Passions and Interests
Pomper, Gerald M.

Published by University Press of Kansas

Pomper, Gerald M.
Passions and Interests: Political Party Concepts of American Democracy.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/84017

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2886479
Sitting at a shoeshine stand in Manhattan in the early twentieth century, a self-educated political philosopher offered a fervent defense of American political parties: “First, this great and glorious country was built up by political parties; second, parties can’t hold together if their workers don’t get offices when they win; third, if the parties go to pieces, the government they built up must go to pieces; fourth, then there’ll be hell to pay.” George Washington Plunkitt, the shoe-stand philosopher, was a district leader of Tammany Hall, probably the most notorious of the great urban machines. His discourses, recorded by a bemused reporter, provide a description of this variety of American political parties, partly serious and partly tongue-in-cheek, partly engaging and partly outrageous, partly accurate and partly deceiving.

CHARACTER AND FUNCTIONS OF THE URBAN MACHINE

Although Plunkitt praised the machine, others condemned it, particularly for the corruption inevitably associated with it. Indeed, research literature on the subject is commonly found in library catalogs under the heading, “Politics—Corruption.” Moral condemnation frequently led to political reform movements, which passed through a discouraging life cycle of indignant victory, civic reform, and early defeat by the resuscitated supporters of the spoils system.

This regular revival of the machine suggests that its strength cannot be attributed simply to blatant corruption or to electoral fraud. After all, when out of power, the machine had access neither to the city treasury nor to the unstuffed ballot boxes. Nevertheless, machine rule has frequently dominated political life in American cities, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The longevity and the widespread success of party machines require explanation, not simple disdain.

To understand the machines, we must first acknowledge that their development was not an accident but an adaptation to the conditions of American
cities. When machines were in their prime, cities were burgeoning in population, providing great opportunities for economic enterprise, and attracting millions of immigrants and migrants from the hinterland; but adequate governmental means to cope with the consequent enormous political and economic strains were lacking.2

The machine's dominance was not inevitable—central governmental planning was one possible alternative. Yet if not inevitable, in a period in which the dominant liberal ideology restricted governmental activism, the machine was an available, convenient, and workable system. Even a severe critic recognized this virtue of the machine and its leaders:

The depredations committed by the boss are made up for, to a certain extent, by a better, more responsible administration. . . . State legislatures, which vote laws, at the bidding of the boss, to swell the resources of patronage, also vote good laws—laws of public utility. . . . Thus, the boss acts as a disciplining force; he exerts it on the whole political community for good as well as for evil.3

In its own terms, the machine was interested only in power, jobs, and profit. To accomplish these manifest goals, however, using the terms of social science, the machine performed vital "latent functions," unintentionally meeting essential societal needs.4 Cutting through the red tape created by overlapping governmental jurisdictions and multiple checks and balances, the machine fostered the building of urban infrastructure, manufacturing, and commerce. Those doing business with the city—utilities, construction companies, suppliers—considered payments to the machines as part of their costs, which were recovered in profitable contracts. For a special category of business, the machine provided a different kind of help; in an age of official puritanism, it protected services that were illegal but still desired, such as liquor, gambling, and prostitution.

The machine also accomplished social as well as economic functions. It achieved the political socialization of new arrivals, making them citizens and voters. It created electoral coalitions among diverse and contentious groups. It softened the harshness of capitalist development by providing a modicum of social welfare for the poor. It provided an alternative mechanism of social mobility for those skilled in the arts of politics, particularly for low-status ethnic groups. In promoting these ends, the spoilsmen forged a rough union of mass democracy and urban growth, doing so inadvertently
and often without good intentions. The financial costs were great and ultimately would be paid by the poor, in the coin of limited and inefficient governmental services, high costs, and regressive taxation.

Nevertheless, the work of government did get done: Subways were built to carry the urban work force between new jobs and modest tenements, even as construction costs were inflated by corruption and high profits; children were provided at least minimal literacy, and neighborhood crime was kept in check, even if schoolteachers and policemen were appointed on the basis of personal friendships instead of merit.

