

The Political Party versus the Political Machine

By HAROLD F. GOSNELL

INTELLIGENT action on the part of the forty million voters in the United States at the many elections in which they participate involves careful organization and planning. Political parties are needed to educate the voters regarding the issues and the candidates and to induce them to perform their duties as citizens upon registration and election days. These parties must have a well-trained body of rank-and-file troops, persons who are willing to perform the routine tasks so necessary in politics such as canvassing, circulating petitions, opening their homes for small meetings, addressing envelopes, distributing literature, making public speeches, and looking after the technical details of the election process. There must also be party leaders who know how to conduct campaigns, arrange for meetings, direct publicity, and meet the tactics of the opposition. In addition, the party must have access to means of mass impression. Somewhere it must find crowds for its speakers and readers for its literature.

It is conceivable that the elements of a political party could be supplied on practically a volunteer basis. Many of the labor parties in European countries rely largely on volunteer workers. The workers and leaders are fired with a zeal for their cause. In this country, many party services are rendered without compensation. However, it is well known that the parties in the United States can depend upon voluntary efforts for only a small part of the work which must be done. Money furnishes the backbone of the American political parties. Certain services, such as printing, use

of the mails, newspaper advertisements, use of auditoriums and office space, telephone service, and radio broadcasting are not available without large expenditures of money. Money can buy practically every other type of political service needed. Speakers, clerical workers, canvassers, professional publicity men, expert organizers, legal authorities on election affairs, can all be hired for a consideration.¹ Frequently the party workers are not paid in cash but are rewarded indirectly by receiving a political appointment or some administrative favor. When the spoils element is predominant in a political organization, it is called a political machine.

WHAT IS A POLITICAL MACHINE?

The term "political machine" is used to convey an unfavorable impression regarding a given party organization. In New York the Republicans refer to the Tammany machine, in Philadelphia the Democrats and the independents refer to the Republican machine, and in the Middle West the conservative newspapers refer to the LaFollette machine. Any political faction which holds power for a considerable length of time is likely to be called a machine by the opposing forces.

When used in connection with an organization like Tammany Hall, the word brings to mind the picture of a political feudalism with ruthless bosses, grafting officeholders, gangster politicians, election crooks, and unscrupulous lawyers and business men who combine to manipulate the con-

¹ See Overacker, L., *Money in Elections*, New York, 1932.

fused and apathetic voters by special favors, fraud, and force. When the word "machine" is applied to the La Follette organization in Wisconsin by a reactionary paper, it carries the meaning that here is a group of dangerous radicals who have used demagogic methods and the prestige of public office to mislead the voters. However, the more ordinary use of the word, and the one which will be followed here, is that which describes such organizations as the Tammany Democracy.

THE PARTS OF THE MACHINE

In order to find out how political machines are constructed, it is necessary to analyze the parts. What relation do the machines have to the elements of American life—to the churches, the press, the business and professional groups, the labor organizations, the fraternal and social organizations, and the underworld? Which of these groups furnish the rank and file of the machines, which furnish the sinews of war, and which furnish the leadership?

Churches—

There have been times when political machines in this country have obtained important support from the churches. The religious tie has bound together many of the Tammany chieftains and ward heelers. The Brennan-Cermak Democratic machine in Chicago has also relied heavily upon the Catholic elements found in the sections of the city where the foreign-born groups predominated. On the other hand, the notorious Stephenson machine in Indiana had the active support of many Protestant churches, and the Mayor Thompson machine in Chicago was aided by white and colored Protestant ministers. Ministers can make speeches, advise their con-

gregations as to how to vote, and help to distribute the party funds.

Newspapers—

It often happens that a machine may win elections in spite of important newspaper opposition. The Tammany victories in New York and the Thompson victories in Chicago are evidence of the power of the machines to combat unfavorable publicity. However, a closer examination of the situation shows that no machine is likely to be without some newspaper support. Local neighborhood papers and foreign language papers have been won over by the political bosses,² and in a few cases great dailies have been willing to aid a given organization in return for scoops and favorable treatment. Other newspapers may favor spoils politics by their failure to print items damaging to the political powers that be.

Business interests—

The close relationship between business and machine politics has been revealed by many investigations.³ While the masters of industry and finance do not as a rule control party machines openly, they exercise great influence upon them. The dethroned monarch of the utility industries, Samuel Insull, was able to pull wires that were attached to important personages in both of the major political parties in a number of states. When local governments fell into

² Park, R. E., *The Immigrant Press and Its Control*, New York, 1922.

