
The Politics of Efficiency

**MUNICIPAL ADMINISTRATION AND
REFORM IN AMERICA: 1880-1920**

Martin J. Schiesl

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley

Los Angeles

London

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California
University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

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The Regents of the University of California
First Paperback Printing 1980
ISBN 0-520-04086-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 75-17285
Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Acknowledgments

I am especially indebted to Professor Clifton K. Yearley, who suggested that I study the history of urban governmental efficiency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He has been a sympathetic and discerning critic since I began the research and wrote a dissertation on this topic. Professor John F. Naylor of the State University of New York at Buffalo likewise read the manuscript and offered valuable suggestions. Professor Daniel D. Sager of California State University at Los Angeles provided helpful insights along the way.

I want to thank the staffs of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, the Columbia University Library, the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, the Lockwood Memorial Library of the State University of New York at Buffalo, the New York Public Library, the Henry E. Huntington Library, and the libraries of the Stevens Institute of Technology, Stanford University, California State University at Los Angeles, and the University of California at Los Angeles for assisting me in my research beyond the call of duty.

Finally, for her loving confidence, gentle prodding, and infinite understanding, I offer my most heartfelt gratitude to my wife, Sharon.

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Introduction

American city governments in the mid-nineteenth century, judged by standards of cost and service, were democratic and congenial to the people of a community-oriented society. Municipal regulations for the protection of life and property, together with cooperation for public improvements through taxes and private contributions, had fostered a strong sense of community among urban populations. This self-sufficiency of local government began to decline, however, under the impact of industrialization and immigration. By the 1880s reform spokesmen of the middle classes in the large cities were railing at the sluggish response of public officials to new problems of social adjustment and control. They searched for means of political reform which would preserve older social values and provide better ways of maintaining order and discipline in municipal affairs.

The reform movement and the deterioration of city administration were partly the consequence of rapid urban growth in an environment where government had a limited role. In the years from 1850 to 1890 the development of new methods of municipal transportation made it possible for cities to spread beyond their earlier boundaries, thus permitting high- and middle-income groups to live some distance from where they worked. Established neighborhoods eroded, downtown areas became divided into sections for the performance of specific functions, and suburban communities emerged beyond the central city.¹ To officials living through this transformation, the whole process was bewildering. Governmental systems that had been adequate for earlier communities were strained beyond their capacity to provide urban dwellers with adequate services and efficient administration.² There were few ready programs to meet pressing problems and contrive some order out of the uncon-

trolled expansion. Thus, the need in each city for some coordinating institution became more apparent.

This need was met to some extent by the political parties. During the 1860s and 1870s existing "machines" within the parties had centralized bits of power scattered among the numerous precincts and wards of cities. By the eighties these organizations were attempting to tighten their grip on urban administration. In the process, it was the responsibility of the "boss" to keep the machine operating effectively and make sure that political power remained in its hands. While their methods of mobilizing the organization differed little from those used by mid-nineteenth-century predecessors, the bosses wielded a new authority derived mainly from the increasing size and scope of municipal government. In some instances they were elected or appointed officials, but more often they exercised outside control over public servants tied to the organization by bonds of loyalty and patronage. The survival of the machines depended upon the bosses' continuing ability to distribute public posts and social services to various groups in urban society.

It was this function of the boss as an "invisible" governor behind the constitutional structure of city government that aroused the wrath of political reformers in the late nineteenth century. Like other middle-class groups who interpreted democracy in terms of property rights and assumed that government should be in the hands of well-educated and "respectable" people, they were frightened by the growing social and political influence of immigrants and workers. They therefore denounced the party system which permitted these lower-class people to acquire such power. In this period both population increases and economic expansion owed much to the arrivals of successive waves of immigrants from European countries. Grateful for the boss's favors and services, these citizens usually voted the straight party ticket and accepted the corruption evident in the machine system as a distasteful, though natural, part of city politics. Feeding on the anxieties of the newer residential neighborhoods, reformers saw this entrenchment of bossism as the collapse of legitimate and responsible government. They demanded drastic modifications in established forms of political expression.

