

## Overview

- During the Gilded Age, politics were riddled with corruption as presidents awarded government positions to political supporters through the patronage or spoils system.
- Although several presidents made limited efforts toward reforming the spoils system, it was not until disappointed office-seeker Charles Guiteau assassinated president James Garfield in 1881 that civil service reform garnered widespread support.
- The Pendleton Civil Service Act was the first significant piece of anti-patronage legislation. The act created the Civil Service Commission to regulate and limit patronage positions.

## Politics in the Gilded Age

Corruption, shady political compromises, and backroom deals were political hallmarks of the Gilded Age. One famous example was the Compromise of 1877, which resolved the disputed presidential election of 1876 by awarding the presidency to Republican Rutherford B. Hayes (who had lost the popular vote) in exchange for the removal of federal troops from the South after the Civil War (which benefitted Democrats, who wished to end Reconstruction and return white supremacy to southern state governments).

Although Hayes' questionable ascendancy to the presidency did not create political corruption in the nation's capital, it did set the stage for politically-motivated agendas and widespread inefficiency in the White House for the next 24 years. Weak president after weak president took office; not one incumbent was reelected. The populace, it seemed, preferred the devil they didn't know to the one they did.

Once elected, presidents had barely enough power to repay the political favors they owed to the individuals who ensured their narrow victories in cities and regions around the country. Their four years in office were spent repaying favors and managing the powerful relationships that had put them in the White House.

Among the political issues that presidents routinely addressed during this era were ones of patronage, tariffs, and the nation's monetary system.

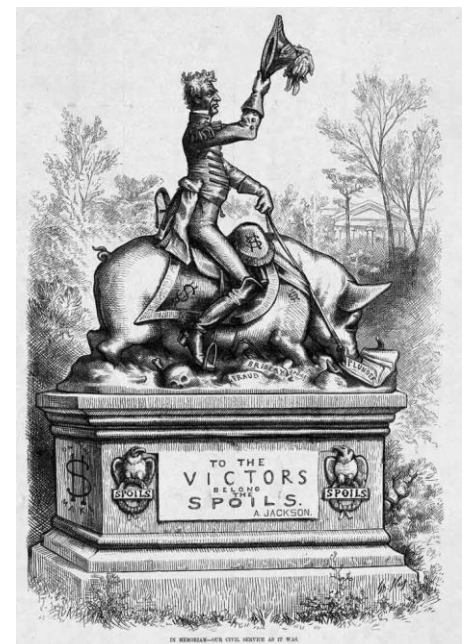
## The spoils system in the Gilded Age

At the heart of each president's administration was the protection of the spoils system, that is, the power of the president to practice widespread political patronage. Patronage, in this case, took the form of the president naming his friends and supporters to various political posts. Given the close calls in presidential elections during this era, the maintenance of political machinery and repaying favors with patronage was particularly important for presidents, regardless of their party affiliation.

As the table below depicts, every single president elected from 1876 through 1892 won despite receiving less than 50 percent of the popular vote. This established a repetitive cycle of relatively weak presidents who owed many political favors that could be repaid through one prerogative power: patronage. As a result, the spoils system allowed those with political influence to ascend to powerful positions within the government, regardless of their level of experience or skill, thus compounding both the inefficiency of government as well as enhancing the opportunities for corruption.

### US presidential election results (1876–1896)

Year	Candidates	Popular vote	Percentage
1876	R. B. Hayes	4,034,132	47.9%
	Samuel Tilden	4,286,808	50.9%
1880	James Garfield	4,453,337	48.3%
	Winfield Hancock	4,444,267	48.2%
1884	Grover Cleveland	4,914,482	48.8%
	James Blaine	4,856,903	48.3%
1888	Benjamin Harrison	5,443,663	47.8%



This political cartoon satirizing the spoils system shows 1830s president Andrew Jackson riding a pig, which is walking over "fraud," "bribery," and "spoils," and feeding on "plunder."

	Grover Cleveland	5,538,163	48.6%
1892	Grover Cleveland	5,553,898	46.0%
	Benjamin Harrison	5,190,799	43.0%
1896	William McKinley	7,112,138	51.0%
	William J. Bryan	6,510,807	46.7%

## Debates over civil service reform

At the same time, a movement emerged in support of reforming the practice of political appointments. As early as 1872, civil service reformers gathered to create the Liberal Republican Party in an effort to unseat incumbent President Grant. Led by several midwestern Republican leaders and newspaper editors, this party provided the impetus for other reform-minded Republicans to break free from the party and join the Democratic Party ranks. With newspaper editor Horace Greeley as their candidate, the party called for a “thorough reform of the civil service as one the most pressing necessities” facing the nation. Although easily defeated in the election that followed, the work of the Liberal Republican Party set the stage for an even stronger push for patronage reform.

