

Democracy and Corruption in the 19th Century United States:
Parties, “Spoils” and Political Participation

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Throughout the democratic west, widespread and systematic corruption is a disease of the past. Among advanced democratic societies, corruption characterized a pre-democratic stage of government in which electoral participation was limited and the work of government largely invisible from the public. However, the United States presents a puzzling exception to that relationship between democratization and corruption.

In the United States' political development there is a puzzling association between widespread corruption and high levels of democratic participation. In American political history, corruption is positively correlated with some gross indicators of democratic participation. Participation declines with the eventual reduction of corruption in American government. Furthermore, I shall suggest that the widely applauded replacement of temporary, patronage-appointed, citizen-administrators by a professional administrative class was directly associated with declining participation in political life.

In this paper I shall explain how corrupt practices in 19th century American public administration related to the expansion of democratic participation. Then I will examine the attack on corrupt practices in administration and the mechanisms through which those practices were mitigated. Finally, I will argue that declining voting turnout was an unintended consequence of the reform of American national government and administration.

Through much of the 19th century corruption pervaded American government. At the same time, electoral participation was extremely high in the decades after the Civil War—averaging around 80 percent turnout by eligible voters in national elections. Seats in Congress were vigorously contested, and turnover of congressional seats was high. Through new laws and investigative procedures, corruption diminished in 20th century American government. Simultaneously, rates of electoral participation declined precipitously, to about half of eligible voters in presidential elections and a third in congressional elections by the 1990s. Congressional and administrative positions also became career occupations rather than the temporary positions they had been in 19th century America. And the vibrant, mass political parties of the 19th century became highly institutionalized service providers to professional politicians in the clean government era that developed in the 20th century.

Is a positive relationship between systemic political corruption and voting participation in the United States merely coincidental? Or, was political corruption in 19th century America instrumental in some way to expanded democratic participation?

I. Corruption and Governance

Among advanced democratic societies today, corruption in government is an anathema. It is to be rooted out where it appears, and rigorous protections against it are mounted in public administration and the judiciary, and to lesser extent, in the legislative process and political campaigning.

About corruption, David Rosenbloom writes: It “can be defined as a betrayal of the public trust for reasons of private interests” (Rosenbloom, p. 533). Most often, corruption’s perpetrators are those who seek either personal enrichment or preferment for their interests through government activities. For example, in the matter labeled “Whitewater,” the President and Mrs. Clinton were accused of having profited from illegal transactions made under the cover of law while Mr. Clinton was governor of Arkansas. Once Clinton was in the presidency, this accusation caused the appointment of an independent special counsel to investigate the Clintons’ roles in “Whitewater.” However, corruption can be conceptually distinguished from behaviors that illegally attain private enrichment; it can be conceived more broadly as behavior that is generally deprecated. Anechiarico and Jacob observe:

Corruption is the name we apply to some reciprocities by some people in some contexts at some times. The popular use of the term does not require that the conduct labeled corrupt be illegal; it is enough that the labeler thinks it is immoral or unethical (p. 3).

Indeed, corruption need not at all be limited to personally aggrandizing behaviors or necessarily be in direct violation of the law. Instead of seeking private gain through the public trust, corruption can entail the inappropriate use of public processes to achieve policy ends that are unobtainable through approved means. The American scandal of the mid-1980s known as “Iran-Contra” illustrates such a misuse of government. The ends sought by President Reagan’s subordinates were public purposes and not personal aggrandizement—the return of American hostages held in Lebanon and the arming of anticommunist rebels in Central America. However, the means used by the President’s men were illegal specifically and generally seen as violating democratic morality. As in “Whitewater,” the accusations around “Iran-Contra” occasioned the appointment of an independent special counsel.

In its conception of corruption, government in late 20th century United States was no different from the rest of the advanced industrial world. Through a variety of mechanisms, the American federal government is armed against corrupt practices by individuals or groups seeking to undermine normal processes for their own private interests or to achieve otherwise unobtainable policies. Among the mechanisms currently at work against corrupt practices in the United States, the independent counsel has been a prominent fixture. Other anti-corruption efforts include the inspectors general within the departments of government, the auditing and investigative responsibilities of the General Accounting Office, the protective system of the civil service laws, the “whistle-blower” protective laws, and the “oversight” investigative functions of congressional committees. And from outside of government, investigative news media aggressively survey government, seeking sins and stories.