THE MACHINE AS A PARTY ORGANIZATION

The machine constitutes a distinctive form of political party but shares some characteristics with other models. Concentrating on gaining benefits for its activists, it has an elite focus; in this respect, it resembles a party bureaucracy. The machine’s benefits are essentially discrete individual advantages for the party’s workers, most notably the patronage of public office, making the party goals coalitional rather than collective. Based on this criterion, the machine is like a team of office seekers.

Yet machines are different from bureaucracies or office-seeking teams, the critical distinction being in their mode of activity. They are expressive and emotion-laden organizations, not coldly rational power seekers. Machines arouse loyalties and antipathies, a distinctive characteristic, even as they pursue their coalitional goals and develop their elite organizational structures.

The common view of machines regards them as hierarchical organizations, bent on private gain, emphasizing instrumental activities. They are typically portrayed simply as earlier and more colorful versions of contemporary campaign consultants. This view is only partially correct. Although the machine did stress coalitional goals, its internal organization was less cohesive than is generally assumed, and its operational mode is more appropriately seen as expressive rather than as instrumental.

The word “machine” itself suggests a highly disciplined and centralized organization. The descriptive literature identifies these organizations with their imperial “bosses,” the legendary names of Tweed, Pendergast, Ruef, Hague, Curley, and Daley. In Philadelphia, identified by Lincoln Steffens
as "a very perfect machine," the hierarchy stretched across all formal governmental barriers:

Matthew S. Quay . . . is the proprietor of Pennsylvania and the real ruler of Philadelphia, just as William Penn, the Great Proprietor, was. . . . The organization that rules Philadelphia is . . . not a mere municipal machine, but a city, State, and national organization. The people of Philadelphia are Republicans in a Republican city in a Republican state in a Republican nation, and they are bound ring on ring on ring. . . . All these bear down upon Philadelphia to keep it in control of Quay's boss and his little ring. This is the ideal of party organization, and, possibly, is the end toward which our democratic republic is tending. 6

On closer examination, however, these parties seem less hierarchical than suggested by the images of machines and bosses. Their histories are replete with internal conflicts, intrigue, and palace coups. The machine was intensely personal and local, with loyalties tied to individuals, not to the common organization. Rather than a modern bureaucracy, it more closely resembled opportunistic feud alism. Each ward chieftain had his band of followers. The leader of the party held power not by command but by dint of his ability to maintain alliances among these barons. As the fortunes of political war changed, these bands would shift their allegiances as faithlessly as the dukes in Shakespeare's histories. Although some bosses did maintain their power for considerable periods, all of them knew the truth of the playwright's warning, "Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown." Their unease was even greater when they depended on material rewards for their power. In such machines, once these prizes were lost, the boss also lost the source of his authority.

Explanations of the machines' success typically emphasize these material rewards. Even Plunkitt finds such incentives essential to these parties, including patronage jobs and the "honest graft" that politicians gained from inside information. The same emphasis is evident in more academic writings, for example, in the fundamental work of Banfield and Wilson, who unqualifiedly define a machine as "a party organization that depends crucially upon inducements that are both specific and material. . . . A political machine is a business organization in a particular field of business—getting votes and winning elections." 7
Illustrations of this emphasis on material incentives, on the instrumental party mode, abound in the rich vocabulary of American politics. We can read about the machine’s “boodle,” the exploits of the “gas house gang,” the reformers’ denunciation of party “tyranny.” Machine leaders are universally described as inevitably materialistic and despotic. “As with every autocrat, absolute power makes him lose his head sooner or later; he becomes willful, arrogant, and tyrannical; he exceeds all bounds in the effrontery with which he and his men use the public resources for their own benefit.” But this emphasis is not fully appropriate. Machines certainly have employed material appeals, but this alone cannot explain their strength and longevity. Empirical research leads to a reconsideration of their mode of operation.

