

Political Bosses Lesson Plan

Central Historical Question:
Were political bosses corrupt?

Materials:

- Copies of Document A: Lincoln Steffens
- Transparency of Document A: Lincoln Steffens
- Copies of Document B: Plunkitt
- Political Bosses Powerpoint (Tammany Hall Political Cartoon)
- Copies of Graphic Organizer

Plan of Instruction:

1. Review Progressives: *Who were they and what did they stand for? Many were against city corruption and against political bosses.*

Political bosses were political leaders who got people to vote for them by giving favors. They also made deals with various contractors. The ring of people who made deals and got votes for the political boss were called the **political machine**. In NYC the political machine was called Tammany Hall.

2. Put Tammany cartoon on overhead. Ask students to write in their notebooks:
 - a. What do you see here?
 - b. Who is in the ring?
 - c. What is the cartoonist saying?
 - d. Does he like Tammany or not?
3. Transition: *Today we're going to read documents by a muckraker and a city political boss. Progressive muckrakers thought that party bosses were corrupt and prevented democracy from working well.*

Hand out Document A and Graphic Organizer. Put transparency of Document A on overhead projector.

I am going to model the first document, and as I do, please fill in the Graphic Organizer.

4. Begin cognitive modeling on Document A: Lincoln Steffens:
 - *Comments in italics are what you say out loud.*
 - Comments that are underlined are what you tell students to write on the Graphic Organizer.

FIRST: My eyes always go down to the bottom of the page to the sourcing information and I see: "Excerpt from a book by muckraker Lincoln Steffens, The Shame of Cities, published in 1904."

I know that 'muckrakers' were journalists who tried to expose bad things that were happening in society, and it says that his book is called 'The Shame of Cities,' so I'm going to say that This author probably believes that something bad is happening in city governments. Write that on your worksheets.

Continue reading from headnote:

"New advances in printing technology during the 1890s made magazines and other publications inexpensive to print. Magazines became available to a broader middle-class audience. Lincoln Steffens was well known for writing magazine articles about child labor, prisons, religion and political machines."

This headnote tells me that the people buying these magazines were middle-class, so I'm going to say that I think the audience is middle-class readers, mostly white and Christian. Write that on your worksheets.

Based on the sourcing information, I predict this author will try to convince people that something bad (shameful) is happening in cities.

I do trust this document because I think Steffens probably wanted to improve society, but he's probably going to use certain words to try to convince me to think a certain way.

Begin context questions before reading document: I already know that at this time many people were upset at a lot of the problems in society. They were called Progressives. I also know that more people learned about these issues because magazines were reaching more people. I also know that there was a lot of immigration in cities and that many cities were run by political machines.

Read through entire document once.

From this document I would guess that people at this time were feeling upset and angry about the level of corruption in American cities. It also seems like it was really widespread and common.

This document might not give me the whole picture because it only reflects the perspective of the middle-class Progressive reformers. There might have been people who thought that the political machines worked really well. Corruption might also not have been as widespread as Steffens makes it seem.

I think the author chose these words because they probably made people ashamed for letting all this corruption happen.

The author tries to convince the readers by showing how corruption can start with a little bribe. He also says that it's everyone's responsibility to reform government.

Return to question of trustworthiness and ask students where they stand, now that they read the whole document.

5. Guided practice (with whole class) OR individual work on Plunkitt.

ANSWER GUIDE:

This author probably believes that political machines are good and that there are good forms of corruption.

It's not clear who the audience is. He's giving a talk, so it could be to people who support him, but it could also be to people who support Steffens and read his book.

Based on the sourcing information, I predict this author will try to convince people that his way of running government is good.

I don't trust the document because I think Plunkitt is going to try to make himself look good.

Read through entire document once.

From this document I would guess that many of the people running the political machines were Irish. This means that the Irish gained power since the mid 19th century.

This document might not give me the whole picture because it only reflects the perspective of a political boss, who will lose power if the reformers have their way.

I think the author chose these words because they probably made people laugh and make fun of Steffens. Steffens seems uptight and clueless.

The author tries to convince the readers by showing how corruption can be good and can even lead to patriotism.

Together these two documents tell me that at this time there was a lot of tension between political machines and reformers. It might be that the Irish

and immigrants took over running the city and the white, rich people wanted to get control back from them.

6. Assessment: Write a dialogue between Steffens and Plunkitt in which Steffens tries to convince Plunkitt to run a more honest government. Complete for homework.

Citations:

Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities* (New York: McClure, Philips & Co., 1904), 1–18. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5732>

George Plunkitt, “On the Shame of Cities,” recorded in 1905.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2810/2810-h/2810-h.htm#2HCH0007>

Document A: Lincoln Steffens (Modified)

New advances in printing technology during the 1890s made magazines and other publications inexpensive to print. Magazines became available to a broader middle-class audience. Lincoln Steffens was well known for writing magazine articles about child labor, prisons, religion and political machines

The typical American citizen is a business man. The spirit of business is profit, not patriotism; individual gain, not national prosperity. "My business is sacred," says the business man in his heart. "Whatever helps my business, is good; it must be. Whatever hurts it, is wrong; it must be. A bribe is bad, that is, it is a bad thing to take; but it is not so bad to give one, not if it is necessary to my business."

And it's all a moral weakness. Oh, we are good—on Sunday, and we are "fearfully patriotic" on the Fourth of July. But the bribe we pay to the janitor is the little brother of the bribe passed to the councilman to sell a city street, and the father of the deal made by the president of the railroad, who agrees to use air-brakes only if he is given stock in the air-brake company.

We are responsible, not our leaders, since we follow them. We let them divert our loyalty from the United States to some "party"; we let them boss the party and turn our democracies into autocracies. We cheat our government and we let our leaders loot it, and we let them bribe our sovereignty from us. We are content to let them pass bad laws, giving away public property in exchange for money.

Vocabulary

Divert- redirect, change

Autocracy- rule by one person

Sovereignty- independence

Source: Excerpt from a book by muckraker Lincoln Steffens, The Shame of Cities, published in 1904.

Document B: George Plunkitt (Modified)

I've been readin' a book by Lincoln Steffens on *The Shame of the Cities*. Steffens means well, but like all reformers, he don't know how to make distinctions. He can't see no difference between honest graft and dishonest graft and, consequently, he gets things all mixed up. . . . For instance, I ain't no looter. The looter hogs it. I never hogged. I made my money in politics, but at the same time, I served the organization and got more big improvements for New York City than any other livin' man.

The Irish was born to rule, and they're the honestest people in the world. Show me the Irishman who would steal a roof off an orphanage! He don't exist. Of course, if an Irishman had the political pull and the roof was in bad shape, he might get the city authorities to put on a new one and get the contract for himself, and buy the old roof at a bargain-but that's honest graft...

One reason why the Irishman is more honest in politics than many Americans is that he is grateful to the country and the city that gave him protection and prosperity when he was driven by oppression from Ireland. His one thought is to serve the city which gave him a home. His friends here often have a good place in one of the city departments picked out for him while he is still in Ireland. Is it any wonder that he has a tender spot in his heart for old New York when he is on its salary list the mornin' after he lands?

Vocabulary

Graft- illegal activities; corruption

*Source: Excerpt from a talk by George Plunkitt, a political boss in New York City. The talk was called "Honest Graft and Dishonest Graft," recorded in 1905. (Graft is another word for corruption and bribes). In this talk, Plunkitt responds to Lincoln Steffens's book, *The Shame of the Cities*.*