Such dissatisfaction led to an emphasis on governmental efficiency, which tended to be defined as the promotion of

economic growth and development. In this context, it meant cheaper production and greater profit. "Although there are a number of ways in which economic growth may be served," political scientist Oliver P. Williams writes, "producer-oriented political activity often expresses itself negatively; that is, nothing should be done which might hinder the community's growth."³ For the reformers, this policy meant more economy and regularity in the management of municipal finance. They believed that the growing expense of civic management was directly proportional to the degree of dishonesty and waste in machine administrations. By providing responsible officials with more efficient methods of control, they hoped to establish and maintain honest and economical government.

In promoting this program, the reformers were not mainly motivated by status anxieties as defined by George E. Mowry⁴ and Richard Hofstadter.⁵ True, there was a degree of concern among the older gentry over alleged threats to inherited values and prestige. But most of the younger patricians found in political reform an avenue to upper-class respectability and prominence. More importantly, the dedication of reformers, as Robert H. Wiebe has shown, stemmed from the "inherent dynamics" of their occupations rather than from class connections.⁶ Differences existed, however. To older elements of the middle class in the eighties, efficiency was essentially a medium through which local government would be purified by the replacement of "bad" officials with "good" ones. Those who concerned themselves with the machinery of government felt that such a view was all too simple. For them, the character of two or three leading officials was of minor importance when set against the complexities of municipal management. The road to efficiency lay in the direction of new techniques of administrative control. By 1900 urban political reform was under the leadership of these progressive "structural" reformers. In addition to campaigning for honest government, the structuralists sought the total reorganization of city administration and eventual creation of a new bureaucratic system.⁷

This movement for governmental efficiency turned on three key concepts: nonpartisanship, the strong executive, and the separation of politics from administration. These themes suggested the need for more competent people in appointive

office and the establishment of an area of policy making where there would be no political conflict. In this setting, government meant a nonpartisan or "businesslike" management of municipal affairs. The reformers believed that there existed an interest that pertained to the entire city and would always prevail over competing, private interest. Public policy, therefore, mainly involved technical problems and only those with formal training could manage the business of the city. These civil servants would be responsible to the office of the chief executive in which authority over administrative personnel would be centralized. Thus, this model left little room for debate over questions of party policy in municipal administration. To elements of the middle class and their reformist spokesmen proposing the model, public policy was not the result of thorough discussion by various interest groups. Rather, it was achieved by a totally different system of making public decisions.

In pressing for this sort of efficiency, political reformers introduced arrangements that facilitated the movement of efficiency-minded representatives of the middle and upper classes into centers of power in city government. Finding themselves in competition with the party bosses, these officials welcomed the proposals of "nonpolitical" elites because the implementation of such proposals ultimately meant an increase in their influence over subordinate employees and the centralization of authority within their respective departments and offices. To be sure, there would be some disagreement between them and reform elites outside government as to the purpose and scope of administrative efficiency. Furthermore, some party leaders integrated political reform principles into their programs and worked for competent civic management. But most administrators and structural progressives outside public office shared the aversion to the boss system and the conviction that nonpartisan experts were the best directors of municipal affairs. The end in view for them was the removal of as many areas of formal decision-making as possible from the currents of machine politics.

The pursuit of this goal raised serious questions about the efficacy of mass democracy in an urban-industrial society. Confronted with charges that their philosophy of government was undemocratic, the structuralists repeatedly retorted that efficiency meant a modernization of urban democracy rather than the

destruction of popular government. In a time of far-reaching and rapid change, such a perspective, at least in theory, was directly related to the welfare and security of the urban masses. The political progressives were trying to replace the spasmodic welfare programs of the parties with a modern system of public services for all urban dwellers. Governmental efficiency, however, involved also a significant redistribution of political power in American cities. To the structural reformers it meant equal access to formal power for middle- and upper-class groups whom they felt were not being represented by machine government. But they overlooked the crucial issue of whether there could be equality in the exercise of power once these people were occupying key positions in municipal administration.