II. Corruption in Nineteenth Century American Government

In the period after the American Civil War (1861-65), a system of political practices that sustained American national politics and government was attacked as corrupt. An ensuing fifty-year battle over corruption changed the nature of American government and reshaped the role of political parties in American politics.

From the Civil War's end to early in the 20th century, the practices attacked by critics as "corrupt" were not simply manipulations of the public trust for private gain, although there was abundant private gain. They were, rather, a system of practices that used government to supply the sustenance for mass-based political parties. In that roughly fifty year period, the attack on corruption was an attack not on individual dishonesty but an attack on the mainsprings of the American national political system of that era. Thus, the successful battle against corruption in government not only ended widespread corrupt practices in government but also transformed politics and government in unexpected ways.

Political Parties, Patronage and Participative Democracy

Winning the presidency in the 1828 election, Andrew Jackson represented a new force in American politics. He was the first man of the West to conquer the highest office, held until then by members of East Coast elites, and he was the first president unconnected to the founding generation's patrician style (Skowronek, chap. 5). Advocating generational, regional and ideological changes in American politics, Jackson asked, how was his electoral victory to be translated into governance? The Constitution empowered him to appoint the handful of secretaries who headed the several federal departments, subject to approval by the Senate. But what of lesser administrators who implement government on a day to day basis? Jackson attacked the assumption those minor administrators and clerks would hold their places permanently, and he ended this state of affairs in the executive branch (White, 1965, chap. 1).

In his first inaugural address, Jackson enunciated a new doctrine of public administration. Administrative appointees, great or small, would be people loyal to the victorious president and party. Administrative appointment should be an instrument reflecting the will of the electorate. Of course, the logical consequence of Jackson's new personnel policy was that each new presidential administration would drive out of offices all the occupants who had been placed in them by the last president. In fact, there had been turnover in administration since Jefferson's victory in 1800 but never so systematically conducted or justified as under Jackson (Aronson).

Jackson's offered a doctrine of "rotation in office" as a conception of democratic administration (Mosher, pp. 61-64). This practice of political appointment and removal from administrative positions had two different consequences, one for governance and the other for political parties. First, the appointment of partisans to administration assured that administrators would be loyal to the policies of elected leaders (Crenson, pp. 104-139). Second, Jackson, and his followers, also composed a new American politics of mass-based parties (Ceaser). The Jackson period began the construction of

national political parties that were confederations of state party organizations, each held together by patronage wielding leaders. These state-level parties controlled the selection of state and local nominees as well as those for the two houses of Congress. And in a quadrennial gathering, those state parties, in national convention, chose the party's nominee for the presidency. Thus, rotation in office imposed political responsibility on administration while also supplying resources for building mass-based parties.

The post-Jackson party system was sustained by its ability to distribute patronage appointments to loyalists, its ability to direct government purchasing to supporters, and the power to reward favored constituencies through distributive public policies. In effect, an organized system of corruption was the foundation for democratic political organization and participation in the United States. Nineteenth century American governments lacked capacity but faced expanding demands and burdens. They lacked rational administrative organization, trained administrators, means of communication, and they had uncertain authority over new economic developments. By using government resources to sustain themselves, the political parties also brought order to government. The parties' operations vis a vis their activists and voters filled some of the vacuum created by American minimalist governments.

Ann Orloff and Theda Skocpol argue that the stage at which democracy appears in the state's development determines the amount of public resources available for co-optation by political parties. They write:

In some European absolute monarchies state bureaucratization preceded the emergence of electoral democracy . . . When electoral parties finally emerged in such countries they could not get access to the 'spoils of office,' and therefore had to make programmatic appeals But, in the countries where electoral politics preceded state bureaucratization . . . parties could use government jobs and policies as patronage (p. 731).

Between the 1820s and 1900, these American patronage parties would do battle as if they were great armies (Jensen, p. 11). Voters were strongly connected to one or another major party, and as a consequence, while it was literally impossible to vote a "split-ticket," that inconvenience went unnoticed by voters. Until the end of the century, election ballots were printed by political parties and included only the candidates of the political party. Voters chose the ballot of one or another party and by virtue of that cast a straight party vote. Thus, on Election Day, each party's main concern was to maximize the "turn-out" of its own loyalists.

