

How Congress Lost, Part IX: Resilient Corruption and an Emerging Progressive Critique in the Late 19th Century

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Key Points

- Though the 1883 Pendleton Civil Service Act drastically reduced federal patronage, political machines proved extremely durable.
- A new breed of party boss—typified by Thomas Platt of New York and Matthew Quay of Pennsylvania—built strong party organizations by forging a tight connection with business interests.
- In Congress, party leaders like Senator Nelson Aldrich of Rhode Island protected business interests on issues like the tariff and were richly rewarded for their efforts.
- In the face of persistent corruption, reformers like Woodrow Wilson theorized on how to reform the government, focusing on drastically reducing Congress's role in American political life.

The patronage system, which had facilitated the rise of powerful political machines by 1880, abruptly ended when a deranged office seeker assassinated President James A. Garfield in 1881. Democrats won a strong victory in the 1882 midterm elections, buoyed by a public that had had enough of corruption. Fearing a wipeout in the upcoming 1884 presidential election, Republicans backed the Pendleton Civil Service Act, which President Chester A. Arthur signed into law in 1883.

Yet this period in the late 19th century—from the signing of the Pendleton Act until Teddy Roosevelt's presidency—was the golden age of political machines. Not only did the machines endure, but a new generation of leaders exercised more control than ever by forging a tight connection to big business interests. This relationship between (predominantly Republican) politicians and corporate America was not limited to state

machines. Party leaders in the Senate—most notably Nelson Aldrich of Rhode Island—stood athwart reform movements on business's behalf. They were well remunerated for their efforts—not only did business interests finance Republican political campaigns, but they also made sure their most trusted and valuable allies were well compensated personally.

This was also a time of reform movements. Even as the political system remained unresponsive to calls for change, forces outside were gathering strength—organizing, campaigning, and thinking through ways to influence American politics.

Important among such reformers was a young academic named Woodrow Wilson. As a young professor at Bryn Mawr College in the 1880s, Wilson published *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* and “The Study of Public Administration,” two works that

would not only launch him to the forefront of reformist intellectuals but anticipate the basics of the Progressive agenda for reform in the 20th century. While Wilson's thought would evolve between the 1880s and his ascension to the presidency in 1913, a consistent thread in his philosophy was that Congress was unable to wield its vast powers responsibly and that fundamental changes to the political order were necessary to preserve republican government.

By 1880, the Republican Party—which had dominated American politics for a generation—was split internally over patronage's role in federal politics. "Stalwart" Republicans strongly favored patronage. Led by Senator Roscoe Conkling of New York, they sought to nominate former President Ulysses S. Grant for the presidency at the party's convention in Chicago. Arrayed against Conkling and the Stalwarts were "Half-Breeds," who supported the candidacy of Senator James G. Blaine of Maine. They were lukewarm on the importance of patronage and open to reform. A deadlocked convention finally produced a dark horse nominee—Representative James A. Garfield of Ohio, who aligned with the Half-Breeds. As a sop to the Stalwarts, the convention selected Arthur, the former collector of the Port of New York and Conkling's top lieutenant, as his running mate.

Conkling threw the full weight of his machine behind Garfield's campaign, and the Ohio congressman won a narrow victory over Democratic nominee Winfield Scott Hancock. Conkling had hoped his efforts on behalf of the Republican ticket would induce Garfield to let him control the collectorship, but he was mistaken. Garfield instead nominated William Robertson, a Blaine ally, for the job.

Conkling—and New York's junior senator, Thomas Platt—resigned in protest. Their plan was to have the New York legislature reelect them in the special election to fill their seats. But they miscalculated. Rising opposition in the New York Republican Party to Conkling's hardline tactics complicated their bids, which stalled in the early summer of 1881.

That July, Garfield was shot in a train station in Washington, DC, and he died two months later as a result. The assailant was Charles Guiteau, a delusional office seeker and self-proclaimed Stalwart, but whom nobody

in Republican politics had taken seriously. Still, the attack on Garfield was a grievous blow to the national psyche and stirred Americans' opposition to corruption.

The Pendleton Act brought a swift end to the era of federal patronage. It established protected lists of workers, chosen for their qualifications and secure in their jobs amid political turnover in the executive branch. The law allowed presidents to expand the list of protected workers, which outgoing presidents did to protect their own appointees from removal by an incoming, rival administration. The frequent transference of power over the next decade and a half—from Republican Arthur to Democrat Grover Cleveland to Republican Benjamin Harrison to Cleveland to Republican William McKinley—led to a massive increase in the protected list. By the end of the century, federal patronage all but dried up as a source to finance machine politics.

