



"A Temptation to Dishonesty": Patronage and the Corruption of the Party System, 1828–83

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Key Points

- Patronage became the dominant factor in political organization from the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 until the passage of the Pendleton Civil Service Act in 1883. It was a way for party leaders to maintain order by awarding public jobs, contracts, and emoluments to loyalists.
- While the patronage system helped establish the party system, the corruption it produced eventually became intolerable.
- Before the Civil War, the patronage system's fraud and incompetence degraded the quality of government in the United States. After the Civil War, federal patronage became centralized in a handful of senators, who built formidable and corrupt political machines.
- The failure of the patronage system demonstrated that the parties were not well designed to work for the good of the country.

The rise of political parties is as important to understanding American politics as the development and ratification of the Constitution itself. The Constitution established the basics of how social, political, and economic disputes would be arbitrated via republican politics. But the parties extended the process by organizing how such disagreements would be presented to voters.

In so doing, the parties created the possibility for harmony to come through the seemingly endless factionalism that the founders anticipated. By carefully organizing public opinion, parties hold out the prospect of finding the points of consensus among groups who would otherwise disagree with each other. In this way, the parties make democratic accountability over the government possible.

In Martin Van Buren's ideal of the American party system, patronage was essential in bringing about this goal. A handful of elite party leaders would strategically distribute patronage—jobs, contracts, and emoluments—to party loyalists to induce them to follow the party program. Patronage was the means to secure the party's commitment to specific policy objectives, leaving it to the voters to decide whether those objectives are good for the country. If the party did its job well, it would win electoral victory because the voters judged its policy proposals were in the national interest.

At any rate, that was the theory. Yet in practice, the parties during the patronage era (roughly 1828–83) rarely lived up to this aspiration. Perhaps the main

reason was their unique origins. Whereas the Constitution was created in a moment outside political time—with delegates to the Convention sequestered to debate matters in an abstract manner—the parties were always yoked to short-term political calculations. Van Buren and the Democrats may have aspired to bring public opinion to bear on public policy, *but the party was mainly a tool to elect Andrew Jackson and his allies*. The Whig Party, which formed in reaction to Jackson's administration, was similar in its purpose—to defeat Jackson. As such, the parties' ability to facilitate democratic accountability was always a secondary matter, one that could be easily overlooked in its efforts to win the next election.

Strong leadership could ease this tension—and it did at several points in the history of the patronage era. Men such as Van Buren and Abraham Lincoln—crafty, clever, and unabashedly political, but with an abiding commitment to the public interest—could balance electoral victory with democratic accountability. But as James Madison warned in *Federalist* 10, “Enlightened statesmen will not always be at the helm.”¹ They quite often were lacking during the patronage era.

As the wrong sorts of leaders acquired power, patronage stopped being the means to an end and became the end of politics. Party leaders won elections to acquire wealth and power, without regard to the interests of the nation. And since the parties were built primarily for electoral victory, there were no institutional safeguards to remove such bad leaders from positions of authority.

The great genius of the American constitutional system is that it uses checks and balances to make sure that government works reasonably well without “enlightened statesmen.” The great weakness of the party system was that when mediocre men gained control of a political party, they could wreak enormous havoc. Van Buren's ideal of a centralized, organized machine that used patronage to direct party men to act on behalf of the national good devolved into what one office seeker called “a general scramble for plunder.”² Consequently, the quality of public administration rapidly declined during the patronage era, the taxpayer was defrauded for tens of millions of dollars, and Americans were left without a government competent enough to handle the rapid industrialization that occurred after the Civil War.

Patronage and Corruption Before the Civil War

The use of patronage for partisan purposes took quick and deep root in national politics after Jackson and Van Buren introduced it during the 1830s. This was due in part to the Tenure of Office Act of 1820, which placed term limits on most offices dealing with money and subjected them to the constitutional nomination process. Originally intended to be a way to safeguard the public treasury, these rules became an opportunity for the parties to appropriate government resources for political purposes, as these regularly vacated offices were filled via patronage appointments.³

The critical test of the patronage system came in 1841. The Whigs, who had opposed Jackson and Van Buren, came to power that year. Would they retain the patronage system, or would they return to the old way of merit that had characterized the early republic?