Plunkitt was convinced that “when parties can’t get offices they’ll bust. They ain’t far from the bustin’ point now, with all this civil service business keepin’ most of the good things from them.” His reformist adversaries agreed, although they did not share his further concern, that civil service reform led to the death of patriotism:

How are you goin’ to keep up patriotism if this thing goes on? You can’t do it. Let me tell you that patriotism has been dying out fast for the last twenty years. Before then when a party won, its workers got everything in sight. . . . The boys and men don’t get excited any more when they see a United States flag or hear “The Star-Spangled Banner.” And why should they? What is there in it for them?

In assessing the importance of material incentives, however, it is significant that machines were able to resist the alleged damage of civil service reform. Notable leaders of Tammany itself, such as Richard Crocker and Charles Murphy, came to power after, not before, civil service reform, as did the great Chicago organizations of Nash, Kelly, and Daley and smaller machines elsewhere.

The survival of machines, despite civil service reform, can be partially explained by the parties’ ability to manipulate and to limit the scope of the reform legislation. In Chicago, for example, “temporary” jobs were exempted from merit systems, and a large proportion of municipal jobs were then classified as temporary, even when held by the same individuals for decades. The ability of the machines to use these stratagems, however,
suggests that they had deeper sources of strength than the jobs on the public payroll.  
Consider then the simple numbers involved. Even in their heyday, machines did not provide public jobs for all their members. Gosnell and his students did the most thorough investigations, examining Chicago, reputedly the strongest of these party organizations. Even in this most “advanced” specimen of the species, patronage positions were not available for about one-half of the ward leaders, the elite officers of the party, or for more than one-third of the precinct leaders, its street-level troops.

Fewer direct material rewards could be expected in organizations weaker than the Chicago leviathan, yet machines still dominated urban politics. In all cities, rather than having unlimited rewards to distribute, “party bosses had to husband scarce resources. The demands of ethnic groups and the working class for jobs and services nearly always exceeded the machine’s available supply.”

Even though limited in supply, patronage conceivably could strengthen machines if the scarce resource were employed to advance their goals through internal party discipline. In legend, we hear of the allocation of appointments and promotions through a political merit system, as workers competed to carry their precincts, were repaid with low-level jobs, and then advanced on the public-payroll ladder as they achieved more victories for the party. The party then would indeed be a business, using corporate-management standards of job efficiency—measured by electoral, not bureaucratic performance—and matching rewards—the spoils of patronage—to this performance.

In fact, complex social systems, including corporate businesses, do not fit the model of a pure goal-oriented organization. Maintaining social relationships among the members of the organization often becomes more important than its manifest external goals. Personal considerations can displace the impersonal standards of achievement. Traditional practices are maintained long after they have become irrelevant to the original task, and the organization itself may be perpetuated even after it has accomplished its intended mission. These realities are evident to anyone who has seen co-workers “covering” for a well-liked but ineffective colleague or wondered why the military still maintained horse cavalry after tanks were invented. The same “inefficiencies” have been found in empirical studies of party machines’ use of material rewards.

Even in the original allocation of jobs, the standards used do not fit a
model of efficient politics. With the causes of political success themselves unclear, the reasons for the division of spoils among the winners cannot be closely compared to the relative achievements of the would-be winners. Instead, personal and ethnic criteria, unrelated to electoral results, are applied. Another material reward, the provision of public services among constituents, also has been found to be unconnected to political effort. Bringing in the votes, even in the vaunted Chicago machine, apparently has little relationship to bringing home the bacon of fire protection, parks, and similar amenities.

Once hired, patronage appointees are often politically inactive; indeed, they may drop any political activity in order to protect themselves from the retribution of future winners. Jobs do not stimulate work for the party, then, but actually become a disincentive. Furthermore, advancement and retention do not necessarily depend on political performance back in the precincts. And even in the most mundane patronage appointments, some standards related to the appointive position must be taken into account. Illustratively, a former “reform” leader of Tammany Hall recounts his successful insistence that persons appointed as “hole inspectors,” supervising utility work in the city streets, at least be able to see.