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Nevertheless, party bosses, particularly in the mid-Atlantic and New England, proved extremely resilient in the face of reform. Two politicians of this period demonstrate the durability of machine politics—Senator Matthew Quay of Pennsylvania and Platt of New York. Both had come up through the ranks as junior members of existing machines. Platt had been lieutenant for Conkling, while Quay had worked for Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania, who began politics as a Democrat before switching to the Republicans in the 1850s.

Cameron initially sought the Republican nomination in 1860 but swung his support to Abraham Lincoln, who named him secretary of war. Yet Cameron's corruption prompted Lincoln to rename him minister to Russia after a year—a not-so-subtle way of getting rid of a troublesome politico. Cameron resigned after a brief time in the position. His retirement from politics was short-lived, however, as he rebuilt his machine and secured election to the Senate in 1867. Cameron's machine was similar to Conkling's in New York. Both relied on control of federal patronage to dominate their states. And both were vulnerable to reform-minded

presidents, such as Hayes and Garfield, who wanted to control executive appointments for themselves.

Quay and Platt rebuilt their machines for durability. (The Pennsylvania machine was so entrenched that it even secured the state's Electoral College votes for Republican Herbert Hoover in 1932.) The new approach still took advantage of loopholes in federal law to retain some scraps of federal patronage. More useful was the control over state patronage. The Pendleton Act created protected lists for only federal workers, not state workers—a gap Quay and Platt exploited. But the two men built their operations above all on cultivating relations with business interests.

The 1880s and 1890s were a time of rapid industrial development in the United States, along with attending economic and social dislocations—unsafe working conditions, the proliferation of child labor, long working hours, paltry wages, and so on. While the federal government generally left these issues unregulated, state governments were more amenable to reform. This created a massive challenge for business interests, as they would have to bribe scores of state legislators, who were often unpredictable and unreliable. This was where Quay and Platt were so crucial. Rather than deal with rank-and-file state lawmakers, interests could come to agreements with the bosses: In exchange for the vast sums necessary to maintain party hegemony, Quay and Platt would ensure that state government protected business interests.

Quay took this model nationwide for the 1888 presidential election. Cleveland's defeat of Blaine in 1884 was the Democrats' first victory in nearly three decades, and Republican Party leaders were determined to regain control. As Republican National Committee chairman, Quay turned the tariff issue into a fundraising tool for the party. The first protective tariff—the Dallas Tariff of 1816—had been intended for national security, to protect essential domestic industries against another war with Great Britain. But the size and scope of protection had expanded massively, and by the 1880s, the tariff system was a sprawling, complicated, and inefficient mess that burdened consumers with higher prices while padding big business's profit margins.

Cleveland had called for reforming the tariff schedules, with an eye to reducing the overall burden. Quay saw this as an opportunity to put business interests “under the fire and fry all the fat out of them,” as he was

reputed to say.¹ If corporate America wanted to keep tariff rates high, it had to fund the Republican campaign. And it did, as the GOP hauled in money hand over fist. Harrison won a narrow victory over Cleveland in 1888, and the McKinley Tariff of 1890 raised rates.

While Quay and Platt were the undisputed masters of their states, they were hardly involved in the nitty-gritty of congressional lawmaking. To protect their interests against reform, business moguls looked instead to “The Four”—Aldrich, William Allison of Iowa, Orville Platt of Connecticut, and John Spooner of Wisconsin.² This quartet of Republicans controlled the Senate by virtue of their domination of the Senate Republican caucus and the committee system. They ensured that the upper chamber was above all responsive to big business's needs. They kept tariff rates high, guaranteed a friendly regulatory environment, and ensured that the Supreme Court remained stocked with former corporate attorneys.

Aldrich was the leader, and his political career illustrates how power worked in the late 19th century. As the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, he was the undisputed master of the tariff in the upper chamber. Nobody in the Senate understood the arcana of the tariff schedules like Aldrich. House-initiated tariff reforms would leave the Senate reinforcing the protective regime—a feat he accomplished with the “Mongrel Tariff” of 1883 and the Payne–Aldrich Tariff of 1909.

