Politics in the Late 19th Century

How Native Born Americans and Ethnic Immigrants shaped democratic politics into a national pastime, 1876–1896
Is your cell phone on?

Cheryl Decines Says

Please Turn it off!
Major Themes and Topics

- Role of Government
  - Nature of political party competition for power
  - Coalitions making up political parties
  - Assessment of Political Leadership, 1876–1900
  - Key Issues in Presidential Elections, 1876–1900
- Private Enterprise
  - Nature of “political economy” in the “Gilded Age”
- Multiculturalism
  - Ethnic and Racial makeup of urban “political machines” and regional/national party coalitions
- Regional Differentiation
  - Regional nature of party coalitions
- Cultural and Social Outsiders
  - Groups excluded or marginalized by political processes
Central Analytical Questions

• How have historians assessed the political leadership of the U.S. 1876-1900?
• Where was the locus of power in the American government, 1876-1900?
• What was the basis of political party organization, 1876-1900?
• Why was American politics so popular during this period?
Characteristics of Gilded Age Politics I

- Mainstream political scene was seedy, superficial, doggedly partisan
- Popular participation in politics was never higher
- The era is known for its great evasion by its leadership of major issues effecting the country
- Hence, the era is seen as backwash or nadir* of political achievement
- But folks loved it

*Nadir: the lowest point in the fortunes of a person or organization
Characteristics of Gilded Age Politics II

- Parties were run like military units
- Balloting-- and straight ticket voting-- in the 1870s and 1880s was at or near the highest level in American history
- Politics became "the sumptuous display" of parades, torchlight parades, bonfires, and pep rallies, songs and long speeches
Voter Participation

- What was it?
  - Parties were effective at mobilizing turnout
  - Voters thought political action important, even if political leadership did not address issues
  - Participation was fueled by ethnic and religious tensions
  - But the period also witnessed a dramatic decline in African American and poor southern white voting
  - In the 20th Century, disenfranchisement would pull U.S. voter participation rates to well below 19th Century rates.
Trends in Participation: Presidential Elections

While some southern states participated again by 1868, Texas missed the 1864 & '68 presidential elections.
Trends in Participation: Mid-Term Elections

While some southern states participated again by 1866, Texas missed the 1862 and 1866 midterm elections.

1874: A tumultuous end to Reconstruction in Texas temporarily reduces turnout.
Role of Patronage

- Political culture depended upon an “unethical system” of **patronage and spoils** to remain vital, and consequently political corruption became one of defining traits of the era.
- Federal Government’s Number of Jobs increased:
  - Before the Civil War appointments numbered less than 15,000
  - By 1871 the number of civil service employees numbered 51,000
  - By 1881 there were 100,000 individuals listed on the federal payroll
- Parties spread their appointments throughout the organizational structure:
  - Politicians embracing this practice were called “**The Spoilsmen**”
  - These resources gave them a powerful advantage over opponents of corruption like the **Mugwumps**
Role of Patronage

• Civil Service Reformers and the attack on corruption
  ▪ Rutherford Hayes issues an executive order in 1877 established new rules for merit appointments, replacing older practice of purchasing offices
  ▪ In 1883, Congress passed the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act
    • Creates a 3 man Civil Service Commission
    • 14% of Federal jobs given over the CSC to fill by competitive exams
    • Authorizes the President to increase the percentage at his discretion
  ▪ During Cleveland’s first term by executive order he increased the percentage of federal jobs given over to CSC exams to 28%, but he replaced 66% of federal office holders with members of the Democratic Party

• Was the spoils system so wrong? What was right about it?
Which Side Were They On?

- **Republicans**
  - Political Insiders
  - Protestants
  - British Descent
  - Native Born Whites
  - Anti-Catholic Nativists
  - African Americans
  - Veterans of Civil War
  - Moralists
  - Prohibitionists
  - Organized Labor

- **Democrats**
  - Political Outsiders
  - Southern Whites
  - Ethnic Immigrants
  - Ethnic Catholics
  - Jews
  - Freethinkers/Skeptics
  - Libertarians
  - Drinkers

What was the nature of American political parties?

Vast Coalitions
Political Stalemate

- Neither Party Dominates White House
  - 1876 Hayes (R)
  - 1880 Garfield (R)
  - 1884 Cleveland (D)
  - 1888 Harrison (R)
  - 1892 Cleveland (D)
  - 1896 McKinley (R)

- Neither Party Dominates Congress
  - 1876–1881 Democratic Congress
  - 1884–1888 Republican Congress
  - Republicans control White House and Congress 1881–1883; and 1889–1891
  - Democrats control White House and Congress only once: 1893–1895
  - Republicans dominate both branches of government, 1896–1912; 1920–1932
## Close Elections

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Concentrations of Party Loyalty, 1880
Concentrations of Party Loyalty, 1892
What does concentrations of voters tell us about the parties?

