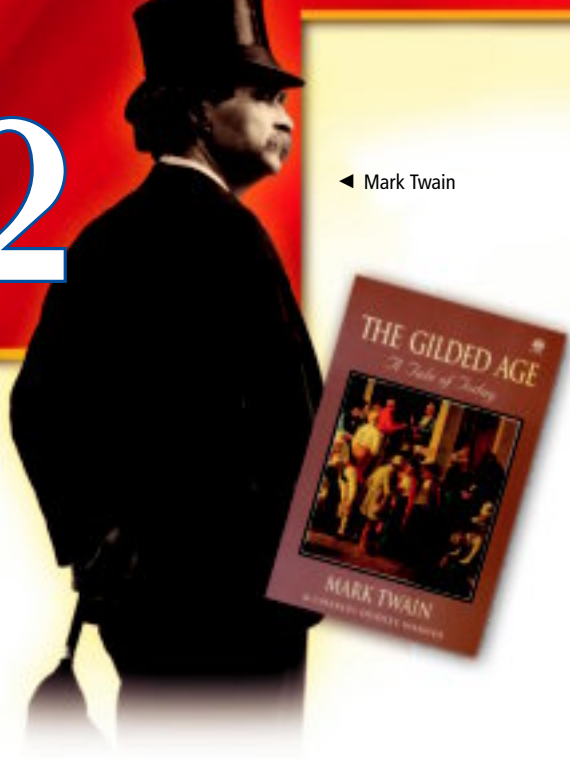
SECTION 2



◄ Mark Twain

WITNESS HISTORY AUDIO

The Gilded Age

The spoils system, or the practice of giving government positions to political supporters, was the accepted way of staffing federal offices. However, there were demands for reform. Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner give their view of the situation in *The Gilded Age.*

"Unless you can get the ear of a Senator . . . and persuade him to use his 'influence' in your behalf, you cannot get an employment of the most trivial nature in Washington. Mere merit, fitness and capability, are useless baggage to you without 'influence.' . . . It would be an odd circumstance to see a girl get employment . . . merely because she was worthy and a competent, and a good citizen of a free country that 'treats all persons alike.'"

—from *The Gilded Age* by Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner

Political and Economic Challenges

Objectives

- Analyze the issue of corruption in national politics in the 1870s and 1880s.
- Discuss civil service reform during the 1870s and 1880s.
- Assess the importance of economic issues in the politics of the Gilded Age.

Terms and People

spoils system
civil service
Pendleton Civil Service Act
gold standard

NoteTaking

Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas As you read, describe the issues that dominated national politics in the 1870s and 1880s.

I. Politics and Economics
  A. Political Stalemate
  B. Corruption in Politics
    1.
    2.

Why It Matters While Congress enacted many major reforms during Reconstruction, it passed very few measures between 1877 and 1900. Instead, inaction and political corruption characterized the political scene during the Gilded Age. This raised questions whether or not democracy could succeed in a time dominated by large and powerful industrial corporations and men of great wealth. **Section Focus Question: Why did the political structure change during the Gilded Age?**

Balance of Power Creates Stalemate

Party loyalties were so evenly divided that no faction or group gained control for any period of time. Only twice between 1877 and 1897 did either the Republicans or Democrats gain control of the White House and both houses of Congress at the same time. Furthermore, neither held control for more than two years in a row. This made it very difficult to pass new laws. Most of the elections were very close as well, allowing those who lost to block new legislation until they got back in power.

In comparison to Lincoln, the Presidents of the Gilded Age appeared particularly weak. They won by slim margins and seemed to lack integrity. Rutherford B. Hayes owed his election in 1876 to a secret deal. Benjamin Harrison became only the second President in history to lose the popular vote but win the electoral college vote.

Chester Arthur, who took the helm following James Garfield's assassination, upset so many of his fellow Republicans that he failed to win his own party's presidential nomination in 1884.

Vocabulary Builder
integrity–(ihn TEHG ruh tee) *n.* quality of being honest and always having high moral principles

The most noteworthy President of the era was Grover Cleveland. In an era known for its corruption, Cleveland maintained a reputation for integrity. He once observed, "A Democratic thief is as bad as a Republican thief." Cleveland enjoyed an extremely rapid rise to political prominence. In 1881, running as a reformer, he won the race for mayor in Buffalo, New York. A year later, he became the governor of New York, and in 1884, he became the first Democrat to win the White House in 24 years. In 1888, even though he won the popular vote, Cleveland lost to Benjamin Harrison. But Cleveland came back to rewin the presidency in 1892.