Chapter I

A NEW CONCEPTION OF POLITICS

Possibly because I was disorderly myself, I wanted order. And I hated waste. That I had been taught to esteem a cardinal sin, and American cities, I was told, were wasteful because they were ruled by politicians, whose only interest was in jobs.

Frederic C. Howe
The Confessions of a Reformer (1925)

To reform-minded members of the middle class who had a deep and abiding respect for a political system that facilitated economic advancement and usually protected the wealth and position of its most “valuable” citizens, it appeared that popular government had broken out of the stable framework in which smaller communities had contained it. Now, to their eyes, mass democracy ran reckless through the large cities and threatened not only private property but also all the authority of local institutions. In 1878 the prominent patrician historian Francis Parkman declared that the “diseases of the body politic” were “gathered to a head in cities” and it was there that the need of attacking them was “most urgent.” For him, the source of the disease lay in a system of “indiscriminate suffrage” which elevated an “ignorant proletariat” to positions of power.¹ In much the same vein, Thomas Cooley, a supreme court judge in Michigan and widely known authority on taxation, informed a Johns Hopkins University audience in 1879 that elections did not indicate the “public judgment,” and that those who wanted responsible government were aware of the “danger that at some time the better class of citizens” would “find themselves wholly powerless.”² Four years later John A. Kasson, a former congressman and later member of the Pendleton committee that would devise civil service regulations for the federal government,

pleaded for the expulsion of the "ruinous principle . . . which gives to a mere majority of irresponsible numbers the right of control over the municipality."³

In line with this resentment of mass democracy, spokesmen for the middle classes focused upon party government as the medium through which demolition of established institutions was being accomplished. A few conceded that this expansion of the political system was in part a consequence of the swift growth of cities since the Civil War, and that the unprecedented rise in public expenditures was a result of efforts to meet the needs of various groups in urban society. But most reformers shared the view that, as one authority on local politics put it, party government was the source of the "adulation of power and man-worship, the spirit of intrigue, suspicion and calumny . . . and the insolence of place."⁴ In 1875 the Tilden commission, formed in response to the Tweed Ring exposures in New York, spoke bluntly: "We place at the head of the list of evils under which our municipal administration labors, the fact that so large a number of important offices have come to be filled by men possessing little, if any, fitness for the important duties they are called upon to discharge."⁵

Other reformers agreed. In his *Critical Review of American Politics*, published in 1881, Charles Reemelin, former member of the Ohio legislature and then occupant of various commission posts, spoke of party governments which "eat out the substance of the people, leave them without good authorities, and conduct our public affairs to ruin and disgrace." Rather than being "free municipalities with vigorous administrative authorities," American cities, he argued, were subject to "mercenaries that rob society by levying taxes, taking blackmail, and heaping up public debts for posterity to pay."⁶ Similarly, a Democratic party group in Buffalo, New York, heard a reformer declare in 1886 that the "injection of political virus" into municipal government had "poisoned the system."⁷ Two years later James Bryce, an astute foreign observer of American politics, described the situation as follows:

As party machinery is in great cities most easily perverted, so the temptation to pervert it is there strongest, because the prizes are great. The offices are well paid, the patronage is large, the opportunities for jobs, commissions and contracts, pickings, and even stealings, are enormous.

Hence it is well worth the while of unscrupulous men to gain control of the machinery by which these prizes may be won.⁸

Such conditions had moved reformers to challenge the legitimacy of mass politics in municipal affairs. Simon Sterne, a reform lawyer and member of the Tilden commission, argued in 1877 that the "principle of universal manhood suffrage" only applied to "a very limited degree" in municipal administration because the city was "not a government, but a corporative administration of property interests in which property should have the leading voice."⁹ In the same vein, Francis Parkman saw the notion of "inalienable rights" as an "outrage to justice . . . when it hands over great municipal corporations . . . to the keeping of greedy and irresponsible crowds."¹⁰ E.L. Godkin, founder-editor of *The Nation*, one of the country's most influential organs of political criticism, pointed to unrestricted suffrage as the main source of misgovernment in major cities. "The reason why majority government succeeds so well . . . in small municipalities . . . and does not succeed in large cities," wrote Godkin in 1884, "is that all, or nearly all, voters are direct taxpayers, and thus feel local politics to be part of their private and personal affairs." He blamed the alleged indifference of nonpropertied classes to public expenditures for the rising costs of local government and recommended that they be prevented from voting on important civic measures.¹¹