- **Republicans**
  - Represent rural and small town New England, Pennsylvania, and Upper Mid West
  - Native born urban northerners

- **Democrats**
  - Represent urban south and southern border states
  - Ethnic enclaves in Northern cities

There are significant geographical and regional foundations to political identity.
What About 3rd Parties?

- Populists show considerable strength in mid and far west
- Populists show considerable strength in south
- Populists did not win popular support in northeast
Role of the Intellectuals: The Mugwumps

- Social origins of the Mugwumps
  - The “Best Men”
  - Primarily natives of New York and New England, the majority sprang from old established families to whom wealth and prestige were concomitant inheritances
  - College educated
- Key political demand: civil service reform
- Why weren’t they successful?
  - The majority of voters responded to bluster and spectacle, yet the Best Men gave them lengthy treatises on tariff reform published in highbrow journals
  - Mugwumps "possessed neither the inclination to 'get down' among the masses of voters nor the proper equipment for reaching them"
Political Machines

• Grew up in every urban area
  ▪ Democratic Party Machines (NY, Chicago)
  ▪ Republican Party Machines (SF, St. Louis)

• Machine politics became a part of the cultural landscape because they existed in a symbiotic relationship with the masses:
  ▪ Machines provided immigrants essential social services in the absence of a welfare state
  ▪ Machine exchanged entertainment and employment for votes and party loyalty
  ▪ Republican and Democratic Party urban machines often beat socialists and populists to different elements of the American working class, hence why
Presidential Leadership

Seen as weak
Defer to Congress

Period called
“Congressional Government”

Historians see these
Presidents as only
“Average” or “Below Average”
Presidential Election, 1876-77

Rutherford Hayes

Samuel Tilden
Hayes as President

- Toured the South, adopts “benign neglect” toward violations of African American civil rights
- Used Federal troops to intervene on the side of the railroads to break the strike of 1877
- Vetoed Bland-Allison (silver purchase) Act of 1878—Congress overrides
Presidential Election, 1880

J. Garfield
C. A. Arthur
Winfield Scott Hancock
Garfield-Arthur as President

Arthur

- Garfield assassinated
- Arthur from Stalwart wing of GOP
  - Proved a surprise because his administration prosecuted corruption, vetoed the Chinese Exclusion Act (overridden), and embraced Civil Service Reform and Tariff reform

Garfield

- Dumped by party in 1884 campaign
Presidential Election, 1884

1884

ELECTORAL VOTE TOTAL: 401

POPULAR VOTE TOTAL: 10,052,706

Democratic (Cleveland)

Republican (Blaine)

Grover Cleveland

James Blaine

Territories
Cleveland as President

- Cleveland was one politician who takes strong positions
  - Against government favoritism
    - Fought Railroads land grants
    - Fought Veterans benefits
    - Vetoed Texas Seed bill
  - For government reform
    - Civil Service Reform extended
    - Tariff Reform-fails
    - Regulation of Railroads (embraced Interstate Commerce Commission)
Presidential Election, 1888

Grover Cleveland

Benjamin Harrison
• Republicans control White House and Congress, produce watershed legislation
  - Major increase in Veteran’s Benefits ($89M to $175M)
  - Sherman Anti-Trust Act (1890)
  - Sherman Silver Purchase Act (1890)
  - McKinley Tariff (Up 49%)
  - Admission of 6 New Western States (Idaho, Wyoming, Dakotas, Montana, Washington)
  - State prohibition and English Only campaigns (21)
• GOP loses control of Congress in mid-term elections
Presidential Election, 1892

Benjamin Harrison
Grover Cleveland
James Weaver
Populist gains in the 1892 Elections were overwhelmingly in the west.

Texas was not the only southern state to show populist strength, but elsewhere the Democratic Party used violence to suppress the Populist movement.
Cleveland as President Again

• A massive depression hits U.S.
  ▪ Cleveland refuses government aid to ailing groups
  ▪ Attorney General intervenes in labor strikes

• Cleveland blunders on currency issue
  ▪ Supports repeal in 1893 of Sherman Silver Purchase Act
  ▪ Isolated him within his own party
Presidential Election, 1896

William J. Bryan

William McKinley
McKinley as President

- Puts US government solidly behind Gold Standard
- Tariff Protection
- Cuban liberation
- Imperial project in Asia
- Triumph of urban-industrial values over rural America
Presidential Election, 1900

William J. Bryan  
Theodore Roosevelt  
William McKinley
Critical Thinking Exercise

• Was 19th century political system more democratic than 20th century?
  ▪ Does broader voter participation among two political parties constitute a democratic system?
  ▪ Were the parties democratic institutions?
  ▪ What was the promise of American democracy?