For these efforts, he was well compensated, especially by the sugar-refining industry. Refiners wanted to keep tariffs on imported raw sugar low and tariffs on refined sugar high—a politically unpopular combination because it left domestic sugar growers in Louisiana vulnerable to competition while forcing higher prices on the American consumer. To make this happen, refiners relied on Aldrich. In return, they ensured that Aldrich's political organization in Rhode Island was flush with cash, to bribe not just state legislators but also voters. Company officials even put up \$5 million to create the United Traction and Electric Company, of which Aldrich became president despite putting no money down. Aldrich used his control over state politics to secure the company franchises for railway transportation in Rhode Island and so became a millionaire many times over. Aldrich's daughter Abby married John D. Rockefeller Jr., and his grandson Nelson Rockefeller

became governor of New York and vice president of the United States.

Muckraking journalists had a field day exposing this kind of double-dealing. In his 1906 series *The Treason of the Senate for Cosmopolitan Magazine*, David Graham Phillips wrote of Aldrich:

Various senators represent various divisions and subdivisions of this colossus. But Aldrich, rich through franchise grabbing, the intimate of Wall Street's great robber barons, the father-in-law of the only son of *the Rockefeller*—Aldrich represents the colossus. Your first impression of many and conflicting interests has disappeared. You now see a single interest, with a single agent-in-chief to execute its single purpose—getting rich at the expense of the labor and the independence of the American people.³

Phillips's series included articles on many Senate bosses, including Platt and Chauncey Depew of New York, Spooner, Allison, and Joseph Foraker of Ohio. While his exposés reflect the political anxieties of the Gilded Age, they are deeply reminiscent of the Anti-Federalist warnings about the Senate, written more than a century before. The author of the Brutus essays cautioned that senators “will for the most part of the time be absent from the state they represent, and associate with such company as will possess very little of the feelings of the middling class of people.”⁴ That is a fair description of leaders like Aldrich, Quay, and Platt, who come across the pages of history more like ancient satraps than republican representatives.

Samuel Bryan in “Centinel I” warned, “The President, who would be a mere pageant of state, unless he coincides with the views of the Senate, would either become the head of the aristocratic junta in that body, or its minion.”⁵ That is another prescient description, in this case of Aldrich's blockade of tariff-reform initiatives. George Mason, warning that the overawing powers of the Senate “will destroy any balance in the government, and enable them to accomplish what usurpations they please,” predicted that the government would devolve into either “a monarchy,” should the president emerge the dominant figure, “or a corrupt, tyrannical aristocracy,” should the Senate win

the power struggle. The Four's domination amounted to such an aristocracy.⁶

The old warnings from Anti-Federalists about how senators would be too powerful and too independent of the people seemed to have come true. The Senate had transformed the republic into an oligarchy—responsible not to the public interest but to the economic elites who financed politics and lined the pockets of senators. Reformers of this period thus confronted more than a series of policy questions—on the tariff, business regulation, or the corporate bent of the Supreme Court. They faced institutional challenges as well—how to make it so that Congress, especially the Senate, reflected the public interest. To borrow a phrase from Henry Adams, above all, reformers had to bring “the Senate back to decency.”⁷ An up-and-coming political scientist from Princeton University named Woodrow Wilson would develop bold ideas to address congressional irresponsibility.

The Gilded Age, which lasted roughly from Grant's presidency until Theodore Roosevelt's, is widely remembered for its rampant corruption. But it was also a period of reformist ferment, as a multiplicity of groups endeavored to reform a status quo they thought was corrupt. The Liberal Republicans challenged the Grant administration's graft in the 1870s. The “Mugwumps” broke with the Republican Party in 1884 to back Cleveland, who promised reform. The Populists of the 1890s demanded regulatory and currency reforms to ease Southern and Western farmers' plight. The Progressive movement, the last and most successful of these initiatives, blended aspects of the previous efforts—calling for not only reforms of the political process but a realignment of public policy so it favored average Americans' interests.

One could examine many Progressive reformers to get a sense of the intellectual movement. Historians like Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard emphasized economic forces as major factors in American political development. Intellectuals like Herbert Croly and John Dewey sought to reconceptualize civic life in the new era. Muckraking journalists like Phillips and Lincoln Steffens exposed corruption in Washington, DC; Philadelphia; and New York City. Politicians

like Roosevelt and Robert La Follette took their case for reform directly to the people.

But few figures from this movement are as significant as Wilson. He alone stands at the nexus between Progressivism’s intellectual and activist strands. Nobody thought more deeply about the issues of the day than Wilson, and nobody wielded more power than Wilson at his peak.

