Bosses, Machines, and Urban Voters

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Ten years ago, Americans were deeply involved in the celebration of their bicentennial year. At that time, we became well acquainted, once again, with our colonial predecessors, the revolutionary generation, and even the hardy pioneers of the nineteenth century. We learned less, however, about our urban pioneers, and particularly about the Boss Tweeds, the Tony Cermaks, and their little-remembered but numerous counterparts. This was unfortunate, because urbanization, its concomitant industrialization and immigration, and the politics that emanated from them are very important aspects of our country's second century.

That was why I wrote the first edition of this book, in 1977. And it is because the phenomenon it studies continues to be both interesting and important, with its dynamic not quite spent in the early years of the nation's third century, that I have now revised it, carrying it on to the present day.

Henry Adams and George Washington Plunkitt were contemporaries; that Plunkitt is less well remembered is regrettable, not because he was more or less "important," but because his education was as illustrative of the milieu of millions of newer Americans as Adams's was of thousands of older ones. New York Commissioner Charles Francis Murphy and President Theodore Roosevelt were also contemporaries, and to some degree direct opponents; as far as the lives of many New Yorkers were concerned, the commissioner may well have been a more towering figure than the president.

The urban political machine and its more or less absolute leader, the boss, have been matters of heightened scholarly interest in recent decades largely because of an increased desire to understand our urban past. As an urban
nation, we naturally try to understand the development of urban politics, the clearest expression of the social and economic development of the city. The study of the city’s political development provides a path for understanding the dynamics of its growth, its interpersonal and group relationships, and its role, generally, in our nation’s development. And for many of our cities, particularly the larger ones, one or another variety of what is generally called “machine politics” was, for varying periods of time, characteristic.

In the pages that follow I try to suggest the whys and the ways of the bosses and the machines, particularly in terms of their internal dynamics and of the people who supported and opposed them. If the boss has been characteristic of the city, it can equally be said that the city has been characteristic of the boss. Each has required the other. The reasons for this lie in the social, cultural, and economic complexity of the modern city, and most especially in the kinds of people who have lived there and the kinds of problems they have faced. Thus my inquiry involves much more than politics in some sterile sense—it gets us into an understanding of what American cities have been all about to those who have lived in them.

This is largely a historical problem, a function of the past. But not entirely so. The factors that led to the rise of the boss and the machine are not yet gone, and some factors seem likely to survive this century. But both seem nearly gone, and the reasons for this are central to the inquiry of this book.

In the first chapter I deal with the concepts of the boss and the machine and with their development over time. In surveying a century’s writing on bosses, I hope not only to develop the concept itself but also to suggest the ways in which scholars and the public at large have been interested in and troubled by “the problem” of the machine. Bosses and machines, after all, have not only been important aspects of urbanization; they have been major issues, as well.

I hope that the first chapter will provide the reader with the necessary grounding for a more sophisticated understanding of particulars. These particulars are provided in the next four chapters, which consider in some detail five different bosses and machines, at various times. Through these case studies the reader can see the principles outlined in Chapter 1 in action and can also draw some individual conclusions about the significance of what I am describing. In addition to trying carefully to develop the careers of the bosses themselves, I want to put those careers in the context of the other side of the picture—the voters: who they were and why they seem to have made the choices they did. To accomplish the latter task I have made use of some simple statistical techniques and have tried to show how they can be useful.
Chapter 6 deals with the present, with some of the major social and demographic issues with which contemporary urban politics—machine or not—must contend. This chapter and the Epilogue also confront more directly the question of the overall effect of machines and some of the reasons for their decline. To some degree, they suggest that the “machine/reform” dichotomy is often overstressed—that the form of urban government has been of less importance than one might imagine.

In the first edition of this book, where its central questions and theses were developed, I benefited considerably from the help of colleagues and friends. I am particularly indebted to Profs. Bruce M. Stave and Samuel T. McSeveney, and to Laurance P. Nathan, Esq., for their suggestions and corrections. The second edition reflects some years of rethinking these matters, plus a continuing fascination with the development of Chicago politics as a laboratory par excellence for viewing the contemporary American city. Everything in the book, fact and interpretation, is my own responsibility, and I hereby exonerate colleagues named and unnamed of any shared burden for what the reader may not like.

As usual when I am writing books, my wife and daughters viewed the process with an affectionate and supportive lack of interest, which has always seemed to me entirely appropriate. And so I lovingly dedicate one more book to them, in thanks for their not being any more obstructionist than is their custom.