³ United States Congress, Senate, *Hearings before a Special Committee Investigation Campaign Expenditures in Senatorial, Primary and General Elections*, 1926, 69th Cong., 1st Sess.; New York Legislature, *Investigation of the Departments of the City of New York*. Report by Samuel Seabury, Counsel to the Legislative Committee, New York, Jan. 25, 1932.

straitened financial conditions following the depression which started in 1929, the leading bankers in various cities practically dictated to the political bosses. Through such devices as campaign contributions, inside tips to favored politicians, and the withholding of credit facilities, the industrial and financial magnates have kept a firm hold upon the party machines. This hold has been strengthened by the political activities of lawyers and publicity men whose allegiance to the community at large is sometimes subordinated to their loyalty to their business employers.

The underworld—

In the great cities of the United States where the wet sentiment predominates and where there are many persons with liberal views on prostitution, gambling, and other human failings, the existence of a powerful underworld, with its alliances with business men and machine politicians, may be taken for granted. The combination of agencies which is able to give immunity from the law because of its political power is sometimes called the Big Fix.

In American cities, bootleggers, racketeers, gambling house keepers, panders, thieves, and other hoodlums enjoy extraordinary immunities from interference on the part of the law enforcing agencies.⁴ The gangsters and other criminals realize that this freedom from restraint depends upon how useful they can make themselves to the politicians. When asked to make campaign contributions or to produce results upon election day, the leaders of the underworld cannot very well refuse. When word is passed down from the gangster chiefs, all pro-

prietors of speakeasies, bookmakers, burglars, pickpockets, pimps, prostitutes, fences, and their like are whipped into line. In themselves they constitute a large block of voters, and they frequently augment their value to the machine by corrupt election practices. Personators, repeaters, chain voters, and crooked election boards are recruited from the ranks of organized crime.⁵ In the bad lands of our cities, those engaged in borderline activities often constitute the controlling element in the political machines.

The bootleggers and the gambling house proprietors are particularly important to the party bosses. Political clubs are frequently little more than speakeasies or gambling dens. The Seabury investigation showed that a Tammany police inspector was personally interested in a still. The sums of money involved in these underworld activities are staggering. Because the laws against bootlegging and gambling are very difficult to enforce, due to the ease of concealing violations and the spasmodic interest of the public in such matters, the politicians, the bootleggers, and the gambling kings unite their interests in the perpetuation of the political machine. The same gangs that control liquor and gambling have recently extended their operations into the field of business by methods of extortion which have been called racketeering.

Utilizing the workers—

A curious person may ask, How is it possible to construct a political machine out of such diverse elements? Will church people, journalists, bankers, lawyers, business men, bootleggers, and gambling barons

⁴ National Commission on Law Observance and Law Enforcement, *Report on Police and Report on Prosecution*, Washington, 1931.

⁵ Landesco, John, "Organized Crime in Chicago," Part III of *Illinois Crime Survey*, Chicago, 1929.

work harmoniously together to continue a given political régime? The interrelations between these groups are complex. The business leaders often wish to obtain political favors, and they find that the machine leaders understand their language. The anti-social business magnate and the political boss meet on common ground.⁶ Church people are sometimes willing to overlook the shortcomings of a machine that gives ostensible support to prohibition and other moralistic causes. Besides, it is the function of the machine to work out a division of labor. There are some districts where a gambling king would win few votes, and there are also districts where a crusader against vice conditions would not be welcome. The task of the political manager is to fit the parts of the machine to the particular areas concerned.

THE MACHINE IN ACTION

Political machines keep their grip upon the voters because they take the pains to establish and maintain face-to-face contacts with individual citizens. Such contacts are dependent upon careful canvassing and upon political meetings which are entertaining, informing, and satisfying to the emotions. This burdensome work is usually not undertaken in the United States unless some concrete reward in the form of money or a political job is at stake. These jobs are usually distributed by the party committeemen who have been successful in putting over their candidates at primary elections or in the party conventions. The power of ward or district committeemen depends upon the energy and the effectiveness of the precinct captains who are under him. These

precinct officials are the backbone of any political machine, and upon them rests the responsibility for seeing and winning the voters.

One of the peculiarities of American politics is the smallness of the units reporting election returns. For the entire country the average number of voters per precinct is about four hundred. The precinct captains make a business of getting acquainted with their constituents. The successful precinct official boasts his ability to talk with any of his voters. He can pray with an old woman, he can talk about the races with a gambler, and he can also talk "highbrow."

Services for voters—

In every way that is not too costly, the rank and file of the machine try to perform concrete services for the voters which will be remembered on election day. Where the precinct captain is unable by himself to perform the task, he gets in touch with some one in the organization who can. Thus the machine will furnish legal services, food, medical services, rent, coal, and clothing without charge. In a period of unemployment, when such activities would soon overwhelm the party, the committeemen in the poorer areas merely refer their constituents to the proper authorities and try to get as much credit as they can for what relief is given. The party officials also act as employment brokers for positions in the public service and in certain semipublic businesses.

