

the plunkitt of tammany hall

the plunkitt of tammany hall is a phrase that refers to the political practices and philosophies of George Washington Plunkitt, a prominent figure in New York City's Tammany Hall political machine during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This term has become synonymous with the concept of "honest graft," a controversial form of political patronage and corruption that Plunkitt openly defended. Understanding the plunkitt of tammany hall offers insight into the workings of urban political machines, the nature of political corruption, and the socio-political environment of the Gilded Age. This article explores the historical background of Tammany Hall, the life and career of George Washington Plunkitt, the meaning behind "honest graft," and the broader implications on American politics. The discussion will also touch on the legacy of the plunkitt of tammany hall in contemporary political discourse.

- Historical Background of Tammany Hall
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Historical Background of Tammany Hall

Tammany Hall was a powerful political organization that dominated New York City politics for much of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Founded in 1789 as a fraternal society, it evolved into the Democratic Party's political machine in New York City, controlling elections, patronage, and local governance. The organization was notorious for its role in political corruption, electoral manipulation, and providing social services to immigrants in exchange for votes. By the late 1800s, Tammany Hall had become synonymous with political bossism and urban political machines across the United States.

Origins and Rise to Power

Tammany Hall's origins lie in the early post-Revolutionary period, but it was during the mid-19th century that it solidified its control over New York City

politics. The influx of immigrants, especially the Irish, created a fertile ground for Tammany's patronage network. By providing jobs, housing assistance, and legal help, Tammany leaders secured loyalty and votes from immigrant communities, thereby ensuring their political dominance. The organization's influence expanded through a complex system of ward bosses and local leaders who controlled neighborhoods and election outcomes.

Political Influence and Corruption

The organization became infamous for its corrupt practices, including vote buying, bribery, and kickbacks. Tammany Hall leaders wielded immense power, often deciding who received city contracts and public jobs. Despite this, the machine's ability to provide tangible benefits to constituents helped it maintain popular support. This blend of corruption and social welfare defined Tammany Hall's political strategy during its peak years.

George Washington Plunkitt: Life and Political Career

George Washington Plunkitt was a key figure in the Tammany Hall political machine, known for his candid explanations of political graft and patronage. Born in 1842, Plunkitt served as a New York State Senator and was a loyal member of Tammany Hall's inner circle. His political career spanned several decades, during which he became a symbol of the pragmatic, often corrupt, politics practiced by Tammany leaders.

Early Life and Entry into Politics

Plunkitt was born and raised in New York City, where he became involved in local politics at a young age. His early exposure to the workings of political machines influenced his understanding of urban governance. He quickly rose through the ranks of Tammany Hall due to his effective leadership and ability to navigate the complex patronage system. Plunkitt's political success was closely tied to his skill in managing relationships within the party and with the public.

Senate Career and Political Influence

As a New York State Senator, Plunkitt was known for his bluntness and practical approach to politics. He openly discussed the mechanisms of political graft and was unapologetic about his methods. His speeches and writings provide valuable primary source material for understanding Tammany Hall's operations. Plunkitt's influence extended beyond legislation to shaping the political culture of New York City during his tenure.

The Concept of Honest Graft

One of the most enduring aspects of the plunkitt of tammany hall is the concept of "honest graft," a term coined and popularized by George Washington Plunkitt himself. Honest graft refers to the practice of using political office for personal gain in a manner that Plunkitt argued was legitimate and beneficial to both the politician and the community. This stood in contrast to what he called "dishonest graft," which involved deceit and harm to the public interest.

Definition and Explanation

Plunkitt distinguished honest graft as the act of capitalizing on insider knowledge and political connections to acquire wealth, provided it was done openly and without cheating or lying. For example, buying land near a planned public project and profiting from its increased value was considered honest graft. According to Plunkitt, this form of graft was a natural and acceptable part of politics, reflecting shrewdness rather than corruption.

Examples of Honest Graft

Typical examples cited by Plunkitt included:

- Purchasing real estate adjacent to public improvements before prices rose
- Benefiting from city contracts awarded through political influence
- Using political connections to secure profitable business opportunities

Plunkitt argued that honest graft was transparent and did not harm the public, unlike bribery or fraud.