The importance of voter turnout can be seen in the narrow winning margins in presidential elections between 1868 and 1900. Only two of these nine quadrennial elections were won by a margin of more than 5 percent of the total vote for the Republican or Democratic parties. Three were won by margins of less than 1 percent of the total for the two parties vote (Keller, p. 545). Additionally, party balance in Congress shifted from election to election. As the tensions around Civil War and

Reconstruction faded, the battle of politics became a struggle by party machines to maximize voter turnout in a context without sharp ideological or issue cleavages.

To this end, parties fielded armies of party workers to assure turn out and to man the polling stations on Election Day. Morton Keller observed: “The brittle, mechanical devices of organizational politics prevailed over major national issues” (Keller, p. 544). Party workers clustering at the polling stations gave the party last minute opportunities to bribe or cajole voters. Between elections, the parties worked to maintain allegiance by the voters through the partisan orientation of newspapers and through the distribution of benefits. Until the late 19th century, virtually all American newspapers were party affiliated, and the bulk of the material they printed was distributed by national and state party organizations (for example, see Abbott). And in an era without welfare policy, the party organizations were service providers, granters of favors and employment bureaus.

Therefore, the parties were not simply machines for the distribution of particularistic benefits to sustain themselves. Additionally, they filled gaps in public policy that would be provided elsewhere in the West by the expanding social welfare state. For example, at the same time that urban party machines in the United States were providing a variety of welfare-like benefits to new immigrants from Ireland, Eastern Europe, and southern Italy, central governments in England and western Europe were initiating universalistic welfare policies for their citizens. Patronage was central among the benefits distributed by the party to its loyalists. James C. Scott has noted:

By exploiting the public purse to provide posts that may be dealt out according to political criteria, the machine party gains a staple means of maintaining internal discipline and cohesion. The diverse groups and individuals comprising the party are linked together by such material rewards as patronage, while these posts supply the party with a cadre of political workers who are constantly available to the organization and who will be responsive to commands from the leadership (p. 1151).

Thus, parties maintained an army of activists ready to work for the party’s candidates, supported a partisan press and maintained the loyalty of voters on the ground through favors. How were political parties financially able to support these extensive activities? The ability of the winning party to fill government employment with its own loyalists gave the party both an immediate ability to reward loyalists and a reliable source of financing. In the Jacksonian system, with a job came the obligation for a tithe to the political party, and the resulting payments became the foundation of the party’s treasury.

What Jackson initiated in the late 1820s became the norm for the rest of the century. Summers writes:

By 1869, government underwent wholesale removals and appointments every time a new chief executive took power No administration could leave enemies in office to implement its policies. In a party system based on loyalty, with the rank and file parading with an army's discipline . . . the winners could not trust the losers to act in good faith, but even more, they could not trust their own followers to stay true without . . . a share in the booty won" (Summers, p. 89).

The parties' needs for government's resources, jobs and contracts, caused them to expand public employment and spending when they controlled government. Thus the parties' dependence on government's budgets was a significant cause for government's expansion. Thus patronage politics were independently causes for government's growth. Certainly American society and economy in the last third of the 19th century were changing, and government's tasks were becoming more complicated. However, the growth of government in this period is not wholly explicable on the basis of expanded functions alone because while its context was becoming more complex, government itself did not greatly expand its policy reach over the society and economy until the 20th century.

Thus, it is logical to look to the organizational needs of the parties as causes for government's growth. Between 1871 and 1881 the federal government's civilian employment doubled, from 51,000 employees to 100,000 employees and in 1891 the number grew to 157,442 (Bureau of the Census, p. 710). Government employment expanded as well in almost every locality. For example, in New York City, there were 140,000 government employees, local, state and federal, among the citizenry—about one out of every eight voters (Keller, p. 239).

