

Patronage

The practice or custom observed by a political official of filling government positions with qualified employees of his or her own choosing.

When the candidate of a political party wins an election, the newly elected official has the right to appoint a certain number of persons to jobs in the government. This is the essence of the patronage system, also known as the spoils system ("To the victor go the spoils"): appointing persons to government positions on the basis of political support and work rather than on merit, as measured by objective criteria. Though the patronage system exists at all levels of U.S. government, the number of positions that are available through patronage has decreased dramatically since the 1880s.

The patronage system thrived in the U.S. federal government until 1883. In 1820 Congress limited federal administrators to four-year terms, leading to constant turnover. By the 1860s and the Civil War, patronage had led to widespread inefficiency and political corruption. Where patronage had once been confined to the cabinet, department heads, and foreign ambassadorships, by the 1860s low-level government positions were subject to patronage. The loss of a presidential election by a political party signaled wholesale turnover in the federal government. When President [Benjamin Harrison](#) took office in 1889, 31,000 federal postmaster positions changed hands.

The assassination of President JAMES GARFIELD in 1881 by a disgruntled office seeker who did not receive a political appointment spurred Congress to pass the Civil Service Act, or Pendleton Act of 1883 (5 U.S.C.A. § 1101 et seq.). The act, which at the time only applied to 10 percent of the federal workforce, created a Civil Service Commission and advocated a merit system for the selection of government employees. By 1980, 90 percent of federal positions had become part of the civil service system. In addition, the passage in 1939 of the [Hatch Act](#) (53 Stat. 1147) curtailed or restricted most partisan political activities of federal employees.

State and local governments have employed large patronage systems. Big-city political machines in places such as New York, Boston, and Chicago thrived in the late nineteenth century. A patronage system not only rewards political supporters for past support, it also encourages future support, because persons who have a patronage job try to retain it by campaigning for the party at the next election.

Large-scale patronage systems declined steadily during the twentieth century. During the Progressive Era (1900–1920), "good government" reformers overthrew political machines and installed civil service systems. Chicago, under Mayor Richard J. Daley, remained the last bastion of patronage, existing in its purest form until the late 1970s.

Patronage has its defenders. It is a way to maintain a strong political organization by offering campaign workers rewards. More importantly, patronage puts people into government who agree with the political agenda of the victor. Cooperation, loyalty, and trust flow from this arrangement. Finally, patronage guarantees some turnover, bringing new people and new ideas into the system.

Opponents have long agreed that patronage is acceptable at the highest levels of government. Presidents, governors, and mayors are entitled to select their cabinet and department heads. However, history indicates that patronage systems extending far down the organizational chain are susceptible to inefficiency and corruption.

Congress took another look at patronage issues in the Civil Service Reform Act of 1978 (92 Stat. 1121–1131, 5 U.S.C.A. 1201–1209). Concerned that federal bureaucrats were too independent and unresponsive to elected officials, the act replaced the Civil Service Commission with the Office of Personnel Management, under closer control of the president. The act also created the Senior Executive Service, which gives the president greater discretion in reassigning top officials to departments and agencies.