The Whigs, just like the Democrats before them, had swept into office thanks to a massive effort to drive out their vote, and they had a seemingly endless number of party workers to reward. Therefore, just like the Democrats before them, they embraced patronage, thereby entrenching the practice for the next 40 years. At the end of every administration between Van Buren and Rutherford Hayes, there would be a great purge of executive officers, as the new president removed his foes to reward his friends. In 1857, Democrat James Buchanan even went so far as to remove the appointees of his Democratic predecessor, Franklin Pierce.⁴

In the Jacksonian era, the Constitution's intermixing of the appointment power—between a president who nominates officers and a Senate that confirms them—brought about a struggle between the executive and legislative branches over control of patronage. For the most part, the president carried the day, at least for the offices that require Senate confirmation. As the Senate could only reject presidential appointments, rather than make its own selections, the president more or less retained the edge in placing his own allies.

For other offices that did not go through the confirmation process—the thousands upon thousands of post officers, land-office officials, tax collectors, and so on, which by law were appointed by the president or heads of departments—Congress held greater sway, even though it had no formal role. The president simply did not have the time to deal with the

endless swarm of job seekers, so power devolved to congressmen and senators, whose counsel usually carried the day. From the president's perspective, it was better to give House members discretion about who was named as postal carriers in their districts than to evaluate each applicant on the merits.

Consequently, patronage—far from being a tool to unite the party—actually became a way for one faction in a state to enrich itself at the expense of the others. Members of Congress possessed an institutional myopia that prevented them from seeing the big picture, and the president—whose stature could in theory grant him that vision—simply did not have the time to deal out every postmastership in the country.⁵

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This was the great institutional flaw of the patronage system, why it could not bring coherence to the chaos of American politics. The only way that could happen was if patronage went through a central clearinghouse, which distributed patronage strategically for the good of the party and its political program. The president was the obvious choice for such a role, as he is the only national officer in the constitutional schema. But there was too much patronage for him to handle, so its distribution eventually became decentralized. And far from uniting various factions in a shared quest for the public good, a decentralized patronage system, wherein factions effectively took care of themselves, could never possibly harmonize the diverse interests of the country around a set of policy commitments that advanced the general welfare.

Nevertheless, one can appreciate a partial realization of Van Buren's aspirations during the middle of the 19th century. Between 1832 and 1858, the two parties managed to hold together diverse interregional coalitions, despite the potential of the slavery issue to drive the nation apart. Daniel Webster's famed speech on the Senate floor about the union from

1836—"While the Union lasts, we have high, exciting, gratifying prospects spread out before us and our children. Beyond that I seek not to penetrate the veil. God grant that in my day, at least, that curtain may not rise!"—was memorized by schoolchildren for generations.⁶ But it must be noted that patronage was, at least in part, the glue that held the storied union together.

Equally important, patronage was essential to the agenda of Lincoln, who was a true savant in employing it to secure the Republicans' domestic agenda, manage the Civil War, and free the slaves. It was through patronage, for instance, that he secured Nevada as a free state. In addition, it was through patronage that he induced Congress to propose the 13th Amendment to the states for ratification. The cause of freedom itself depended not just on his ability to express a moral vision of the country, Grant's military genius, and the sacrifice of countless thousands of Union soldiers, but also on Lincoln's clever ability to distribute tax collectorships at the New York Customs House.⁷

Yet if patronage worked for the national good to some degree in the mid-1800s, it simultaneously produced bad side effects. In particular, there was a marked decline in the quality of public administration and a noticeable increase in misspent taxpayer funds. These problems were evident early on in the era, and they only grew worse over time. Samuel Swartwout, whom Andrew Jackson appointed as collector of customs at the Port of New York in 1829, embezzled \$1.2 million, a staggering sum for the period. He escaped to England. His successor, Jesse Hoyt, also embezzled a substantial sum.⁸ Land officers collected large quantities of cash and would use it for private purposes. For instance, in 1836 W. P. Harris, a collector of revenue at a western land office, blew \$100,000 of public money in speculative schemes. Later, his friend Gordon Boyd wasted another \$50,000.⁹

In 1859 congressional Republicans began an extensive investigation into the patronage practices of the Buchanan administration. The report of the Covode Committee—named after its chairman, John Covode of Pennsylvania—provided detailed evidence of abuse. It found that Buchanan and his Democratic allies spread patronage around to secure the passage of the pro-slavery Lecompton Constitution of Kansas, over and above the wishes of the state's residents. Government printing and binding contracts were not

given out to the lowest bidders, but instead to Buchanan partisans. There were also widespread irregularities at the customs house of Philadelphia, including jobs being given to Democratic allies who never showed up for work. Also in Pennsylvania, government workers were required to chip in around 5 percent of their salaries to support the local party, and around Election Day many workers were absent from their jobs because they had been instructed to campaign for Democrats.¹⁰