Virtually by its defined purpose, the federal government's largest spending program of the late 19th century sustained the interests of only one party, the Republicans. The veterans' pension for former Union soldiers of the Civil War, and their dependents, cemented a huge population to the Republicans, the party of Lincoln and the Union. The Grand Army of the Republic, the era's largest pressure group, represented those veterans and was an unofficial affiliate of the Republican Party. The pension constituted 34 percent of the federal budget in 1890, and the pension bureau that administered the policy had 6,241 employees in 1891. In 1900, 753,000 veterans and 241,000 dependents were receiving pension payments. Additionally: "An extensive infrastructure of pension and claim agents, pension attorneys [an estimated 60,000 by 1898], medical boards, and 4,000 examining surgeons served this first large-scale federal welfare system" (Keller, 311). Simultaneously, the Democrats, "the party that had opposed the Civil War, was disadvantaged by the distribution of so substantial a part of government's expenditures to Republicans.

From one perspective, late 19th century American government was governance founded upon corruption. However, if corruption is the "betrayal of the public trust for reasons of private interest,"

what was happening in American government was more complex than modern corruption. It was, rather, a use of the “public trust” to fuel the machines of democratic politics in America. In the 1890s, the political scientist Henry Jones Ford described spoils as the currency through which the dispersed organizations within the parties sustained themselves and conducted their business. “The members of Congress, as party leaders in their states and localities, became office brokers, seeking and spending the currency of spoils” (Quoted in White, *Repub. Era*, pp. 7-8). While undoubtedly there was simultaneous misuse of the public trust for private gain, the central purpose of the political parties reliance on government resources was to operate a system of participation, which made 19th century America the most democratic political society of its time. Thus, the corruption that came to be called the “spoils system” was a means for extending government’s public purposes—even if by non-legal and unofficial means.

Party and Government

The American Constitution of 1787 had created a government for an agrarian republic. Without substantial change in authority and organization, that national government was ill suited to deal with the rise of industrialism and corporate capitalism, a rapidly expanding population, increasing urbanism, and expanding transportation. The rise of the party machines went some way towards supplying the means for extending government’s reach into the society and economy. The historian Mark Summers observed: “The boss, the organized lobby, the swindling contractors, all owed their rise to the fact that a small, limited government, with popularly elected officials could no longer do all the tasks that were expected of it either efficiently or even competently” (Summers, p. x).

Small, official government in the midst of a vibrantly growing society and economy was supplemented by mass political parties with their organizational roots in states and localities, their skillful organizational leaders—“the bosses,” and their legions of partisan activists and politically loyal businessmen. Theodore Lowi characterized the national government of this period as a distributive state, meaning that the federal government’s major role in a growing society was to stimulate the national economy through the distribution of subsidies and incentives (Lowi, chap. 1). The premier illustration of the public policy of the distributive state was the subsidization of westward railroad building through the give away of public lands to railroad companies.

Government subsidies were distributed through businessmen loyal to the party in power and were another form of political patronage. These subsidies, like the railroad land grant, constituted exchanges whereby the federal government stimulated businessmen and entrepreneurs to undertake large projects. Thus, without bureaucratic capacities for planning and implementing projects, the federal government was able to support the building of a national infrastructure for expanding industrial capitalism—canals, roads, the post and railroads.

Government contracts served dual functions for government, achieving a policy end while also providing jobs and financial resources to the political parties. Consider the remarkable wave of the

construction of grand public buildings in the late nineteenth century. From local city halls and courthouses to state capitols and great federal buildings, the two decades before 1900 constitute a golden age of public architecture in the United States. Virtually every town that was already well established in the later 19th century has in its central square a glorious court house or city hall. These buildings seem to bespeak that a new government was emerging, one that was more powerful and imperial than the agrarian republic. However, the key to understanding the aesthetic splendor—and cost—of these buildings is to note that these projects were as corrupt as they were spectacular.

Through building contracts, government rewarded politically loyal businessmen and the party organizations, which served as labor bureaus for placing workers into construction jobs. Additionally, as the payback for receiving contracts, businesses paid tithes to the politicians and party leaders. The consequences of this complicated, symbiotic relationship among government, the political parties and business could be spectacular in scale. Morton Keller noted: “Favored contractors shared with politicians the profits from grossly inflated charges. The New York County Court House . . . cost more than four times as much as Britain’s Houses of Parliament. Over \$13,000,000 [\$170 million in 1998 dollars] went into its construction from 1869 to 1871, and the building was never completed” (Keller, p. 240).

