NAME:

Section 5 - The Politics of Fraud and Bribery

Another problem at the turn of the century was political corruption. In 1902, the muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens published *The Shame of the Cities*, a book on corruption in city government. The book exposed the rampant fraud that plagued cities throughout the nation. Steffens reported that politicians spoke openly about accepting bribes. "I make no pretensions to virtue," one politician said, "not even on Sunday." Corruption served the interests of dishonest politicians and those who bribed them, while weakening the political influence of average Americans. In short, it distorted and undermined democracy.

Political Machines and Bosses By 1900, many cities were controlled by political machines [political machines: an organization consisting of full-time politicians whose main goal was to retain political power and the money and influence that went with it]. These organizations consisted of full-time politicians whose main goal was to get and keep political power and the money and influence that went with it. Machines were usually associated with a political party. Party politicians joined forces to limit competition, while increasing their own power and wealth. At the top of this corrupt structure was the political boss, who controlled the machine and its politicians. Perhaps the most infamous of these bosses was William "Boss" Tweed of New York's Tammany Hall [Tammany Hall: a political machine in New York City] machine, who in the early 1870s cheated the city out of as much as $200 million.

Political machines exercised control at all levels of city government, down to the wards and precincts that subdivided most cities. Ward bosses and precinct captains got to know local residents and offered them assistance in exchange for political support. They helped immigrants who were sick or out of work. As one New York City ward boss said, "I never ask a hungry man about his past; I feed him, not because he is good, but because he needs food." This aid could take a wide variety of forms, including supplying a Christmas turkey or helping a grieving family by paying for a funeral. In exchange, residents agreed to vote for machine politicians at election time.

In some ways, the political machines worked for the good of city dwellers, particularly immigrants. At a time when the national and state governments did not provide such benefits as welfare for unemployed workers, local political machines filled the void.

Corruption in Local and State Politics Although political machines provided aid, they also stifled opportunity for many citizens. Political bosses controlled access to city jobs, such as employment in the police and fire departments or on construction projects. With a good word from a boss, a poorly qualified person could land a job in place of a capable applicant.
The political machine also controlled business opportunities. To get a city work contract, a company often had to donate to the machine's reelection campaign. Many businesses also paid politicians to keep the city government from interfering with their activities. Such payoffs became part of the cost of doing business. Muckrakers called them bribery.

The political machines profited from urban entertainment, both legal and illegal. In exchange for a payoff, the boss could clear the way for such illegal activities as gambling. Even legal businesses such as baseball teams and vaudeville theaters paid the machine. Some political bosses saw these payments as informal taxes. They used some of the revenue to help those in need, but they made sure they profited themselves.

To keep control, political machines rigged local elections. Average citizens had little influence in choosing candidates, and the machine frequently used fraud to win at the polls. Candidates might pay citizens for their votes or stuff the ballot box with phony votes. By controlling elections, political machines maintained their grip on American cities.

At the state level, corrupt politicians tied to powerful industries, such as railroads and mining, controlled many state governments. In passing legislation that favored big business, state legislatures and governors often ignored the needs of average citizens.

**Corruption on the National Level** The national government also suffered from corruption. For example, the Constitution gave state legislatures the power to choose senators, but corporations often bribed state legislators to elect their favored candidates to the Senate. The Senate became known as the Millionaires Club because many of its members were wealthy men with close ties to powerful industries.

![Cartoon of politicians](image)

In both the House and the Senate, politicians received campaign contributions from big business in exchange for passing favorable legislation. The railroad monopolies, for example, frequently gave company stock to members of Congress who passed laws that strengthened the railroads. Other businesses also gave money to lawmakers who worked to limit competition.

Politicians frequently engaged in **patronage** [**patronage**: the practice of politicians giving jobs to friends and supporters]. Some of these jobs went to unqualified people. In 1883, Congress passed the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act to limit patronage. The **Pendleton Act** [**Pendleton Act**: an 1883 federal law that limited patronage by creating a civil service commission to administer exams for certain nonmilitary government jobs] set guidelines for hiring **civil service** [**civil service**: nonmilitary government employees] employees—nonmilitary government workers. It set up a civil service commission to administer exams to new applicants for government jobs. The jobs covered by this test had to be specified by the president. Over the years, most presidents have agreed to expand the number of specified jobs. Most civil service jobs are now based on merit.