✓ **Checkpoint** **Why did the federal government fail to make significant political gains between 1877 and 1897?**

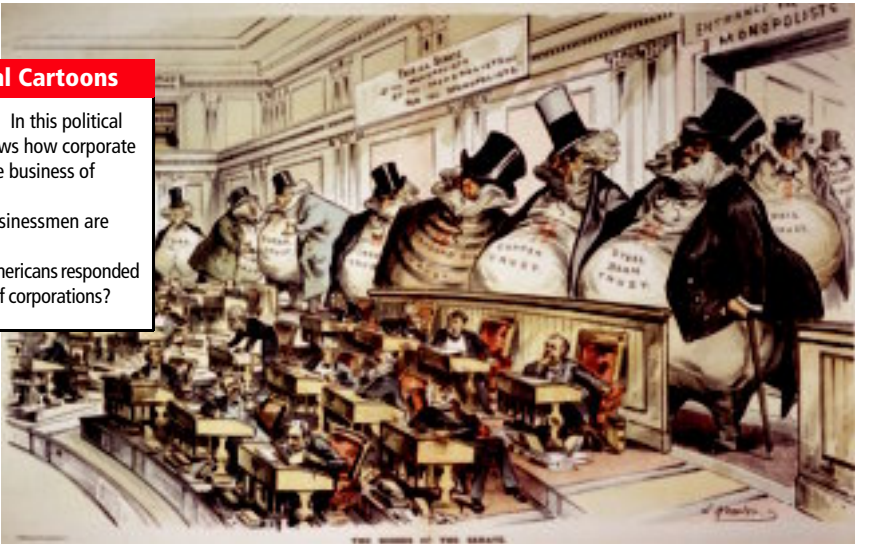
Corruption Plagues National Politics

Grover Cleveland's reputation for honesty was the exception. Many government officials routinely accepted bribes. As Henry Adams, the great-grandson of John Adams, observed, "one might search the whole list of Congress, Judiciary, and Executive . . . [from] 1870 to 1895, and find little but damaged reputation."

Political Cartoonists Raise the Alarm Besides such writers as Mark Twain, political cartoonists expressed their concern about the damaging effects of corruption and big money.

"The Bosses of the Senate," one of the most famous political cartoons of the time, drawn by Joseph Keppler, showed a cluster of businessmen representing various trusts, glaring down on the chambers of the Senate.

Thomas Nast did a series of cartoons which exposed the illegal activities of William Marcy "Boss" Tweed, a powerful New York City politician. Eventually, Tweed was arrested. However, he escaped and fled to Spain. While there, Tweed was identified through one of Nast's cartoons.



Analyzing Political Cartoons

The Bosses of the Senate In this political cartoon, Joseph Keppler shows how corporate interests have taken over the business of the Senate.

1. Why do you think the businessmen are drawn so large?
2. How do you think most Americans responded to the political influence of corporations?

The Spoils System Dominates the Government Political parties and the spoils system were central components of politics during the Gilded Age. Under the **spoils system,** which was first used by President Andrew Jackson, politicians awarded government jobs to loyal party workers, with little regard for their qualifications. Parties held elaborate rallies and parades to get out the vote. However, candidates for the presidency did not take part in the campaign. They felt it lowered the reputation of the presidency. Political parties developed sophisticated organizations that reached virtually into every ward, in every precinct, in every city in the nation.

The spoils system served as the glue that helped make the parties so powerful. The Postmaster General, who headed the U.S. Postal Service, for example, could reward thousands of supporters with jobs. Likewise, other officials could and did use federal contracts to convince people to vote for their candidates. Ironically, political participation probably got a boost from the spoils system and the fierce partisanship of the era. About 75 to 80 percent of all those who could vote did vote in presidential elections during the Gilded Age.