Summing up the argument to this point, American 19th century politics systematically shifted public resources from government to political parties. Consequently, the parties should be understood as themselves performing crucial public functions. They made possible widespread political participation by linking particularistic benefits to political activity by individuals. They made elections appear to be exercises in democracy, linking the choices of the electorate to actions of government. Not least, they gave minimal government the opportunity to use the national parties, and their organizational systems, as means for implementing policy. Yet, this all came at a price.

III. The Attack on Corruption in Government

At the end of the 19th century, Moise Ostrogorski argued scathingly that American government’s main purpose had become party organizational maintenance. He remarked that the parties had bridged the separation of powers system to unify government, but instead of more effective government, what that unity aimed at was “the prostitution of the presidential patronage to the members of Congress,” and, one can add, to the parties (Ostrogorski, pp. 285-6). Was the service of the party to democracy worth the costs to society of the corruption that accompanied that system? In the last several decades of the 19th century, critics of patronage and parties concluded that the costs in corruption and waste of these parties far outweighed the services they performed for democracy and government.

The crusade to eliminate political patronage became a passionate cause in American politics after 1870. If one thinks of the reform movement as merely concerned with increased government efficiency, then the reformers' passion is inexplicable. But if one understands that the goal was the moral purification of government, then one can understand the passion that accompanied reform.

The leading figure in civil service reform was George William Curtis, president of the National Civil Service Reform League. His constituency was composed of native-born upper and upper-middle class citizens. Curtis fought to change the incentive system that tied together the political parties and government and which had incidentally opened government work to lower class citizens. He explained the purpose of reform as "not merely the observance of certain rules of examination. It is the correction of corruption in politics, and the restoration of political parties to their true function, which is . . . national policies" (White, p. 298).

The civil service reformers pressed for a civil service exam system that would assure that those entering office were qualified for administration. To reinforce that "merit system," they also sought protections of civil servants from political harassment for party contributions or removal for political reasons. Reform achieved a modest success with the passage of the Pendleton Act of 1883, influenced by the earlier Northcote-Trevelyan reforms in Britain. This law instituted competitive exams and created an appointed civil service commission to conduct those exams and apply their results. The law also specified "that no person in the public service is . . . under any obligation to contribute to any political fund," and "no person in said service has any right to use his official authority or influence to coerce the political action of any person . . ." (Mosher, pp. 56-7).

The reformer's success was limited initially because the proportion of the public service covered by the new merit system was small. However, the act gave to presidents the authority to expand the number of positions covered by merit system. Over the next two decades presidents routinely expanded coverage. In 1891 22 percent of the federal government's civilian employees were within the competitive civil service. By 1900 44 percent of employees were covered, and by 1910 that percentage had risen to 57 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census, p. 710). In effect, under the new civil service rules, the incentives of patronage and partisanship worked to expand the merit system's coverage. One president after another completed his tenure in office with orders that extended merit system coverage over administrative positions that he had filled through patronage at the beginning of his presidency.

III. The Reformed Republic: Professional Administration and Declining Participation

The civil service reformers changed the public understanding of what ought to be the character of American politics and the federal government. Rectitude replaced representation and efficiency replaced responsiveness. No longer would it be legal to distribute office by partisanship or require monetary contributions from civil servants to the party (Mosher, pp. 64-79). Parties were forced to

find alternative resources. In the search for alternative resources, parties themselves were transformed. Under the spoils system, political parties were interactively connected to mass constituencies in two ways. First, the party was organized to stimulate very high levels of participation, both through voting and in the frequent partisan political speeches, debates and parades that characterized the period. Second, the party organization was sustained by the widespread distribution of political spoils down through its ranks. The new, post-reform system would connect parties with economic elites while distancing them from the grass roots electorate.

New Resources and Changed Parties

The new resource system was innovated in the 1896 election by the Republican party and its leader, Mark Hanna, and was a response to civil service reform's ban on requiring political contributions from government employees. In that year the Democrats nominated William Jennings Bryan, a populist advocate for farmers and a critic of bankers and big business. The Republicans used the specter of Bryan's anti-business stance to raise huge amounts of money from business corporations to fund the Republican national campaign. In turning to corporate financial contributions, the Republican found a gold mine, so to speak (Martin, pp. 84-87). This innovation in fund raising created a stable source of sustenance for the parties that replaced spoils over the course of time. The consequence of the new resource system was that the parties became more closely attached to business elites and increasingly inclined to represent their political interests, Democrats as well as Republicans.