Mechanisms of Political Patronage in Tammany Hall

The plunkitt of tammany hall was deeply intertwined with the patronage system that underpinned Tammany's political power. Patronage involved distributing government jobs, contracts, and favors to loyal supporters in exchange for political backing. This system was a central feature of Tammany's ability to mobilize voters and maintain control over New York City politics.

Ward Bosses and Local Control

Tammany Hall's influence was organized at the neighborhood level through ward bosses who acted as intermediaries between the political machine and the electorate. These bosses managed voter registration, ensured voter turnout, and distributed resources. The ward bosses' close ties to their communities enabled Tammany to build a dependable political base.

Job Distribution and Influence

Government jobs were a major tool of patronage, with positions often awarded based on political loyalty rather than merit. This system secured the allegiance of thousands of workers and reinforced Tammany's political dominance. Contracts for city projects were also used to reward supporters and consolidate power, often leading to inflated costs and corruption.

Impact of the Plunkitt Philosophy on American Politics

The plunkitt of tammany hall has had a lasting impact on the understanding of political machines and corruption in American politics. Plunkitt's frank discussion of graft and patronage revealed the practical realities behind political power structures during the Gilded Age. His ideas challenged traditional notions of political morality and highlighted the blurred lines between public service and personal gain.

Influence on Political Machines

Plunkitt's philosophy exemplified the pragmatic, transactional nature of political machines that thrived in urban areas. The concept of honest graft provided a justification for practices that many viewed as corrupt, helping to normalize political patronage and insider dealings. This perspective influenced how political machines operated and how historians and political scientists analyzed them.

Modern Political Corruption Debates

The plunkitt of tammany hall continues to inform discussions about political ethics and corruption today. The distinction between honest and dishonest graft remains relevant in debates about lobbying, campaign finance, and public trust. Plunkitt's legacy serves as a reminder of the complexities involved in balancing political power, public service, and personal enrichment.

Legacy and Modern Interpretations

The legacy of the plunkitt of tammany hall is multifaceted, encompassing both historical scholarship and popular culture. George Washington Plunkitt's candidness and colorful language have made his ideas enduring symbols of machine politics. The term "plunkittism" has entered the lexicon as a descriptor of pragmatic, self-serving political behavior.

Historical Assessments

Historians view the plunkitt of tammany hall as a window into the functioning of political machines and the realities of urban governance in the late 19th century. While acknowledging the corruption involved, scholars also recognize the role these machines played in integrating immigrants and providing social services. Plunkitt's writings offer direct insight into the mindset of political operatives of the era.

Contemporary Relevance

In contemporary politics, the plunkitt of tammany hall is often cited in discussions about transparency, ethics, and political reform. The phrase evokes the enduring challenges of preventing corruption while enabling effective governance. Understanding Plunkitt's approach helps contextualize ongoing debates about the role of money, influence, and patronage in American political life.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'The Plunkitt of Tammany Hall' about?

'The Plunkitt of Tammany Hall' is a collection of speeches by George Washington Plunkitt, a New York City politician, revealing the inner workings and political strategies of Tammany Hall, a powerful political machine in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Who was George Washington Plunkitt?

George Washington Plunkitt was a prominent New York City politician affiliated with Tammany Hall, known for his candid discussions on political patronage and machine politics.

What is meant by 'honest graft' in the context of Plunkitt's writings?

'Honest graft' refers to the practice described by Plunkitt where politicians

profit from inside knowledge and opportunities gained through their public positions, distinguishing it from corrupt or illegal activities.

How did Tammany Hall influence New York City politics?

Tammany Hall controlled political appointments, elections, and city services by mobilizing immigrant votes and using patronage, thereby maintaining power and influence over New York City politics for decades.

Why is 'The Plunkitt of Tammany Hall' considered significant in political science?

It provides an insider's perspective on machine politics, patronage, and the practical realities of political power, making it a valuable resource for understanding urban political machines and American political history.