Morale among the patronage workers also must be considered. They are likely to view themselves as entitled to their positions because of their original effort for the party. Disciplining these people when their political activity lessens may cause discontent and disruption among the employees, with the result that the patronage system becomes slack.

Rather than being dependent on material rewards, the political machine should be understood as relying substantially, although not exclusively, on affective appeals. This reliance is evident even beneath Plunkitt’s cynical veneer, when he applauds the “magnificent men” of the “grand Tammany organization” or praises the “heroism” of party workers at a Fourth of July ceremony: “five thousand men sittin’ in the hottest place on earth for four long hours, with parched lips and gnawin’ stomachs, and knowin’ all the time that the delights of the oasis in the desert were only two flights downstairs.”

MACHINES AND VOTERS

Materialism cannot explain the internal operation of the machine; still less can it explain its broad electoral popularity, which allowed it to survive
periodic defeats, fissures, and reforms. Even if patronage had been sufficient to satisfy the competing claims of all the precinct activists, certainly no public payroll could have sustained the poor and immigrant populations that repeatedly returned machines to office, even without benefit of ballot fraud.

To be sure, there were some material rewards available to loyal voters—sometimes a job with the gas company if not with the police, or a lowered tax assessment, or the proverbial turkey at Thanksgiving and basket of coal at Christmas. In later periods, machines even turned "reform" to their advantage, finding new jobs for their activists in the regulatory state established with the civil service and new benefits for their constituents in the welfare state created by the New Deal. 20

Yet even in these extended forms, the machine’s material rewards for most of its constituents were usually quite small. It denigrates the poor to believe that they could be bought so cheaply. The true appeal of the machine was not the paltry handouts it provided but the hand it extended. Its strength was best stated by Martin Lomasny of Boston, speaking to Lincoln Steffens: "I think . . . that there’s got to be in every ward somebody that any bloke can come to—no matter what he’s done—and get help. Help you understand; none of your law and your justice, but help." 21

The work of the machine was that of good neighbors, concerned with the lives and deaths of their friends. Plunkitt again is illustrative, responding to the plight of a family burned out of its home:

I don’t refer them to the Charity Organization Society, which would investigate their case in a month or two and decide they were worthy of help about the time they are dead from starvation. I just get quarters for them, buy clothes for them if their clothes were burned up, and fix them up till they get things runnin’ again.

That work was not morally pure, for there was always an explicit or implied contract in which help was extended in exchange for votes. “It’s philanthropy,” Plunkitt admits, “but it’s politics too—mighty good politics. Who can tell how many votes one of these fires bring me? The poor are the most grateful people in the world, and let me tell you, they have more friends in their neighborhoods than the rich have in theirs.” 22 Yet even this contractual relationship carried a certain dignity, for in the contract, the machine politician did not give the voter charity. He made an exchange between two
persons, each with resources, the politician providing the favor, the voter providing the ballot.

A particular affective appeal of the machine was ethnicity. It is almost impossible to describe this kind of party organization without adding an adjective such as “Irish” or “Italian” or, recently, “black.” But ethnicity is an appeal to the emotions, not to rational calculation; the rewards it provides are not those of material goods but those of social solidarity.

These were the rewards, reaching across ethnic barriers, that Henry Jones Ford saw in the “surprising amount of intimacy and association between people of different nationalities.” He painted a somewhat patronizing, perhaps racist, scene of the assimilationist effects of political patronage:

In the district headquarters of a party organization, one may per-chance see an Irish ward captain patting on the back some Italian ward worker who can barely speak intelligible English, but whose pride and zeal in the success of his efforts to bring his compatriots “in line with the party” are blazoned upon his face. American politics seems able to digest and assimilate any race of the Aryan stock, but it fails with the negro race.23

In its electoral efforts, the machine consciously used ethnic appeals. Sometimes these appeals promoted social integration, as in the creation of “balanced tickets,” including candidates of different ethnic groups. At other times, the machine would play on and exacerbate group differences. Grievances from the Old World, such as those of the English and the Irish, were fought again in the mobilization of Irish immigrants against New England yankees. New World conflicts were added: Irish against Italians (each group, in urban legend, believing the other had the “o” at the wrong end of their names), and later, whites against blacks.

