

Spoils system

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In the politics of the United States, a **spoils system** refers to an informal practice by which a political party, after winning an election, gives government jobs to its voters as a reward for working toward victory, and as an incentive to keep working for the party. The term was derived from the phrase "*to the victor go the spoils.*" It is opposed to a system of awarding offices on the basis of some measure of merit independent of political activity (merit system).

Spoils systems are endemic in nations that are struggling to transcend systemic clientage based on tribal organization or other kinship groups and localism in general.

Beginnings

The spoils system was pioneered by New York governors in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, most notably George Clinton and DeWitt Clinton. At the federal level Thomas Jefferson systematically reviewed the civil list, and list of military officers, when he became President in 1801 with the goal of neutralizing the overwhelming advantage held by the opposition during the First Party System. President John Quincy Adams tried to be nonpartisan in his appointments in 1825, but quickly discovered that caused problems. "On such appointments all the wormwood and gall of the old party hatred squeeze out. A vacancy to any office had occurred and there was a distinguishing Federalist started and pushed home as a candidate to fill it, always well qualified, sometimes in an eminent degree, and yet so obnoxious to the Republican party, that they cannot be appointed without exciting a vehement clamor against him and the administration. It becomes thus impossible to fill any vacancy in appointment without offending one half of the community."^[1]

After **Andrew Jackson** became President in 1828, he systematically rewarded his supporters by starting the Second party System. He considered that popular election gave the victorious party a "mandate" to select officials from its own ranks. Proponents claimed that ordinary Americans were able to discharge the former official duties of government offices; not just a special civil service elite. Opponents considered it vulnerable to incompetence and heavy duty corruption, and thus violating the credo of republicanism.

The period from 1854 to 1896 was the apogee of the spoils system. It was used quite effectively by Abraham Lincoln in supporting both his Republican party and the Union war effort. By the late 1860s, reformers were demanding a civil service system. Running as Liberal Republicans in 1872, they were harshly defeated by patronage-hungry Ulysses S. Grant. The Pendleton Act of 1883 created a bipartisan Civil Service Commission that evaluated job candidates on a nonpartisan merit basis. The law allowed the President to transfer jobs (and their current holders) into the system, thus giving the holder a permanent job. Mugwumps were Republican reformers who in 1884 deserted their party to support Democrat Grover Cleveland, a champion of civil service reform. Theodore Roosevelt gained fame as a civil service reformer in the 1890s. From 1885 to 1897, the White House changed hands four times, and after each election the outgoing President applied the Pendleton law to thousands of people (his own supporters). By 1900, most federal jobs were handled through civil service and the spoils system was limited only to very senior positions.

The separation between political activity and the civil service was made stronger with the Hatch Act which prohibited federal employees from engaging in political activities.

The spoils system survived much longer in many states, counties and municipalities, such as the Tammany Hall ring, which survived well into the 1930s when New York City reformed its own civil service. Illinois modernized its bureaucracy in 1917 under Frank Lowden, but Chicago held on to patronage into the 1970s.

References

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