What role did patronage play in Tammany Hall's operations according to Plunkitt?

Patronage was central to Tammany Hall's operations, where jobs and favors were exchanged for political support, ensuring loyalty and maintaining the machine's control.

When was 'The Plunkitt of Tammany Hall' published?

'The Plunkitt of Tammany Hall' was published in 1905 and consists of interviews and speeches recorded by William L. Riordon.

How does Plunkitt justify the ethics of political graft?

Plunkitt argues that 'honest graft' is a legitimate practice where politicians use their knowledge and position to benefit themselves without breaking the law, distinguishing it from dishonest graft or corruption.

What lessons can modern politicians learn from 'The Plunkitt of Tammany Hall'?

Modern politicians can learn about the importance of grassroots organizing, the role of political patronage, and the ethical complexities involved in political power and influence from Plunkitt's candid reflections.

Additional Resources

1. *The Plunkitt of Tammany Hall: A Series of Very Plain Talks on Very Practical Politics*

This classic book by William L. Riordon offers a firsthand account of the political workings of Tammany Hall through the voice of George Washington Plunkitt. It provides an insider's perspective on the distinction between "honest graft" and "dishonest graft," illuminating the nuances of machine politics in late 19th-century New York City. The book remains an essential resource for understanding urban political machines.

2. *Tammany Hall: Power, Politics, and Corruption in New York City*

This comprehensive history explores the rise and influence of Tammany Hall, the notorious political machine that dominated New York City politics for over a century. It delves into the roles played by key figures like Plunkitt and Boss Tweed, highlighting the blend of patronage, graft, and public service. The book provides context for the social and political environment that allowed Tammany Hall to thrive.

3. *Machine Politics and the Rise of George Washington Plunkitt*

Focusing specifically on Plunkitt's political career, this book examines how he embodied the principles of machine politics and "honest graft." It analyzes his strategies for maintaining power and influence within Tammany Hall and how his style shaped urban governance. Readers gain insight into the practical realities of political machines during the Gilded Age.

4. *Boss Tweed and the Making of Modern New York*

This biography of William M. Tweed, Tammany Hall's most infamous leader, provides background on the political environment that Plunkitt operated within. It details the corruption and reforms that defined the era and discusses how Tweed's downfall affected the machine's future. The narrative helps contextualize Tammany Hall's legacy in American political history.

5. *Corruption and Reform in American Cities: The Tammany Hall Story*

This scholarly work explores the broader themes of corruption and reform movements in American urban politics, using Tammany Hall as a central case study. It assesses the impact of Plunkitt's philosophy on subsequent political developments and reform efforts. The book is valuable for understanding how political machines influenced governance and civic life.

6. *Political Machines and Urban Governance: Lessons from Tammany Hall*

This book analyzes the operational mechanisms of political machines, with Tammany Hall as a prime example. It discusses patronage, voter mobilization, and the balance between service and self-interest. Through Plunkitt's experiences, the text illustrates how political machines addressed urban problems while perpetuating corruption.

7. *The Gilded Age: Politics and Society in New York City*

Covering the broader historical context of the late 19th century, this book situates Tammany Hall and Plunkitt within the social, economic, and political transformations of the Gilded Age. It highlights the role of political

machines in managing immigration, urbanization, and industrialization challenges. The book is essential for understanding the environment that shaped Plunkitt's career.

8. *Honest Graft: The Ethics of Political Patronage in Tammany Hall*

Focusing on the concept of "honest graft" popularized by Plunkitt, this book examines the ethical dimensions of political patronage and machine politics. It debates the fine line between public service and self-enrichment, exploring how Plunkitt justified his actions. The study offers a nuanced perspective on political morality in urban America.

9. *The Legacy of George Washington Plunkitt: Political Pragmatism in America*

This book looks at the enduring influence of Plunkitt's political philosophy on American politics beyond Tammany Hall. It traces how his pragmatic approach to power and governance can be seen in later political practices and machine-style politics. The work contributes to the understanding of political pragmatism in a historical and contemporary context.

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