Directions: Find the answers to the following questions. Highlight/underline them and label the question answered in the margin.

1. Why were political machines popular with the urban poor?
2. Who were the most famous bosses of New York City?
3. What is honest graft? (Note, graft is a dishonest or unfair gain.)
4. How does the cost of the Tweed courthouse demonstrate political graft?
5. What tools did muckrakers use to expose political corruption?
6. How did good government organizations try to change politics?

Topics / Urban Life, 1860-1900 / Machine Politics and Bossism / Machine Politics and Bossism (Overview)

The Society of St. Tammany was founded in 1788, the same year George Washington was first elected president. "St. Tammany" was not a saint, but a famous Delaware chief. Soon called Tammany Hall, this political club quickly became a New York institution. It was designed to promote ethics and democratic ideals amongst its membership. Most of its members were Irish Americans who were excluded from the city's older and more traditional clubs because of their Irish and working-class backgrounds. Tammany Hall became their club and slowly took over their political party, New York's Democratic Party.

Tammany Hall

Tammany Hall could help or hurt. A machine political worker might find a poor family or a new immigrant a place to live, which would earn their gratitude. The machine might also take a kickback from the landlord for bringing renters. If a landlord was uncooperative or insufficiently grateful, the political worker might show up with a city building inspector at his side; the inspector would be sure to find costly violations. The local ward boss would assist immigrants and thus assure their votes for the machine. Through its vast network of political workers, the machine had its hand in every aspect of city life. The official government of the cities, overwhelmed by the rapid growth of the population, could not compete with the machines in supplying services to the needy.
Machine Corruption

George Washington Plunkitt was a New York State senator and a Tammany chief. Politics made him both wealthy and powerful. Plunkitt acknowledged that the money to keep his political machine going came from graft and that graft made him personally wealthy. But, he insisted, his money came from "honest" graft, not from "dishonest" graft. Dishonest graft, according to Plunkitt, was "blackmailin' gamblers, saloon-keepers, disorderly people, etc." Honest graft, on the other hand, meant using your political connections to find out about where the city was going to build a new bridge or a new park, then buying up the land, and reselling the land to the city at a big profit. According to Plunkitt, and according to Tammany, honest graft was part of political life. Bribing judges and election officials was also part of the system of corruption to maintain machine political power.

In 1871, the New York Times took issue with Tammany's "honest" graft. "Gigantic Frauds of the Ring Exposed," announced the July 22 headline. The story described a group that came to be called the "forty thieves," who made money from contracts for the city's new courthouse. Of course, the thieves came from Tammany. At that time, the average worker made $1 a day. Contractors building the courthouse charged the city $400,000 for safes, $175,000 for carpets, and $7,500 for thermometers. The total cost for the courthouse exceeded $13 million. The head of Tammany Hall, William Marcy Tweed, and several of his henchmen were tried, convicted, and jailed in the scandal.

Political Bosses and Opposition

The trial of one man, or even of several men, could not stop the Tammany political machine. John Kelly had served as sheriff and earned the nickname "Honest John," though the wealth he accumulated probably meant that the nickname was undeserved. In 1868, unsatisfied with Tweed's leadership, Kelly had run against Tweed's candidate for mayor as a "reform" candidate. He lost the election but became head of the Tammany organization after Tweed went to jail. While Kelly threw out many Tweed associates, he also ran Tammany Hall as a political machine. After his death in 1886, Tammany was headed by George Croker. The machine continued to run New York City for most of a century.

Tammany Hall was the best-known political machine in the United States, but hardly the only one. Other large cities had their own political machines, and many of these machines continued to hold power throughout 19th century and well into the 20th century. Later political bosses, following the example of Tweed, included Richard J. Daley in Chicago, James Michael Curley in Boston, and Thomas Prendergast in Kansas City, Missouri.

Through dishonest and honest graft, bosses maintained their political power and voter support. Also, through the spoils system, or by providing jobs for their supporters through their patronage, they could also ensure support. Critics associated with the progressive movement made it their goal to expose the level of corruption practiced by political machines. Lincoln Steffens's book, The Shame of the Cities (1904), reported on the corruption
associated with political machines and offered suggestions on how to confront them. Prominent illustrator Thomas Nast attacked Tweed through his satirical political cartoons.

In addition to muckrakers working to expose the problems of political machines, concerned citizens banded together to form good government organizations. These organizations, like the City Club of New York and the Civic Federation of Chicago, worked to combat the power of the political machine by running candidates that would work to reform the political system. One of these candidates was a young Theodore Roosevelt, appointed by good government advocates to be police commissioner of New York City.

Additionally, when reformers realized that much of the power of the political machines was owed to their popularity among the immigrant working class, reformers worked to create programs within city government that would address the needs of the immigrants.