Even Lincoln, who otherwise was expert in distributing patronage with the eye to the greater good, could not always avoid the taint of corruption. In 1861 he named Simon Cameron secretary of war as repayment for his support during the 1860 nomination battle. Cameron was terribly suited for the job and looked the other way as his cronies defrauded the government, until Lincoln finally fired him 10 months later.¹¹

And as the juxtaposition of Lincoln and Buchanan illustrates, the virtue of the patronage system depended on whether the president employed patronage in a wise and careful manner, with an eye to the national interest. Lincoln was wise and could use patronage for the national interest, even though it proved occasionally problematic. Buchanan was unwise, and patronage fueled corruption that spread throughout much of the federal government.

The ultimate fate of the patronage system would come to depend on the approach of Ulysses S. Grant, elected president in 1868. After four years of Civil War and another four under the disastrous administration of Andrew Johnson, it would be up to Grant to redefine how politics should function in the postwar republic. Would patronage endure as a sustainable form of political organization, offering more benefits from its potential for national unity than burdens upon public administration? Or would it interfere with the steady and reliable enforcement of the laws and promote graft beyond what was publicly tolerable? Grant, one way or the other, would make the determination.

Patronage and Corruption After the Civil War

While historians such as Ron Chernow have praised Grant lately for his moral clarity on voting rights for former slaves, he nevertheless was unusually lax in

his management of the Republican Party and the federal administration. This was extremely problematic for the maintenance of a healthy party system.

An essential premise of the Van Buren structure was vigorous, centralized leadership. Somebody, or at least some authority, had to distribute jobs, contracts, and emoluments with an eye toward securing the public good. Grant did not set this task for himself. Instead, he adopted a hands-off approach to executive administration, allocating essential decisions to the party bosses who dominated the United States Senate.

In his letter accepting the Republican Party's nomination in May 1868, Grant wrote that the president should be a "purely administrative officer."¹² Similarly, Sen. John Sherman of Ohio, a longtime friend of Grant, later recalled that the president's errors, such as they may have been, were due to the limits of the presidency itself. The office, Sherman averred, "Should be subordinate to the legislative department. The President should obey and enforce the law, leaving to the people the duty of correcting any errors committed by their representatives in Congress."¹³

This minimalist view is consistent with Article II of the Constitution, which does not give the president a lot of power over domestic politics. But the executive office had grown a great deal beyond its constitutional origins, and by 1869 the president had expansive duties to lead his party in pursuit of a national agenda. This, Grant generally refused to do. Henry Adams later wrote, "Grant avowed from the start a policy of drift; and a policy of drift attaches only barnacles. . . . Grant had no objects, wanted no help, wished for no champions."¹⁴ Admittedly, Adams was one of the harsher critics from Grant's time. Yet his complaint comes close to the mark. Grant diverged from strong administrators like Jackson and Lincoln by generally deferring on virtually all executive matters of appointment to a handful of Republican senators whom Grant considered friends and confidants.

Senators enjoyed another advantage, in addition to an indulgent president. In 1867 the Radical Republicans markedly shifted power relations between the president and the Senate on the matter of appointments by passing the Tenure of Office Act over Andrew Johnson's veto. This measure, later ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, required

the president to receive the Senate's advice and consent on not only executive appointments but also executive *removals*. The animating idea was to stop Johnson—a Democrat from Tennessee looking to go easy on the former states of the Confederacy—from undermining Reconstruction.

However, the act also had the side effect of making it extremely difficult for the president to rein in the Senate bosses, if that were what he wished to do. If, say, a powerful senator had installed a favorite as director of the New York Customs House, the president was powerless to get rid of him without that senator's consent. In 1877 future President James A. Garfield called the act a "usurpation, by the Senate, of a large share of the appointment power . . . seriously crippling the powers of the executive. It placed in the hands of senators and representatives a power most corrupting and dangerous."¹⁵

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Future presidents, including Garfield himself, would struggle against the power that the Tenure of Office Act granted to the Senate party bosses, but Grant had no interest in such a battle. Instead, he delegated authority to northern Republican senators, who took advantage of the president's indulgence to build formidable, and profoundly corrupt, political organizations. Nearly a dozen such senators dominated the upper chamber of the Congress, though two in particular stand out—Simon Cameron of Pennsylvania and Roscoe Conkling of New York.¹⁶

At first blush, Cameron would make for an unlikely boss of the Pennsylvania Republican Party. He originally cut his teeth as the publisher of a Jacksonian newspaper, and his connections to the state Democratic Party enabled him to get rich on government contracts for private businesses. However, Pennsylvania's rapid industrialization put Cameron at odds with the national Democratic Party, which favored

lower tariff rates while Pennsylvania was generally in favor of industrial protection.