The services which the party machine is nearly always able to perform are those which are directly connected with the functioning of the government. The party committeemen and their assistants are ready at all times to listen to complaints from their constituents regarding the way in which the operations of the government af-

⁶Ferguson, H., "A Plea for Inefficiency in Government," *The Nation's Business*, XVI, Nov. 1928, p. 20.

fect them. Foreign-born persons do not understand the intricacies of the naturalization laws and the many irritating delays. Property owners, large and small, are in a constant state of apprehension as to what may happen to their tax assessments from year to year. Persons who want to engage in a given trade, business, or profession which is licensed by the government are anxious to obtain the necessary permission. Those who have been apprehended by the police, whether guilty or innocent, whether charged with major or minor offenses, want to mitigate the rigors, the expenses, and the delays of the law.

The party machine which is well entrenched has persons who are trained and willing to listen to these pleas. Some understand the naturalization procedure and can guide the timid over the rough places, some know how tax assessments can be adjusted and how tax bills may be fixed,⁷ some can facilitate the obtaining of governmental permits and licenses, and some know how traffic arrest slips, indictments, bail bonds, judgments, and other orders of the law enforcing agencies may be fixed. As a result of the many favors which the machine can perform, its agents are able to get a hearing when they come around on primary and election days and ask for votes.

Control of elections—

Another element in the power of the party machine is the control which it enjoys over the election machinery in this country. The laws of the various states provide that the election boards shall be composed of representatives of the two major parties.⁸ By cus-

tom, in most of the states the recommendations for election boards are made by the party committeemen. The frauds in American elections, particularly in primary elections, are committed largely with the help or collusion of the precinct election boards. Sometimes the election officials are called upon to perform party services entirely outside of their legal duties. Even in lean times, when a given party machine is out of power, it can count on the patronage connected with the administration of elections.

While the direct buying of votes in this country is not so common as it once was, the party machines, with huge campaign funds at their command, have methods for the effective use of money on election day. In many states the money is spent for the hiring of party workers who hand out literature on street corners or who go from house to house to get out the laggard voters. The hiring of these workers is an indirect method for buying their votes and the votes of their close relatives and friends. In combating the machine, the independent and reform groups are at a great disadvantage in not having funds for "current expenses" or the hiring of workers.

THE COST OF MACHINE POLITICS

What is the balance sheet of machine politics in the United States? On the credit side of the ledger should be placed the assistance given to the mechanical operation of the election process in a country having over sixty-five million potential voters and about forty million actual voters; the aid given to some of the unassimilated elements in our population; the adjustment of some of our rigid and untional *Municipal Review*, Supplement XIX, 1930, 637.

⁷ Simpson, H. D., *Tax Racket and Tax Reform in Chicago*, Chicago, 1930.

⁸ Committee on Election Administration, "Model Election Administration System," Na-

workable legal rules to actualities of human experience; the concentration of responsibility which would otherwise be dissipated among many conflicting and overlapping authorities, national, state, and local; and the part played in the rapid exploitation of those economic opportunities that were connected with the rapid growth of cities.

On the debit side should be listed the distortion of the election process by demagogic and corrupt practices; the preying upon the weaker economic elements; the twisting of the administration of the law to benefit special interests; the weakening of the faith of the masses in political methods; the destruction of the morale of the public employees; and the intensification of the inequities of our economic system.

The party machines are a heavy and costly load upon American democracy, and it is likely that a country which was poorer and less extravagant would not tolerate them in their present form. Are there any signs that the power of the political machines is lessening? The economic crisis which began in 1929 has greatly reduced our national income and has made the burden of taxation appear relatively much greater than it did in the past. A political machine thrives during a period of prosperity, when real estate values, incomes, and the special objects of taxation are inflated. During such times the taxpayers are not so active as in lean times, and the general public is more indifferent to graft exposures and the wasteful expenditure of public funds. In a period of economic depression, the resources of the political machines are greatly reduced.

The political bosses have been compelled in the last few years to make drastic economies, under pressure from

the financial interests. Tax collections have been insufficient to meet the governmental expenses, and the unpaid public employee is not a great asset to the political machine. The banks have been unwilling to lend money unless total public expenditures have been reduced. While many of the economies have not improved governmental efficiency, and there are still strongholds of patronage and spoils, there have been some decided improvements which have left the political bosses with less to work with. Greater publicity regarding tax assessments and collections has broken the strangle hold which the corrupt politicians once had over a lucrative source of campaign funds. The demand for economy has aided the movement for the consolidation of overlapping authorities and the concentration of official responsibility for fiscal affairs.

ARE THE MACHINES WEAKENING?