President Garfield Is Shot
Charles J. Guiteau, unsuccessful at getting a government position, shot President Garfield in a Washington, D.C., train station. *How did Garfield's assassination lead to a change in the civil service system?*

Civil Service Reform Promotes Honest Government The feeling that the spoils system corrupted government, or at least made it terribly inefficient, prompted a number of prominent figures to promote civil service reform. The **civil service** is a system that includes federal jobs in the executive branch. In a reformed system, most government workers would get their jobs due to their expertise and maintain them regardless of which political party won the election. Reforming the spoils system did cause controversy. Without the spoils system, politicians felt they would not attract the people needed to run their parties. Independent attempts by politicians to change the system failed. When Rutherford B. Hayes took office in 1877, he worked for civil service reform. He even placed well-known reformers in high offices. However, the Republican Party did not support his reform efforts. It took the assassination of President James Garfield by Charles J. Guiteau to make civil service reform a reality. Guiteau shot Garfield because he believed that the Republican Party had not fulfilled its promise to give him a government job.

Chester A. Arthur became President after the assassination of Garfield. While Arthur defended the spoils system, he supported the movement for civil service reform, which had been strengthened because of public indignation over Garfield's assassination. Arthur signed the **Pendleton Civil Service Act** in 1883. This act established a Civil Service Commission, which wrote a civil service exam. Individuals who wanted to work for the government had to take the exam, and getting a job depended on doing well on the exam, not on manipulating one's political connections. Initially, the act covered only a small percentage of federal employees, but its reach grew over time, reducing the power of the spoils system.

Vocabulary Builder
manipulate–(muh NIHP yoo layt) *v.* to exert influence or practice deception to obtain some advantage

✓ **Checkpoint** **How did the spoils system lead to government corruption and, eventually, government reform?**

Economic Issues Challenge the Nation

The tariff and monetary policy were critical economic issues during the Gilded Age. The tariff issue sharply divided the Democrats and Republicans. Monetary policy gave rise to independent political parties or movements that disagreed with the major parties' commitment to the **gold standard.** Using the gold standard meant that the government would use gold as the basis of the nation's currency.

Americans Debate the Tariff Question The debate over the tariff had deep roots in American history. The tax on imports of manufactured goods and some agricultural products was created to protect newly developed industries. Since then, the debate to lower or increase tariffs continued. Differences over the tariff had divided the Federalists and Jeffersonians and the Democrats and Whigs. During the Gilded Age, it divided the Republicans and Democrats. The tariff question became a major issue during the presidential election of 1888. The Republicans favored a high tariff, arguing that it would allow American industries to grow and promote jobs in manufacturing. Democrats countered that high tariffs increased the costs of goods to consumers and made it harder for American farmers to sell their goods abroad.

Conflicts Develop Over Monetary Policy Two related factors turned monetary policy into a bitter issue during the Gilded Age. During the Civil War, the federal government issued paper money, known as greenbacks. After the war, because they had contributed to wartime inflation (a rise in prices), the government retired, or got rid of, the greenbacks.

Around the same time, Congress passed the Coinage Act of 1873. This law reversed the government policy of making both gold and silver coins. Those who favored the minting of silver—in other words, considering silver as money—protested against what they termed the "Crime of 1873" and prompted Congress to mint silver dollars. Nonetheless, the debate over whether to consider both gold and silver as money or only gold as money continued.

Bankers and others involved in international trade feared that considering silver as money would undermine the economy. In contrast, most farmers favored coining silver to create inflation. They hoped the rise in prices would increase their income. You will read more about this dispute in the next section.

Checkpoint **Why did the Republicans and Democrats differ in their view of the tariff issue?**

Silver and Gold
By the 1870s, the debate between supporters of the gold or the silver standard began to dominate national politics. At one time, however, the government used both metals to back national currency. Silver and gold certificates, as shown here, were widely circulated.

SECTION 2 Assessment

Progress Monitoring *Online*
For: Self-test with vocabulary practice
Web Code: nca-1604

Comprehension

1. **Terms and People** Explain how each of the following terms describes a political issue during the 1870s and 1880s.
   - spoils system
   - civil service
   - Pendleton Civil Service Act
   - gold standard

2. **NoteTaking Reading Skill: Identify Main Ideas** Use your outline to answer the Section Focus Question: Why did the political structure change during the Gilded Age?

Writing About History

3. **Quick Write: Examine the Question** Look for the key word that will tell you how to focus and organize your response: Summarize the importance of the tariff as a national issue. Write a brief paragraph.

Critical Thinking

4. **Draw Inferences** Why do you think Congress became the strongest branch of the government in the 1880s?
5. **Analyze Information** What were the positive and negative effects of the Pendleton Civil Service Act?
6. **Identify Point of View** President Cleveland called the high tariff "unjust taxation." Why do you think President Cleveland made this statement? Explain his point of view.