Another change in American political campaigning that was reinforced by the new sources of money in the business sector was the rise of popular, national news and entertainment media. During the 1880s newspapers were transformed from small-scale partisan operations, subsidized by parties, into thriving businesses, publishing larger, more colorful and politically independent papers. New printing technology and the rapid growth of national firms seeking advertising outlets stimulated that change in the newspaper industry. The number and circulation of newspapers exploded in the half-century between the Civil War and 1914. In 1860 there were 387 daily newspapers in the country with a total circulation of 1,478,000. In 1914 there were 2,580 dailies with a total circulation of 28,777,000 (Bureau of the Census, p. 500). In that same half century that newspaper circulation expanded almost 20 times, population grew 3 times (Bureau of the Census, p. 1). With new, generous sources of money, the political parties discovered print media advertising as an ideal replacement for the armies of party workers who had stimulated turnout in 19th century campaigns. Thus, as a consequence of the end of the spoils system, the nature of political party campaigning changed just as the source of party finances had changed. Losing the patronage-based organization to conduct 19th century army-style campaigns, the political parties increasingly adopted an advertising-style campaign consistent with newfound cash resources from business (Jensen).

Just as the party bases shifted away from extensive grass roots organization, they also declined as service providers to their loyal voters. In the era of small government in the United States, party

machines had provided services for the poor, the unemployed and new immigrants. After 1900, state and local governments increasingly provided some social services, and, along with private charitable agencies such as the settlement houses, built a minimal social safety net that displaced the party organization's role in distributing favors.

The Reformer's Victory over Corruption

The reformers were successful in their war against corruption and inefficiency in American politics, completely at the national level and incompletely among city governments by World War One. They had reformed the federal executive branch and introduced the concept of a professional cadre of public administrators. At the local level, they had introduced the concepts of non-partisan city government and the professional city manager. Furthermore, they initiated an American discipline of public administration to study means for increased efficiency in government "to straighten the paths of government," as Woodrow Wilson put it in his classic essay, "The Study of Administration" (p. 485). Finally, the reformers created research and training programs to educate the professional administrators who would manage government efficiently and rid it of the taint of spoils.

In the reformer's vocabulary, the end of corruption in American government would assure that government was close to the people. Yet, there was a paradox herein. As James Morone observes: "government would be simultaneously returned to the people and placed beyond them, in the hands of experts" (Morone, p. 98). In its own quite compromised way, the spoils system had realized Andrew Jackson's ideal of an administrative system of "rotation in office" whereby common citizens experience government service for relatively short periods of time. A more orderly and reformed government would instead be in the hands of career professionals. The reformers redefined the relationship of government to the people. Instead of directly involving citizens in government, the reformers created a government that would better serve citizens. Under spoils, citizens were participants in politics and government. Under reform, they became customers.

Interestingly, there is evidence the aim of serving citizens as customers—or constituents—eventually gave politicians an incentive to attack patronage and corruption. At the end of the 19th century, the post office was one of the federal government's remaining great pools of party patronage. Virtually the whole system of rural mail collection and delivery was based on patronage in the form of politically appointed 4th class postmasters. Yet, in the 1890s congressional legislation transformed that system into one of rural free delivery using examination chosen personnel and eliminating patronage. This elimination of spoils and establishment of professionalism was initiated not by reformers but by members of Congress seeking increased services for their constituents (Kernell and McDonald).

Thus the parties and politicians were changing as civil service and administrative reform drove spoils out of government. Adapting to an advertising style of campaigning, the parties spent large sums on newspaper ads, pamphlets and campaign books. At the same time, however, a troubling trend emerged. Electoral participation began to decline in 20th century American politics.

