Machine Politics
Background

The late nineteenth century saw the rise of a new political entity—the political machine. Political machines were organizations whose sole purpose was to amass wealth and power and then hold on to it. Graft, bribery, and other forms of corruption were standard operating procedures of a machine. The machines were able to keep their power and influence by trading favors—like a job or an apartment—for votes.

In New York City, the machine was known as Tammany Hall, and its most notorious leader, from 1860 through 1873, was William “Boss” Tweed. Under Tweed, corruption ran rampant. By some estimates, Tweed and his Tammany cronies bilked the city of New York of between $30 million and $200 million.

However, not everyone felt that political machines were bad. The machines provided an avenue to political power for many people who might not have been well-represented otherwise. Many immigrants had their voices heard because of their relationships with political machines.

Directions: Study the political cartoons below, and then answer the questions that follow.
Analyzing Political Cartoons  

Urban America, 1865–1896

Critical Thinking

1. The Blind Lady of Justice overseeing this meeting of “Boss” Tweed and his Tammany Hall cronies has the scales of justice, truth, and fairness tucked under her left arm rather than held out, and her traditional blindfold has been shed. What do you think Nast was implying with this part of the cartoon?

2. The gentleman raising his hat is Sheriff Brennan. What does his raised hat and presence at the meeting tell you about corruption in New York City?

3. At the time this cartoon was drawn, Tweed was just two years away from being convicted of corruption and sent to jail. Why do you think he is smiling at the Sheriff?

Making Comparisons

Both of these cartoons concern the corruption at Tammany Hall. The following cartoon, also by Thomas Nast from 1871, offers a different perspective. The cartoon is captioned, “We drink to our constituents. May they live long, so that we may prosper.”
Analyzing Political Cartoons  Cont.

Urban America, 1865–1896

Critical Thinking

1. Identify some symbols of wealth and privilege from the cartoon.

2. Identify the irony in the caption of this cartoon. How does this express the cartoonist’s views?

3. Why do you think political machines were popular among many people?