Wilson’s accomplishments during his eight-year presidency are, when judged on their own merits, staggering. The sheer volume of reforms was unprecedented in his day and rivaled in the 20th century by only Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson. But more than this, Wilson’s vision of strong presidential governance was the basis for an alternative mode of politics to the dominant paradigm established by men like Quay and Aldrich. In due course, his approach would triumph—embraced not just by progressives on the left but conservatives on the right. So while his list of accomplishments perhaps pales in comparison with the heady successes of Roosevelt and Johnson, both men’s approaches to government were fundamentally Wilsonian.

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Wilson’s theories on how to reform the government were not static. As a young academic at Bryn Mawr College in the 1880s, he did not envision the president as a national leader. That view would come later, after he witnessed how Teddy Roosevelt wielded the presidency’s powers to bring coherence to the political system. Nevertheless, Wilson’s early writings remain important for understanding the direction reforms would take, for they develop his basic proposition that Congress could not wield its capacious powers in the nation’s interest. This is the through line in Wilsonian thought that would inform his own presidency and thus mark the beginning of congressional decline.

Wilson’s most significant early work is *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics*, published in 1885. “The Study of Public Administration,” published in *Political Science Quarterly* in 1887, is also fundamental.

They develop Wilson’s interest in shifting governing power from congressional committees—where he thought it was wielded irresponsibly—to cabinet ministers and bureaucrats, who could better serve the public interest. Wilson’s inspiration is not a strong president—for there had been no such example during his lifetime—but European government. The English system, as detailed in Walter Bagehot’s *The English Constitution*, informs Wilson’s views of congressional power, and the French and Prussian systems inform Wilson’s proposals on public administration.

In *Congressional Government*, Wilson argues that though the Constitution’s framers had envisioned a balanced system of government—with power carefully apportioned among the federal branches and between the states and the federal government—this had disappeared. Federal authority had overwhelmed the states, while Congress had come to dominate the president and the courts.

What is of decisive importance in Wilson’s view is the organization of Congress itself. Power rested specifically in the standing House and Senate committees. This decentralized system was bad for public power because it diffused power so broadly that nobody was responsible for bad policy. As he argues in “The Study of Public Administration,” “There is no danger in power, if only it be not irresponsible. If it be divided, dealt out in shares to many, it is obscured; and if it be obscured, it is made irresponsible.”⁸

Wilson’s alternative proposal is for “cabinet government,” along the lines of the English system. The English constitution formally separates the king from Parliament, but after the Glorious Revolution, the king’s ministers were members of Parliament and thus positioned to impose coherence on government—controlling the legislative agenda while encouraging effective oversight of executive administration. They were responsible for public policy. If voters did not like the course the nation was on, they could vote for the opposition party.

Integrating the American cabinet departments into Congress would make cabinet secretaries responsible for forming and executing public policy. As Wilson argues,

In the British House of Commons the functions and privileges of our Standing Committees are all concentrated in the hands of the Ministry, who

have, besides, some prerogatives of leadership which even our Committees do not possess, so that they carry all responsibility as well as great power, and all debate wears an intense personal and party interest. Every important discussion is an arraignment of the Ministry by the Opposition, an arraignment of the majority by the minority; and every important vote is a party defeat and a party triumph. The whole conduct of the government turns upon what is said in the Commons, because the revelations of debate often change votes, and a Ministry loses hold upon power as it loses hold upon the confidence of the Commons.⁹

This is not a presidential system in the sense that Wilson would later promote. Walter Lippmann characterized the president in this early Wilsonian model as “a kind of republican monarch, the head of the state, but no longer the chief executive.”¹⁰ That is remarkably different from Wilson’s later ideas of presidential governance.

Nevertheless, the underlying motivation is the same—Congress cannot govern responsibly, in the sense that voters can trace bad outcomes to bad policies, then punish the authors of those policies by voting for the opposition. Wilson’s solution is to integrate the cabinet departments with Congress. As president, he tried to transform the president into the person responsible for public policy, overseeing the legislative agenda and being held accountable to voters for the failures or successes of public policy.