The importance of these appeals has also been shown by empirical examination of the voting support—ethnic, not economic—of the urban machines. There is very little correlation between class position and support of machine candidates in local elections during the period of machine dominance, but there is a high relationship between ethnicity and the machine vote.24

Ethnicity defined the boundaries of the urban electorate. Contrary to the prevailing ideology of a homogenized America, the machine went “beyond the melting pot,” recognizing the emerging reality of a more diverse
nation. Its activists literally spoke the languages of the immigrant populations and participated in the critical events of their life cycles—births, weddings, and funerals—becoming identified not only with individual voters but with their communities. “By their substantive and symbolic activities,” even to the present, machine politicians “persuade the voters that they are concerned about the local community and that they are acting to advance its interests.”

In attacking the machine, reformers could make a good and rational case regarding its corruption and even its social inequities, but they rarely could overcome these emotional ties. As a result, most reform administrations would be turned out of office after a single term. The notable exceptions—such as Fiorello LaGuardia in New York and Brand Whitlock in Toledo—were reformers who themselves adopted similar ethnic appeals.

Ironically, these same strong affective appeals of ethnicity undermined the machines. As immigrant groups succeeded each other in America’s cities, most machines could not adapt to their changing constituencies. The Irish machines that had once fostered quick naturalization and political mobilization of immigrants came to depend on a limited electorate of their kindred and to resist the assimilation of newer immigrants from the more distant parts of Europe or from the American South. While keeping a firm grip on the major proportion of offices and patronage for themselves, Irish machine leaders attempted to hold off the new groups by providing smaller spoils and symbolic rewards. “In the short run, the Irish monopoly of power preserved the machine. In the long run, the failure to share power with later-arriving ethnic groups eroded the organization’s electoral base.”

A rational organization, of course, would circulate its leadership to appeal to the new ethnic groups, but it happened only rarely. Irish politicians were not succeeded by Italian politicians; they were defeated as the Italians in turn have been defeated by the blacks. The solidary claims of ethnicity proved stronger to the machine than the instrumentalist claims of electoral rationality.

THE MACHINE’S VISION

The goals of the machine were different from its mode of appeal. Its objectives were essentially materialist and individualist, combined for political
purposes into a coalitional program. Analyses of the machine correctly emphasize these materialistic goals; they err in seeing the goals as also being the source of its deeper, more affective appeal.

Broad social programs were simply outside the understanding of the machine politician. "The political structure is not based upon people in general," William Whyte explained. "The politician has obligations to particular people, and he maintains his organization by discharging a certain number of these obligations." He might provide recreational facilities, for example, but this social amenity would only be a by-product of distinct individualist objectives, such as the graft to be skimmed from the construction of a park or a favor to individual constituents. In a crowded Boston neighborhood, for instance, a protective fence was not placed around a baseball diamond until an identifiable group of voters made the local leader aware of the direct political benefits.\(^{30}\)

Individual needs were not aggregated to the social level. The machine would provide immediate, even generous, help to the family that suffered a tenement fire or to the widow whose breadwinner was killed in a factory accident. Yet it rarely had the vision to prevent these disasters by sponsoring legislation to require fire-resistant construction or safer factories. Indeed, such legislation would not clearly benefit the machine because there would then be fewer victimized families and widows and therefore fewer grateful voters.