Clearly owing favors to his Republican handlers for his surprise compromise victory by the slimmest of margins in 1876, President Hayes was ill-prepared to heed those cries for reform, despite his own stated preference for a new civil service system. In fact, he accomplished little during his four years in office other than granting favors, as dictated by Republic Party handlers.

Two powerful Republican leaders attempted to control the president. The first was Roscoe Conkling, a Republican senator from New York and leader of the Stalwarts, a group that strongly supported continuation of the current spoils system. A long-time supporter of former President Grant, Conkling had no sympathy for some of Hayes’ early appeals for civil service reform.

The other was James G. Blaine, Republican senator from Maine and leader of the Half-Breeds. The Half-Breeds, who received their derogatory nickname from Stalwart supporters who considered Blaine’s group to be only “half-Republican,” advocated for some measure of civil service reform.

Hayes failed to achieve any significant legislation during his presidency. His efforts towards ensuring African American civil rights were stymied by a Democratic Congress, and his decision to halt the coinage of silver merely added to the pressures of the economic Panic of 1873.

Hayes did, however, make a few overtures towards civil service reform. First, he adopted a new patronage rule, which held that a person appointed to an office could be dismissed only in the interest of efficient government operation but not for overtly political reasons. Second, he declared that party leaders could have no official say in political appointments, although Conkling sought to continue his influence. Finally, Hayes decided that government appointees were ineligible to manage campaign elections.

Hayes’ first target in his meager reform effort was to remove Chester A. Arthur, a strong Conkling man, from his post as head of the New York City Customs House. Arthur had been notorious for using his post as customs collector to gain political favors for Conkling. When Hayes forcibly removed him from the position, even Half-Breeds questioned the wisdom of the move and began to distance themselves from Hayes. The loss of his meager public support due to the Compromise of 1877 and a declining Congressional faction together sealed Hayes fate and made his reelection impossible.

## An assassin's bullet sets the stage for civil service reform

In the wake of President Hayes’ failure, the Republican factions began to battle over a successor for the 1880 presidential election. Initially, Stalwarts favored Grant’s return to the White House, while Half-Breeds promoted their leader, James Blaine. Following an expected convention deadlock, both factions agreed to a compromise presidential candidate, Senator James A. Garfield of Ohio, with Chester Arthur as his vice-presidential running mate. The Democratic Party turned to Winfield Scott Hancock, a former Union Army commander, as their candidate.



Political cartoon depicting Roscoe Conkling playing a popular puzzle game of the day with the heads of potential Republican presidential candidates, illustrating his control over the picks of the party.

Garfield won a narrow victory over Hancock by 40,000 votes, although he still did not win a majority of the popular vote. Despite this, less than four months into Garfield's presidency, events pushed civil service reform onto the fast track. On July 2, 1881, assassin Charles Guiteau shot and killed Garfield, allegedly uttering at the time, "I am a Stalwart of Stalwarts!" Guiteau himself had wanted to be rewarded for his political support—he had written a speech for the Garfield campaign—with an ambassadorship to France. His actions at the time were largely blamed on the spoils system, prompting more urgent cries for change.

Surprising both his party and the Democrats when he assumed the office of president, Chester Arthur immediately distanced himself from the Stalwarts. Although previously a loyal party man, Arthur understood that he owed his current position to no particular faction or favor. He was in the unique position to usher in a wave a civil service reform unlike any other political candidate, and he chose to do just that.

In 1883, he signed into law the Pendleton Civil Service Act, the first significant piece of anti-patronage legislation. This law created the Civil Service Commission, which listed all government patronage jobs and then set aside 15 percent of the list as appointments to be determined through a competitive civil service examination process. Furthermore, to prevent future presidents from undoing this reform, the law declared that future presidents could enlarge the list but could never shrink it by moving a civil service job back into the patronage column.



Garfield's shooting and the subsequent capture of the assassin, Charles Guiteau, are depicted in this illustration. The president clung to life for another two months after the assassination.

1. **What impact did the spoils system have on American government?**
2. **What brought on civil service reform? Do you think the Pendleton Act went far enough to correct the problems of patronage?**