“The Study of Administration,” published a few years after *Congressional Governance*, has a similar goal—making power more responsible—but a different approach. Here, Wilson seeks to distinguish between politics and administration to protect the latter from the former. Politics involves a clash over the values the law should embody. Administration, on the other hand, is a “detailed and systematic execution” of the law that should be value neutral.¹¹ The former is the domain of republican government, while the latter should be left to “a technically schooled civil service” that can apply businesslike precepts to achieve the ends established by law.¹²

For Wilson, a whole field of seemingly political questions are actually *technical* in nature—they should entangle not public opinion so much as experts skilled in the details of administration. Wilson was influenced

in this conclusion by European developments in public administration, including Prussia. Even though Prussia was not democratic, Wilson thinks Prussian notions of bureaucracy can be repurposed for democratic ends. He argues,

If I see a murderous fellow sharpening a knife cleverly, I can borrow his way of sharpening the knife without borrowing his probable intention to commit murder with it; and so, if I see a monarchist dyed in the wool managing a public bureau well, I can learn his business methods without changing one of my republican spots. He may serve his king; I will continue to serve the people; but I should like to serve my sovereign as well as he serves his.¹³

Moreover, asserts Wilson, European-style administration is compatible with American democratic norms, for it would limit public opinion to its proper sphere of operation. He writes,

Directly exercised, in the oversight of the daily details and in the choice of the daily means of government, public criticism is of course a clumsy nuisance, a rustic handling delicate machinery. But as superintending the greater forces of formative policy alike in politics and administration, public criticism is altogether safe and beneficent, altogether indispensable.¹⁴

On an issue like the tariff, Wilson would transfer power from the people (and, by extension, their elected representatives) to specialists and experts. The law would establish a broad outline—a general emphasis on protection for domestic industries, for instance—then experts would determine how best to achieve the goal. While seemingly undemocratic, this is actually—per Wilson—deeply consonant with the principles of popular sovereignty. Separating government’s ends from its means in this way will ensure the two are in sync.

Though he changed his views on the president’s role in the decades after publishing *Congressional Governance*, he remained a consistent believer in the importance of a politically independent administration of government. His reform agenda while president empowered independent agencies like the Federal Reserve and the Federal Trade Commission, while the War Industries Board

sought to inoculate wartime administration against the churn of democratic politics.

All told, in the 1880s, Wilson wanted to mitigate the problems of congressional irresponsibility by stripping the legislature of much of its power. First, Wilson would transform cabinet ministers into congressional leaders to guide policy decisions. Second, he would empower public administrators to handle the details of politics. While these views are distinct from his opinions on presidential governance in the 1910s, they are nevertheless related. Power would flow away from an irresponsible Congress to those who could wield authority for the national interest.

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Wilson's earliest scholarly work on government was published in the 1880s—a moment when reformers

seemed to have gained the upper hand. The Pendleton Act had defanged Conkling and the Stalwarts, Cleveland had secured the presidency, and government seemed to be getting better. But as the century came to a close, machine politics proved more durable than anybody would have imagined a decade prior. The barons of the Senate had forged what seemed to be an indestructible alliance with big business.

But if the 1890s belonged to the conservative forces of big business, the first two decades of the 20th century were the domain of the Progressives. No reformer would be more consequential than Wilson, a onetime academic and intellectual who came to wield enormous political power. And while Wilson's approach to reform would shift—from ministerial government to presidential government—his basic goal of taming an irresponsible Congress would remain the same.

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Notes

1. James A. Kehl, *Boss Rule in the Gilded Age: Matt Quay of Pennsylvania* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1981), 98.
2. See Lewis L. Gould, *The Most Exclusive Club: A History of the Modern United States Senate* (Basic Books, 2005), xii.
3. David Graham Phillips, *The Treason of the Senate*, ed. George E. Mowry and Judson A. Grenier (Quadrangle Books, 1964), 83.
4. "Brutus," "Brutus, No. 16," University of Chicago Press, The Founders' Constitution, https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/a1_3_1-2s13.html.
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7. Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams* (Houghton Mifflin, 1918), 261.
8. Woodrow Wilson, "The Study of Administration," *Political Science Quarterly* 2, no. 2 (1887): 213, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2139277.pdf>.
9. Woodrow Wilson, *Congressional Government: A Study in American Politics* (1885; Dover Publications, 2006), 78.
10. Walter Lippmann, introduction to Wilson, *Congressional Government*, 15.
11. Wilson, "The Study of Administration," 212.
12. Wilson, "The Study of Administration," 216.
13. Wilson, "The Study of Administration," 220.
14. Wilson, "The Study of Administration," 215.

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