



CENTRAL HISTORICAL QUESTION

Why did New Yorkers keep voting for Tammany Hall?

Document A: Jacob Riis

Between 1860 and 1900 millions of immigrants arrived in New York City. Most crowded into tenement buildings on the Lower East Side. Jacob Riis was a police reporter who spent years walking these blocks at night. Here he takes his reader up the stairs of one building on Cherry Street.

Be a little careful, please! The hall is dark and you might stumble over the children pitching pennies back there. Not that it would hurt them; kicks and cuffs are their daily diet. They have little else. Here where the hall turns and dives into utter darkness is a step, and another, another. A flight of stairs. You can feel your way, if you cannot see it. Close? Yes! What would you have? All the fresh air that ever enters these stairs comes from the hall-door that is forever slamming, and from the windows of dark bedrooms that in turn receive from the stairs their sole supply of the elements God meant to be free, but man deals out with such niggardly hand. That was a woman filling her pail by the hydrant you just bumped against. The sinks are in the hallway, that all the tenants may have access—and all be poisoned alike by their summer stench. Hear the pump squeak! It is the lullaby of tenement-house babes. In summer, when a thousand thirsty throats pant for a cooling drink in this block, it is worked in vain. But the saloon, whose open door you passed in the hall, is always there. The smell of it has followed you up.

Source: Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York*, 1890. Chapter 4, "The Down Town Back-Alleys."

VOCABULARY

tenement	a building divided into many small apartments
niggardly	stingy; giving out as little as possible
the sinks	the shared drains and washbasins, out in the hallway
hydrant	the building's only water tap
saloon	a bar

Guiding Questions

Document A. After reading the document, answer these questions.

1. (Close reading) Riis says the only fresh air on the stairs comes from two places. What are they?

2. (Close reading) Name three things the people in this building do not have.

3. (Close reading) The last thing Riis mentions is the saloon, and he says it is "always there." Why might he end on that?

4. (Contextualization) In 1890 there was no unemployment insurance and no city welfare office. Who could a family in this building ask for help?

Document B: George Plunkitt

George Washington Plunkitt ran the Fifteenth Assembly District for Tammany Hall, the organization that controlled New York City politics for most of this period. A reporter named William Riordon sat with him at his bootblack stand and wrote down what he said. Here Plunkitt explains how he keeps his district.

What tells in holdin' your grip on your district is to go right down among the poor families and help them in the different ways they need help. I've got a regular system for this. If there's a fire in Ninth, Tenth, or Eleventh Avenue, for example, any hour of the day or night, I'm usually there with some of my election district captains as soon as the fire engines. If a family is burned out I don't ask whether they are Republicans or Democrats, and I don't refer them to the Charity Organization Society, which would investigate their case in a month or two and decide they were worthy of help about the time they are dead from starvation. I just get quarters for them, buy clothes for them if their clothes were burned up, and fix them up till they get things runnin' again. It's philanthropy, but it's politics, too—mighty good politics. Who can tell how many votes one of these fires bring me? The poor are the most grateful people in the world, and, let me tell you, they have more friends in their neighborhoods than the rich have in theirs.

If there's a family in my district in want I know it before the charitable societies do, and me and my men are first on the ground. I have a special corps to look up such cases. The consequence is that the poor look up to George W. Plunkitt as a father, come to him in trouble—and don't forget him on election day.

Source: George Washington Plunkitt, in William L. Riordon, *Plunkitt of Tammany Hall*, 1905. Chapter 6, "To Hold Your District: Study Human Nature and Act Accordin'."

VOCABULARY

philanthropy	charity; giving to help other people
quarters	a place to live
election district captain	a Tammany worker in charge of one small block of voters
Charity Organization Society	a private charity that investigated poor families before deciding whether they deserved help

Document B. Try to answer questions 1–3 before reading the whole document. Use only the source line and the introduction.

1. (Sourcing) Who is speaking in this document, and what was his job?

2. (Sourcing) Plunkitt is describing his own work. How might that shape what he chooses to say?

3. (Sourcing) The book appeared in 1905, near the end of Plunkitt's career. Why might that matter?

After reading the document, answer these questions.

4. (Close reading) List everything Plunkitt says he gives a family that has been burned out.

5. (Close reading) Plunkitt says, "It's philanthropy, but it's politics, too." What does he mean?

6. (Close reading) Why does Plunkitt bring up the Charity Organization Society? What is he comparing himself to?

7. (Sourcing) How trustworthy is this document as a source of information about Tammany Hall?

Document C: Lincoln Steffens

Lincoln Steffens investigated corruption in American cities for *McClure's Magazine*, a national monthly read mostly by middle-class Americans. He collected the articles into a book in 1904. In this part of the introduction he explains what surprised him most.

And it is corruptible, this citizenship. "I know what Parks is doing," said a New York union workman, "but what do I care. He has raised my wages. Let him have his graft!" And the Philadelphia merchant says the same thing: "The party leaders may be getting more than they should out of the city, but that doesn't hurt me. It may raise taxes a little, but I can stand that. The party keeps up the protective tariff. If that were cut down, my business would be ruined. So long as the party stands pat on that, I stand pat on the party."

The people are not innocent. That is the only "news" in all the journalism of these articles, and no doubt that was not new to many observers. It was to me. When I set out to describe the corrupt systems of certain typical cities, I meant to show simply how the people were deceived and betrayed.

Source: Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*, 1904. From "Introduction; and Some Conclusions."

VOCABULARY

corruptible	able to be bought off or led into wrongdoing
graft	using a political job to make money for yourself
Parks	Sam Parks, a New York labor leader convicted of extortion in 1903
protective tariff	a tax on imported goods that shields American business from foreign competition
stands pat	holds its position and refuses to change

Document C. Try to answer questions 1–2 before reading the whole document.

1. (Sourcing) Who wrote this document, and who was going to read it?

2. (Sourcing) What kind of document is this? How might that shape what it says?

After reading the document, answer these questions.

3. (Close reading) The workman and the merchant give different reasons for tolerating graft. What are they?

4. (Close reading) Steffens expected to find that the people had been "deceived and betrayed." What did he decide instead?

5. (Sourcing) How trustworthy is this document as a source of information about Tammany Hall?

Graphic Organizer

Document	According to this document, why did people support Tammany Hall?	What evidence from this document supports that answer?
A Riis		
B Plunkitt		
C Steffens		

After reading all three documents, why did New Yorkers keep voting for Tammany Hall?

Which document did you find most convincing, and why?

You ran the Fifteenth District yourself in the game. Name one thing these documents show that the game left out.