More generally, the maladies of urban life in the period of the machines were class problems, common disabilities of the poor. The machine, however, found it difficult to conceive of society as composed of social classes or to mobilize voters along class lines. One part of the difficulty stemmed from its unspoken capitalist alliances, solidified with payoffs and deals. As Steffens stressed, machines depended on at least the sufferance, and usually the active support, of the businessman:

"He does not neglect, he is busy with politics, oh very busy and very businesslike. I found him buying boodlers in St. Louis, defending grafters in Minneapolis, originating corruption in Pittsburg, deploiring reformers in Chicago, and beating good government with corruption funds in New York.\(^{31}\)"

Sharing individualist, acquisitive goals, the machine and the local robber barons were natural allies.
Beyond simple corruption, the machine showed only a limited ability to articulate the common interests of its constituent groups. The most obvious feature of the machine coalition was its foundation in ethnic groups, but this characteristic could be divisive. Beneath this surface competition were the common needs of the urban working class, as Bridges has shown, and the machine potentially constituted a class response to capitalist development. Yet if the purpose of politics was seen as winning the spoils for the Irish over the Italians, any synthesizing vision of expanding jobs for both segments of the working class was impossible.

This limited view made the machines antagonistic toward class-based organizations and also vulnerable in competition with them. Machines directly attacked working-class parties, sometimes violently, and offered few economic, rather than ethnic, appeals in their campaigns. Labor unions were seen as rivals, not as potential allies, and were often targets of machine repression, most notably by Frank Hague in Jersey City. Even as prominent a politician as New York's Al Smith would find himself repudiated by his machine colleagues when he adopted a broader class perspective.

Ultimately, the limited vision of the machine and its consequent vulnerability became evident as it declined with the onset of the New Deal and the development of the welfare state. Decline came, in one sense, from simple market competition. The demand for welfare became overwhelming with the collapse of the economy and the social deprivations of the Great Depression. As a local, "retail" supplier of relief, the machine could not compete with the federal government's "wholesale" supply of housing, jobs, and income subsidies. In some cities, such as New York, the federal government deliberately used its control of the "welfare market" to weaken the machine.

This competition, however, is not a complete explanation of the machine's decline. In some areas, the machine was able to form an alliance with the new federal agencies, becoming, as it were, the local distributor of the national government's wholesale resources. In Chicago, this literally became the precinct captains' role, when they personally delivered welfare checks. Thus the Chicago machine attempted to put new money into old wallets, to transform a collective benefit into particularized, individual benefits. Adjusting to the new governmental competition, however, required more than convenient alliances. It demanded that the machine abandon its core strengths and find appeals broader than those of friendship, neighborhood, and ethnic group. In effect, its survival required that it commit suicide.
The long-term weakening of the machine was a subtle process, resulting from the substitution of class for ethnic relationships and of objective standards for personal ones. Federal aid was given to poor people as a category and to those who met stated criteria. Old-age pensions, for example, were established through the social security system for all the elderly, not just the Irish widows befriended by the precinct captain. If direct governmental aid no longer carried with it the captain’s warmth of human concern, it also no longer carried with it the burden of political obligation.

To be sure, political intervention could still be helpful, particularly in prodding the bureaucracy. In the role of advocate or ombudsman, however, the machine politician had less power of his own. A cycle of impotence ensued: The bureaucracy became more autonomous and more efficient; the machine politician lost influence within government; voters had less reason to seek his help; and the power of bureaucracy grew further. The machine’s passing was marked, but with little notice of the irony, when modern urban administrations established “little city halls” to provide residents with neighborhood help in dealing with the government. The bureaucracy not only had defeated the machine; it had replaced it with its own imitation.

In its stress on coalitional goals, the machine carried the seeds of its own destruction. As it replaced the earlier elites, it also lost their communitarian or “mutualist” view of politics and instead saw voters as individuals or as members of small and distinct groups, competing in a “militant” politics. It could not envision them as members of a social collective, such as the poor or the working class. When other agencies could meet these individualist goals better, the machine had no broader or more inspiring ideals. Similarly, it saw businessmen only as profiteers. When business abandoned declining urban enterprises, it could not join with them to enrich the city rather than the corporation.

The problems of the machine were ultimately problems of internal contradictions in its practice and in its thought: an elite focus versus a mass base; individualistic, coalitional goals versus social, collective needs; ethnic particularism versus class needs. The same problems still limit the possibility of a revival of the urban machine.