From this standpoint, political reform appeared to be a matter of running municipal government along the lines of the business corporation. One reformer described local administration in 1886 as "merely a business agency" which would be "most successful and efficient" when managed by people selected on the amount of "special adaptation to work."¹² In the same year George M. Browne, a noted Boston mugwump and educator, contended that city government should be a "business corporation" and added that its organization involved "no principle of suffrage or question of franchise."¹³ Andrew D. White, former member of the New York Senate Committee on Cities and president of Cornell University, charged that cities were being governed under an "evil theory" that held that a city was a "political body." Instead the city, he felt, was a corporation, and "party political names and duties" were "utterly out of place there."¹⁴

These views suggested the need for a new strategy in municipal politics. Despite their distrust of railroad companies and concern over the expansion of industrial enterprises, elements of the middle class had come to see the corporation as a model for political reform. In their eyes it was an institution in which participants were seeking to maximize the attainment of goals with the most "efficient" use of available resources. Governmental reorganization, therefore, appeared to be a task of integrating business standards into the processes of administration.¹⁵ A present-day political scientist, Fred W. Riggs, provides the following insight into such a program of reform: "In general . . . the administrative bureau is a counterpart of the formal economic market. Both are utilitarian, rational, maximizing institutions for making choices in a situation where means are scarce. . . . American market society seeks to apply in the administrative sphere the same basic values that apply in the market."¹⁶ This viewpoint would often have relevance to the strategies adopted by reformers in pursuing governmental efficiency. Indeed, the ideology of political reform presumed this interrelationship of capitalist values and administrative methods.

Beyond the economic orientation of municipal reform, there was an attack on the fiscal consequences of party government. Simon Sterne charged that the parties had through the manipulation of suffrage organized a "communistic system" that led to the "confiscation of a large portion of wealth accumulated in our cities."¹⁷ Another close observer of city politics complained about the "unremitting desire of the politicians to gather masses of votes" and the "placemen who furnish them to prey upon the city treasury."¹⁸ In this indictment of party politics the issue in municipal finance was not simply the level of spending; rather, the reformers were more concerned about the groups from whom party leaders were extracting the revenues to sustain their organization. They saw local government as a logical extension of propertied interests in urban society. "Non-taxpayers, and payers of a poll-tax only," wrote John A. Kasson, "have no civil interest which demands equality of representative force in the municipality. . . . We here find a sound principle which would justify a limitation of municipal suffrage to property-owners and to the payers of taxes, who are affected by the liabilities to be created and the expenditures within the municipal jurisdiction."¹⁹ Ex-

pressing the same thought but with a different emphasis, reformer Frank P. Crandon declared that a city was a "joint-stock affair in which the taxpayers are the stockholders" and that "to them substantially should the management of its business be committed."²⁰ Similarly, the prominent mugwump and biographer James Parton charged in 1887 that "men who have nothing impose the taxes" and held that the remedy for this situation was a government filled "only with city taxpayers" equipped to carry out the public business with "intelligence and economy."²¹

Complementing this corporate view of the city was the sharp distinction drawn by reformers between party and "patriotic" government. To them there had been an era when men were selected for office because they were dedicated statesmen rather than mere custodians of political organizations. In 1884 E.L. Godkin expected to see a time when politics would return to the "management of public affairs as distinguished from the working of the nominating machinery."²² Five years later Moorfield Storey, a prominent Boston lawyer and member of the prestigious Massachusetts Reform Club, noted that it was an "evil day for a nation when its best men . . . cease to take an interest in its government." In his opinion, public questions and decisions required "cool and deliberate reflection" and only men of high intelligence and social standing could meet such standards.²³

