

Political Machines: Capitalists of the Government

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From 1880 to 1890, New York City's population increased from 1 to 1.5 million people.¹ Millions of immigrants entered the US during this period while social services failed to accommodate the rapidly growing population. Political machines like Tammany Hall emerged to fill this vacuum of government in the overpopulated and undersupplied urban centers like New York City. However, in reality, political machines functioned as industrial businesses of government in their founding, leadership, and operation.

Political machines were started in the same way that industrial businesses were founded. Like the entrepreneur who sought startup capital from family and friends, Plunkitt asked his cousin Tommy for the guarantee of his vote.² Plunkitt used this support from Tommy to build credibility with the district leader.³ By gaining from his cousin's support, he commoditized the vote as starting political capital. Neither entrepreneurs nor Plunkitt offered any immediate return to their supporters, but they were trusted by the those around them, allowing them to gain a small base of initial funding or votes at little material cost to themselves. With a small number of supporters, Plunkitt began to "get a bit chesty".⁴ Everyone shook hands with him in public and the district leader boosted his status by lighting his cigar.⁵ Plunkitt's leveraging of his supporter base as social capital was similar to an industrialist rapidly expanding during the early stages of growth: no concrete profit was yet realized and any resources gained from the business had to be

¹ "The Political Machine I: Rise And Fall The Age Of The Bosses | AMERICAN HERITAGE". 2019. Americanheritage.Com. Accessed January 26 2019. <https://www.americanheritage.com/content/political-machine-i-rise-and-fall-age-bosses>.

² William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1994), 52.

³ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1994), 52.

⁴ Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany*, 53.

⁵ Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany*, 53.

reinvested. The priority was to grow in size, of customers or voters, which was meant to yield greater payoff in the future.

Executives of political machines and industrial entrepreneurs led similar lives as leaders of their organizations, sharing many generalist skills and traits. In the course of one day, Plunkitt assisted the victims of a house fire; secured the release of six drunks by speaking on their behalf to a judge; paid the rent of a poor family to prevent their eviction and gave them money for food; secured employment for four individuals; attended the funerals of two of his constituents; attended a Bar Mitzvah; and attended the wedding of a Jewish couple from his ward.⁶ The miscellaneous variety of these activities resembled the childhood of John Rockefeller who did regular household chores, raised turkeys, sold potatoes and candy, and lent small sums of money to neighbors.⁷ Political leaders of these organizations harbored pragmatic, capitalistic mindsets. When asked by an investigating committee if he was “working for his own pocket,” Tammany’s Boss Richard Croker, shot back: “All the time—same as you.”⁸ Plunkitt said, “You can’t keep an organization together without patronage. Men ain’t in politics for nothin. They want to get something out of it.”⁹ These views of reality echoed the sentiments of railroad magnate John D. Rockefeller who said, “a friendship founded on business is better than a business founded on friendship.”¹⁰ These statements demonstrate not only a practical acceptance of reality

⁶ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1994), 91-93.

⁷ Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr* (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 2013), 43

⁸ "The Political Machine I: Rise And Fall The Age Of The Bosses | AMERICAN HERITAGE". 2019. Americanheritage.Com. Accessed January 26 2019. <https://www.americanheritage.com/content/political-machine-i-rise-and-fall-age-bosses>.

⁹ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1994), 69.

¹⁰ Chernow, *Titan: The Life*, 568.

but also an initiative to capitalize on it. Political bosses were also highly disciplined like their business counterparts. George Plunkitt never drank when he was a Tammany Hall member.¹¹ Industrialist John D. Rockefeller who adhered to total abstinence from alcohol and tobacco.¹² During Plunkitt's time, the majority of the 36 district leaders also didn't drink except at meals.¹³ On the night of a city election victory for Tammany Hall, its most prominent figures Richard Croker, John F. Carroll, Tim Sullivan, Charles Murphy, and George Plunkitt went to bed before midnight, waking up early to attend business the next morning.¹⁴ However, when Plunkitt encountered legislation that promoted liquor and alcohol, he firmly supported it. He knew that it profited the party to do so, the same kind of opportunistic behavior as robber barons in the Gilded Age. As Plunkitt himself admitted, "If opportunities for turning an honest dollar comes my way, why shouldn't I take advantage of them?"¹⁵

Political machines operated like 19th century Industrial Trusts in business model and resource allocation. As political associations grew, their value cycle transitioned into a industrial business model: material resources purchased political support in the form of votes, the capital asset which the machines used to stay in power and gain more resources. This is equivalent to a railroad business that used cash to build railroad tracks, the capital assets which netted profit for reinvestment and further expansion. Plunkitt

¹¹ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1994), 91.

¹² Chernow, *Titan: The Life*, 12.

¹³ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1994), 91-92.

¹⁴ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1994), 92.

¹⁵ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1994), 51.

compared the growth of political associations to “snowballs rolling down a hill.”¹⁶ This metaphor reflects the positive feedback loop of scale inherent in the Gilded Age economy: like a snowball gaining surface area accumulating mass, large Industrial Trusts gained greater opportunities upon continued expansion. This idea is illustrated in a common political cartoon which depicted Standard Oil Trust as an octopus whose opportunities increased as its tentacles expanded outward.¹⁷ Under a common capitalist incentive of self-interest, urban bosses allocated scarce resources to the most rewarding opportunities, the same investment strategy that drove Industrial Trusts in the 19th century. At the same time, machines such as Tammany Hall sought only enough votes to stay in power at a minimum cost.¹⁸ This threshold of the ideal electoral market share is equivalent to the optimal point of price level and sales volume. In 1899, Standard Oil, with monopolistic pricing power, raised its oil price.¹⁹ This resulted in fewer customers and sales but greater profits.²⁰ In this example, the oil customers are the voters who are only useful to the extent that they eventually yield profit for the business. When the machine or company gained a sufficient base of customers or voters, their objective became pure material gain. These shared models for resource allocation suggests political machines operated under the organizational structure of industrial businesses.

¹⁶ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1994), 53.

¹⁷ Udo J. Keppler, *Next!*, 1904, photomechanical print, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

¹⁸ William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics* (Boston, MA: Bedford Books-St. Martin's Press, 1994), 69.

¹⁹ Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 165.

²⁰ Yergin, *The Prize*, 167.

In their founding, leadership, and operation, political machines were nearly identical to industrial businesses. They were able to function as capitalist corporations in the role of government. This integration of self interest into public service is a testament to the origin and identity of America as a capitalist democracy.

A

This was hard, but you pulled it off. It was well organized, and it kept my attention. It reflected sustained effort and it exhibited a thorough understanding of the topic. Your answer began with a strong central argument that was laid out in the introduction and then in the topic sentences of each paragraph. You included ample specific historical evidence to support your positions without overdoing it with drawn out quotations. Your evidence was analyzed carefully, demonstrating an impressive understanding of it and its ties to your thesis claims. The evidence that you included was accurate and your writing was as clear as it was concise. The organization was logical and effective. Good writers always vary their sentence length – but most of your sentences were short and punchy. That worked. The longer a sentence becomes, the greater the risk to its effectiveness. Long sentences can easily become disjointed, confused or rambling. You broke a habit and tried not to overuse long sentences. You paid close attention to sentence length when proofreading and that made your essay more readable.

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