In contemporary American politics, machines are treated like animals in a museum: rare, preserved for scholarly examination, but possibly capable of resurrection. If there is to be a revival of urban machines, it will surely be based on black and other minorities, the growing population groups in the nation’s cities. Blacks have come to power in virtually every major city,
even where they were not a majority of the population, such as in Los Angeles and New York.

Machine parties might be expected in these cities, for the needs that the machines once met are again evident among the nonwhite population. Opportunities for economic profit are available, business still wants favorable treatment, the poor and disadvantaged require social welfare, patronage jobs can provide a living, personal consideration is always in short supply. The newer urbanites have taken the places of the old, with similar needs and with even more reason to respond to the affective appeals of ethnicity.

Other requisites for the machine’s success, however, are less evident. Fewer resources are available to any putative machine. Civil service, the growth of employees’ unions, judicial restraints, and bureaucratic insulation make fewer jobs available. Economic wealth has shifted away from the cities so that businesses must be persuaded to invest in cities rather than strong-armed into political contributions. As government has become larger and more technical, parties have lost many of their functions to professional experts, such as social workers, and have been restricted by bureaucratic procedures, such as closed bidding on construction contracts.

New machines, even if feasible, still face the old internal contradictions. Providing patronage jobs for blacks or Hispanics may correct a historic injustice, but it does not constitute a program of social improvement. Ethnic mobilization of “people of color” does not solve the problems of the poor who are white any more than mobilization of the Irish solved the problems of the poor who were Italian, Jewish, and Negro. Machine protection of drug dealers in minority ghettos helps their residents as little as earlier protection of bootleggers helped white tenement dwellers.

Broad programs of urban redevelopment still require collective action and extensive popular support, not a simple redistribution of limited benefits to active but myopic precinct captains. Effective black machines will not only have to be as efficient as their white predecessors; they will also need to be smarter.

MACHINES AND THE DEMOCRATIC FUTURE

The machine form of party organization paralleled a particular kind of democracy, evidencing coalitional goals, an autonomous leadership, and extensive participation. The machine made some contributions to democ-
racy, but it was an incomplete democracy. Coalitional goals limited the possibility of collective action and the emergence of programs to deal with common problems of the poor or the working class, or, today, of the racially disadvantaged. Contemporary cities cannot serve their populations by individual relief but require concerted programs toward some vision of the common good.

The machine’s failure ultimately resulted from the absence of such philosophic vision. It saw voters essentially as acquisitive individuals; it could not consider them in the more abstract role of citizen. The patriotism Plunkitt praised was not truly a commitment to the nation and to its common good but only to the private advantages that might be gained. Thus Plunkitt could not even understand, much less answer, John Kennedy’s famous challenge, “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

Participation under the machine was widespread, but for most voters, it was still limited to a periodic endorsement of its ethnic leaders. Although the machine offered opportunities for entry and advancement to lower-status groups, it did so only for a few people. Even for these party workers, their extensive activity was not only morally dubious, it was politically corrosive. In these respects, contemporary urban politics shows little improvement.

The greatest defect of the machine was not its corruption; it was most deficient in its training in citizenship. The machine did teach the rudimentary means of democratic politics, bringing its constituents to the polls, “assisting” them in casting a ballot, helping them to organize. It also aroused the emotional loyalties that democratic participation requires. But it was inherently unable to teach the broader meaning of citizenship, the involvement of self in a larger social enterprise.

In the cities of the machine, public life became no more than a bigger and better-endowed arena for private satisfaction. These urban areas contrasted starkly with an earlier city, classical Athens. There, Pericles boasted, “Each individual is interested not only in his own affairs but in the affairs of the state as well”; there, he could realistically urge his audience “that you should fix your eyes every day on the greatness of Athens as she really is, and should fall in love with her.” Without this love beyond the self, the machines inevitably perished. Without it, whatever the leadership, democracy itself cannot long survive.