In a manner typical of most urban political reformers, Godkin and Storey glossed over the fact that politicians in the "good old days" often employed the ruse of disclaiming personal ambition when running for public office. By the late nineteenth century the pattern had not changed. Indeed, one could argue that the mugwumps made a fetish of the practice. Still, it was true that there was a noticeable absence of the "best men" from local government. "The people of means in all great cities," wrote the young Theodore Roosevelt in 1885, "have . . . shamefully neglected their personal duties and they have been contemptuously disregarded by the professional politicians in consequence."²⁴ Overlooking the fact that public employment in Europe had been traditionally in the hands of the upper classes and was not really confronted as yet with the pressures of mass democracy, James Bryce wrote that the "proportion of men of

intellectual and social eminence in office was smaller in America than in the "free countries of Europe." This situation, he felt, would not change until municipal posts were cleared of the "dirt heaps" put there by party professionals.²⁵

Such conditions left the reform-minded members of the middle class in a painful situation. To what methods would they turn for political expression if they stayed out of established institutions? For many years most of them had recognized the need for parties in municipal government. Before a New York audience in 1881, George William Curtis, the distinguished editor of *Harper's Weekly*, declared that "organization is the lens that draws the fiery rays of conviction and enthusiasm to a focus and enables them to bury a way through all obstacles."²⁶ A few years later the "organization" was catering to the whims of the "dangerous classes" in urban society, responsible for the "plunder" of public treasuries, and destroying the last traces of "public spirit" in local government.²⁷

Determined to regain influence in municipal politics, the reformers moved in two complementary directions. One was in large measure a rather conventional situation of the "outs" attempting to replace the "ins." But the strategy of political reform went much deeper than mere exchange of personnel. It also promised a basic reorganization of city administration. "The coming reform, to be effectual," wrote George Browne, "must be deep, radical, institutional; it must change the basis of municipal governments, and convert them into their proper form and function of business corporations."²⁸ Andrew D. White maintained that the parties should "have nothing to do with cities," and that those who brought "political considerations into municipal management [were] to be opposed."²⁹

From this perspective, the task of reform was to purge local government of party politics and transform it into an institution run according to the social values of the middle classes. But there were some complications. Traditional channels of patrician leadership were breaking down under the impact of accelerating urbanization and rapid industrialization. During the seventies, urban society considered family position to be essential in appraising the standing of one's contemporaries. But the growing concentration of industrial wealth in large cities was blurring the lines of status between older and newer middle-class families.

Further, a more complex and specialized economy required higher levels of occupational professionalism. In this environment two cosmopolitan “elites” simultaneously interacted and competed for power and prestige: one comprised descendants of the older mercantile and landholding upper middle class; the other included younger professional men who were acquiring a new middle-class consciousness through loyalties drawn from their occupations. This interaction, as recently shown by one historian, was an “evolutionary, assimilative and conservative process” which encompassed attendance at select colleges, membership in metropolitan clubs, and the listing of one’s family in the *Social Register*.³⁰ Pulling both groups into a reform coalition was a common aversion to urban democracy as expressed in party government. Governmental efficiency thus became a mutual objective and important area of cooperation among the older gentry and younger mugwumps.

Confident that there were alternatives to party government, the reformers focused on the notion of executive responsibility in municipal administration. To the Tilden commission the remedy for the “evils” of local government lay in the direction of separating “the exercise of executive or legislative discretionary power.” Executive power would reside in the mayor, who would have powers of appointment and removal. The mayor, in turn, would hold the heads of departments “rigidly responsible for an efficient discharge of their duties.” On the other hand, control of fiscal machinery would rest in an elective board of finance, since the commission felt that putting the control of the city treasury into the hands of one man, “with liberty to use it to keep himself in place, would be suicidal.”³¹ In the same vein, Thomas Cooley contended that there ought to be a “public sentiment” which required that an executive select officials “irrespective of party.” But this influence, he noted, would not insure responsibility in urban government. Equally important was the need for more “unity in the executive,” and this meant developing a system which made “officers and boards” directly responsible to the mayor. To William M. Ivins, city chamberlain of New York City and later counsel of the Fassett committee of the New York Senate which would investigate local governments in the early nineties, the “medley of functions and duties” had left the mayor’s office a kind of “political junkshop.” In this setting one would find “all kinds of administrative odds and ends in a condi-