Therefore, Cameron jumped ship to the Lincolnian Republicans and made a run for their presidential nomination in 1860. He dropped out, endorsed Lincoln at the convention, and as payment was put in charge of the War Department, which he proceeded to run into the ground by turning a blind eye to all sorts of graft and fraud. Lincoln quickly replaced Cameron with Edwin Stanton and sent the former off to be ambassador to Russia.

That might have been the end of Cameron's political career, but he was not done. He used his personal fortune to effectively buy off Republicans in the Pennsylvania state legislature and secured himself a Senate seat in 1867. When Grant became president in 1869, Grant allowed Cameron to dictate patronage distribution throughout the state. He did so very cleverly and was able to hold together a majority coalition in one of the most diverse states in the union—uniting two major cities (Pittsburgh and Philadelphia), farmers and industrial workers, Germans, Scots, the English, and the Irish, all under his banner.

Nevertheless, this was not governance for the sake of the common good, but rather for the good of the Cameron Machine. Contractors, legislators, and even the governor could be bribed, such that between the Civil War and the Great Depression, the Cameron Machine (later helmed by his son Donald, then Matthew Quay, and finally Boies Penrose) thrived. Meanwhile, not one public-spirited reformer ever emerged from the Keystone State as a national leader.¹⁷

The boss of New York Republican politics during the Grant administration was Roscoe Conkling, known as the "Gentleman Boss" for his fine manner of dress. Originally the mayor of Utica, he entered the Senate in 1866, at the high-water mark of the Radical Republicans, who were seeking to control Reconstruction over and above the veto of President Johnson. Conkling was a staunch Radical, and he became friends with Grant, who in turn handed him the keys to the patronage kingdom—the New York Customs Office.

The Port of New York by this point was the largest in the country by far, and because tariffs were the main source of federal revenue, a large amount of tax money came through the Customs Office. Conkling essentially kept his political machine thriving by skimming a small percentage—but a large dollar

amount—off the top of the Customs House's collections. The size of the port also required many government officials on site, which in turn created opportunities for hundreds of patronage jobs that empowered the Republican machine. At the top of this prosperous organization stood Conkling, who was able to dominate the Empire State because the president deferred to him on virtually every matter of patronage.¹⁸

By the end of Grant's eight-year tenure, patronage—once intended as a tool to secure good government against a self-interested few—had come to have precisely the opposite effect. All the problems that were manifest during the Jacksonian age became substantially more severe. Worst of all, power was centralized in a handful of senatorial barons who employed it for no purpose beyond the amplification of their own power, wealth, and prestige. As Ohio Gov. Rutherford Hayes wrote in his 1876 acceptance letter for the Republican nomination:

[The patronage] system destroys the independence of the separate departments of the government. It tends directly to extravagance and official incapacity; it is a temptation to dishonesty; it hinders and impairs that careful supervision and strict accountability by which alone faithful and efficient public service can be secured; it obstructs the prompt removal and sure punishment of the unworthy; in every way it degrades the civil service and the character of the government.¹⁹

Hayes' denunciation was an important milestone in the fight against patronage. The Democratic Party in 1876 actively campaigned against the rule of "to the victors go the spoils" because they had not won the presidency for 20 years. However, for the Republicans to publicly attack a system they had entrenched was an indication of widespread public disgust with the shoddy state of executive administration. As president, Hayes would fight a losing battle against the patronage-funded oligarchs of the Senate to reform a government that had become badly corrupted.

It would take the murder of a president to finally do away with the patronage system. On July 2, 1881, President Garfield was waiting for a train at the Baltimore and Ohio Station in Washington, DC, when Charles Guiteau shot him. Garfield lingered for two

months and eventually succumbed to his wounds on September 18—or more specifically, succumbed to his doctor's clumsy efforts to remove the bullet from his back. Guiteau was a lunatic who, in his insanity, believed that he had been denied a federal office because he was part of the Stalwart faction of Republicans (of which Garfield was not a member). These were the rantings of a maniac, but even so, the slaying of the president over a government job dealt a fatal blow to the patronage system.

