, but many other times, he handpicked others to run for office and helped them win. The boss usually had an army of ward leaders (people who administered a city district) who helped the boss by giving out city jobs and doing favors for residents. In return, the residents would elect the machine ticket.

The political machine controlled all the government jobs. The boss and ward leaders often demanded graft (or money passed under the table) in return for favors, such as business contracts. Some people believed that immigrants helped to fuel the political machines. They thought that because of their lack of education, they were more easily influenced by political corruption. The immigrants did support the political machines, but this may be because the bosses often provided important social services to immigrant groups and other urban dwellers. In an era when the welfare state did not exist, the boss was often the only way poor people and immigrants gained social services. Boss George B. Cox of Cincinnati, for example, worked hard to improve the police force and city services in return for urban residents' support. Some bosses, such as William Marcy Tweed of New York, were less benevolent. He gained a huge fortune through fraud and graft. In 1873, he was convicted and sent to jail.

## **National and Municipal Reform**

The problems raised by industrialization and urbanization caused many Americans—mostly educated upper and middle class ones—to call for reform. They feared that the historic traditions of responsible democratic government and free economic opportunity were being destroyed by machine politics and corporate greed. They looked to government to remedy the problems of slums and poverty, corrupt politicians, crime, and unsafe working conditions. Many of these reformers identified themselves as Progressives.

Despite the fact that many people sought Progressive reform, there was no single, organized Progressive movement. The numerous different reform efforts at the national, state and local level were too diverse, and sometimes too contradictory, to be united into one national crusade. But, generally, all Progressive reformers had the following goals: concern for the downtrodden, desire for an efficient, honest government, and control over big business and government by the people. Toward these ends, they wanted the government to develop more social welfare programs and to create laws to protect children, the needy, and workers. Some also sought to control the influx and influence of immigrants by seeking limits on immigration and attempting to outlaw behaviors (such as drinking) that they believed immigrants committed more often than native citizens.

To eliminate the problem of political machines, many Progressives embraced a new type of government—the city manager system—which grants all of the powers of the city in a small board of elected representatives (usually 5-7 members). The board or council employs a city manager, who is responsible to the council for the operation of the city. There is no mayor as chief administrator. While there is often a mayor who serves as official greeter, he has no more power than any of the other council members. Council members usually run and are elected at large. They do not represent a certain region of the city.

Reformers liked this new plan of government because they felt it created better councils and administrations. The council members only had to serve part-time and thus could maintain their regular jobs. As a result, they might not try to get extra money under the table. The city manager was a professionally trained administrator who would be better than elected mayors who might not have any experience in administration. The reformers were successful in creating this change in many cities. Dayton was one of the first major cities to adopt this plan. Cincinnati adopted it about a decade after Dayton did. Yet, despite the reformers' success in making this governmental change, some groups opposed it. The Socialists were among the strongest opponents. They claimed that this form of government was less democratic and less friendly to the working class, the poor and the nonwhites of the city.