But the economic crisis may be temporary, at least so we hope. If it leaves some constructive economies in its wake, we can all be thankful. Are there some long-run trends which will gradually change the character of American party organization? The party machines have been strongest in the rapidly growing urban communities, particularly in the sections inhabited by the poorer immigrant groups. The population figures show that the rate of growth of the population in this country is falling off, partly because of the cutting off of immigration, and partly because of a lower birth rate.⁹ In the future, the slower growth of the cities and the ever diminishing number of foreign-born citizens will decrease the supply of the

⁹ President's Research Committee on Social Trends, *Recent Social Trends in the United States*, New York, 1933, Ch. I.

voters who readily respond to machine tactics.

In the field of public administration, there are a number of developments which are gradually lessening the influence of spoils upon our politics. There is a trend toward stricter supervision of the local tax collecting authorities, and the newer forms of taxation are less open to political abuses. The advances which are being made in public welfare administration make the social service activities of the precinct committeemen more and more unnecessary. There are fewer occasions when the party officials can step in and mitigate the harshness of law. The growth of such services as parole, probation, community case work, rehabilitation, and public employment bureaus has reduced the importance of the precinct captain as a community agent. Finally, the growth of the merit system in the public services, although slow, is making inroads on the political patronage.

FIGHTING THE MACHINES

Some direct attacks upon the political machine can be made in the field of election administration. The long ballot, the multiplicity of elections, the small size of the election precincts, the burdensome character of the registration requirements, and the lack of adequate safeguards against fraud are all factors which play directly into the hands of the political bosses. The short ballot would mean that it would be more difficult for the machine to dodge its responsibilities.

If election precincts were made larger, the total number of election officials would be reduced and it would be harder for the political bosses to manipulate each tiny unit of the electorate. In Great Britain there are no precinct captains, in part because the votes are not counted by small dis-

tricts but by large areas.¹⁰ The spread of permanent, central registration of voters, with the signature of the voter as a means of identification and with thoroughgoing methods for keeping the lists up to date, has lessened the danger of padded registers, personators, and repeaters.¹¹

The control which the machines have over the election boards could be reduced by abolishing the requirements of residence within the precinct and of representation of the two dominant parties. In some precincts it is very difficult to get properly qualified persons living within the precinct to serve on the election boards, and the requirement of party representation has not prevented bipartisan conspiracies to perpetrate election frauds. The highest type of precinct election officer in this country is found in those cities where precinct residence is not required and where the recommendations of the party machines are not followed.

Reducing the funds—

The methods now employed by the party machines to finance their various activities could be brought under greater control. Many of the states have inadequate corrupt-practices acts, and three states—Illinois, Mississippi, and Rhode Island—are without laws regulating campaign funds. So long as the parties rely upon contributions from business men who are seeking special favors, criminal elements who are seeking protection against interference on the part of the law enforcing authorities, and officeholders who hold their loyalty to the party above that to the state, the machine elements will exercise a cor-

¹⁰ The votes in parliamentary elections are counted by constituencies, the average vote in each constituency being about 35,000.

¹¹ Harris, J. P., *Registration of Voters in the United States*, Washington, 1929.

roding influence upon our political life.

The flood light of publicity, before and after elections, would help to reduce the party funds derived from undesirable sources. Publicity regarding campaign expenditures would also have a wholesome effect upon the party organizations. The prohibition of payment for party workers and watchers on election day would greatly reduce the size of the machine vote. Such measures have already been tried out in some of the states and they have proved beneficial.

As in England and France, the Government might grant aid to all candidates in the form of free postage, and thus lessen the relative advantages enjoyed by machine candidates and wealthy candidates.

Civic action needed—

Legal regulations are necessary in the fight against the spoilsmen, but they are not sufficient. If machine candidates are elected to the important appointing offices, they will find methods for circumventing the civil

service laws. When one of the old-line party organizations has gained control of a council-manager city, it has perverted the plan for its own uses. The spoils politicians can even manipulate a model election system if they are not closely watched.

The struggle against the party machines needs to be carried back to the citizens. More democratic methods for financing political campaigns must be devised, as in England, where the British Labor Party is supported by small fees paid by individual party members. It is necessary to organize citizens' movements to safeguard the honesty and the accuracy of the election process, as in Detroit, where there are practically no complaints about election frauds. It is also essential to organize a citizens' political committee, as in Cincinnati, where the Charter Committee was able to form a corps of voluntary precinct workers who put to rout one of the strongest party machines the country has seen. What is needed is a resurrection of civic morale in the great urban communities of this country.

Mr. Harold F. Gosnell has been a member of the Political Science faculty of the University of Chicago since 1922. He was a Social Science Research Council Fellow in 1925-26, studying European election systems. He is the author of "Boss Platt and His New York Machine" (1924), "Getting Out the Vote" (1927), and "Why Europe Votes" (1930). He is co-author of "Non-Voting" (1924) and "The American Party System" (1929).