After Garfield passed away, the Republicans in control of Congress scrambled to pass civil service reform during the 1883 lame-duck session. They picked up legislation originally proposed by George Pendleton, a Democrat from Ohio. (The Democrats, sensing an opportunity to reclaim the power of patronage, opposed passage of their own measure.) The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act outlawed assessments on civil servants and established a list of positions not open to patronage. Importantly, it also allowed the president to expand the list, effectively grandfathering patronage appointees. The quick turnover of the presidency between 1884 and 1896 led to the rapid dissolution of the patronage regime.

Conclusion

To appreciate the damage that patronage had done to the republic in the decades before and after the Civil War, it is useful to compare Alexander Hamilton's ideal of executive administration to the reality of the period. In *Federalist* 70, Hamilton wrote:

Energy in the executive is a leading character in the definition of good government. It is essential to the protection of the community against foreign attacks: It is not less essential to the steady administration of the laws, to the protection of property against those irregular and high handed combinations, which sometimes interrupt the ordinary course of justice to the security of liberty against the enterprises and assaults of ambition, of faction and of anarchy.²⁰

In contrast, writing in *Putnam's Magazine* in 1868, Julius Bing—a prominent critic of the patronage system—wrote of the government:

At present there is no organization save that of corruption; no system save that of chaos; no test of integrity save that of partisanship; no test of qualification save that of intrigue.

The consequence is, that the revenue laws are not executed, for the want of faithful officers; and these and other laws are imperfectly applied, for the want of competent functionaries. . . .

The great majority of the hundreds of thousands of officeholders of the United States are virtually nothing else than political mercenaries, who are paid by the state, instead of being paid by the individual whom their votes lift into power.²¹

This is why the patronage system had to be placed in the dustbin of administrative history. In the 50 years of its existence on the national level, it debilitated the reliable and steady administration of the laws, corrupted government officials far and wide, and led to a shocking decline in public faith of the government—all of which challenged the very premise of the executive branch the founders had created.

Bing's perspective is primarily a moral one; the patronage system had become an evil in American society. It was perpetuated by selfish crooks with no regard for anything or anybody but themselves. Insofar as contemporary Americans have remembered the patronage regime, this is usually the perspective—an emphasis on fraud, criminality, and bad morals.

Given the ignominious careers of men such as Cameron and Conkling, this is certainly a fair perspective. However, it is not the only perspective. It is fine to view the corruption of patronage on a moral level, but it should also be viewed on an institutional level. From that angle, we can see that the corruption and eventual collapse of the patronage system was a symptom of the problematic structure of the American political parties.

Patronage, Van Buren had argued so many years earlier, was necessary because human beings are naturally selfish. This drives many people to get into politics in the first place, and if politics is going to accomplish public purposes, there must be some system in place to rechannel these selfish motives. The idea of patronage directed by a centralized organization of party loyalists was a way to ensure that parties accomplish their republican purpose of translating public opinion into public policy.

A larger problem with patronage was not the problem itself, but the parties that implemented. They lacked internal checks and balances to keep it from being abused. Unlike the Constitution—carefully constructed behind closed doors by men who on balance had few immediate political gains to be made from the particular structure—the parties were invented on the fly, more or less to secure victory in an upcoming election. So, while the parties could use patronage to secure public-spirited goals, there was really no *requirement* that they do so. Thus, party patronage could facilitate the big-minded goals of a Lincoln or a Van Buren, *as well as* the thievery of a Cameron or a Conkling, the incompetence of a Buchanan, or the indifference of a Grant. The problem was not patronage per se. Like any tool of politics, it has its advantages and disadvantages. Rather, the problem was that the parties were not designed in a way to ensure that the patronage system would not be abused.

The problems of party government would worsen, despite the abolition of the patronage regime. Eliminating patronage as a resource to satisfy selfish impulses did not eliminate the impulses themselves.

The fact remained that politics was still expensive to finance, and the Pendleton Civil Service Act had now outlawed the main form of subsidy. The parties would have to search elsewhere for funds, and this hunt would drive them straight into the waiting arms of the massive business combines that had developed during the Industrial Revolution. The parties would transform into obliging pass-through entities for the oligarchs who sought to dominate government just as they had economics.