At the high point of the spoils era in the United States, political parties sustained by a system of corruption stimulated high levels of turnout--the proportion of those eligible who cast a ballot. “Spoils” in the form of patronage appointments, contracts to politically favored businesses, and distributive policies such as the pension, targeted on partisan constituencies created powerful incentives for the party organizations to increase voter turnout as a means of winning elections and retaining control of spoils. At the same time, the extensive party organizations that were sustained by spoils provided the armies of partisans that were capable of grass roots activity aimed at organizing the voters to turn out at elections. However, the decline of spoils through the reform of government threatened that relationship between corruption and electoral turnout. Table 1 indicates directions in voter turnout in non-southern states during the century after the Civil War.

Table 1
Mean Turnout in Non-Southern States in Presidential Elections, 1868-1948

(Data from Burnham, p. 30)

	Turnout in Percent
1868-1880	82.6
1884-1896	85.4
1900	84.1
1904-1916	73.6
1920-1948	60.6

The decline in American voting turnout during the 20th century is a complicated phenomenon (see Burnham, chap. 1). No single explanation accounts for the entire decline, but the temporal association of this decline with the rise of the anti-spoils, public administration reform movement is striking. Lending more substance to intimations of a causal association here, we can see a quite suggestive fit between the assumptions and methods of the reform movement and the consequent changes in parties that can plausibly explain declining turnout. In bringing government to better serve the people, reformers created a government—and political process—which was ultimately more distant from the electorate than had been the old, spoils-oriented political process. When significant political patronage was the “spoils” of the winners of elections, the parties had powerful incentives to mobilize voters during campaigns. However, as patronage vanished and government service professionalized as a consequence of reform, the parties’ stakes in electoral mobilization diminished.

Of course, the reform movement’s benefits for public administration were enormous. Government bureaus became the provinces of career professionals rather than politically active citizens “rotating through office.” Government, as it expanded in the 20th century, required increasingly the service of educated men and women and specialized professionals. The civil service system that reform

had produced adapted quickly to these changing requirements of the government work. Patronage was a personnel system premised upon the assumption that the average citizen was fit for government service. The demands of 20th century government have made that assumption seem naively antique. However, at the same time, we should realize that these changes in American public administration that highlight merit and eliminate corrupt practices, also diminish the active role of citizens in government even while they may expand the quality of government's service to the citizenry.

Parallel with these changes of public administration from patronage to professionalism, American political parties and their campaigns changed from mobilization of voters at the grass roots to media-based political advertising. And as American partisan politics became dependent upon convincing voters in the same manner as commercial advertising, voters became less viscerally connected to parties, elections and voting.

IV. Conclusion

Is corruption necessarily the enemy of democracy? The development paths of most advanced industrial societies suggest that widespread corruption declined as government's responsibilities develop and electoral competition and participation expand. However, the American case is a notable exception to that general pattern. This paper has argued that American political development exhibits a systematic relationship between political corruption, national political parties, and democratic participation.

The conventional definition of political corruption is that it is a misuse of public trust to benefit private individuals. In 19th century America, however, corruption took on a more complex function. In the U.S. it entailed the appropriation of governmental resources for the sustenance of mass political parties that, in turn, used those resources to expand political participation and serve some public functions, along with substantial private enrichment. Additionally, 19th century American politics formally tied corruption to democracy. Leading politicians such as Presidents Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren crafted an argument that government itself was the province of popular politics and sentiment and that its offices and its patronage ought to be distributed to the citizenry for their benefit. Thus, political parties were given a conception of democratic governance which, paradoxically, legitimated corruption.

Eventually, the battle for reform undermined the legitimacy of corruption in American politics. That thrust created a new professional public administration for American government. But, parallel to that development, the political parties themselves changed in their form and function. They declined as grass roots organizations for stimulating electoral participation, and they transformed into specialized organizations for collecting money from organized interests and managing media-based political campaigns.

Parallel to the changes in parties and political participation, government was becoming a province of expertise that expanded in its functions vis-a-vis the economy and society. Citizen access to

that government was diminished as government expanded and increased its public policy impacts on society. American national government, post-1930s, was large, complex, technical and largely corruption-free. It was a product of the reforms and professionalization of government initiated in the waning years of the 19th century and aimed at ending corruption and increasing efficiency. Those related crusades against sin and for good government were strikingly successful. Systemic corruption was rooted out, and government service was professionalized. But, in ways that were unforeseen by the prophets of efficient public administration, the disappearance of “spoils” was related to political and institutional changes that reduced citizens’ involvement in politics and government.

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