

1886: The Men Who Would Be Mayor

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New York City has given American politics a number of lively mayoral elections, and is in the process of giving it another. But none was livelier than the election of 1886, which set Abram Hewitt (Democrat), Henry George (Labor), and Theodore Roosevelt (Republican) against one another.

History's subsequent interest in the three candidates has been in inverse proportion to their success here. Roosevelt, who went on to San Juan Hill, the White House, and Mount Rushmore, finished third in the mayor's race. Although he was only 28 years old at the time of the election, he had already served four years in the State Assembly, representing a safe Republican seat in midtown. Roosevelt had made quite an impression in Albany. Years later a former colleague remembered Roosevelt's entrance into his first caucus.

He wore a single eyeglass, with a gold chain over his ear. He had on a cutaway coat with one button at the top, and the ends of its tails almost reached the tops of his shoes. He carried a gold-headed cane in one hand, a silk hat in the other. . . . His trousers were as tight as a tailor could make them, and had a bell-shaped bottom to cover his shoes. "Who's the dude?" I asked.

The dude had decided to go into the legislature because he wanted "to belong to the governing class" as well as the upper class. Certain of his upper-class sensibilities unsuited him for city politics, however. Roosevelt wanted to raise the license fees for saloons, and he judged the Irish Democrats he met in Albany to be "a stupid, sodden, vicious lot . . . equally deficient in brains and virtue."

In the last year of his second term, the young assemblyman's mother and wife died suddenly, on the same day. Roosevelt finished the session, then spent two years ranching in the Dakotas to restore himself. By 1886, he was ready to go into politics again.

Henry George, the author and reformer who finished second, had followed a very different career path. A seaman in his teens, he went to California to look for gold and, not finding any, kept body and soul together by odd-job printing. He hit bottom with the birth of his second child.

I stopped a man [on the street]—a stranger—and told him I wanted five dollars. He asked what I wanted it for. I told him that my wife was confined and that I

had nothing to give her to eat. He gave me the money. If he had not, I think I was desperate enough to have killed him.

George eventually moved up from setting type to writing editorials for newspapers. When a friendly politician gave him a job as a gas-meter inspector, he used his free time to write *Progress and Poverty*.

George's book sought to explain why progress and poverty seemed to go hand in hand. San Francisco showed more destitution by the time George got there in the late 1850s than it had in the first days of the gold rush, and old cities like New York showed still more. George's answer was that the greater wealth of advanced societies was sucked up by rents paid to landowners. George's solution was to tax all rent in land at a rate of 100 percent, and to abolish all other taxes and tariffs, thus liberating capitalists and laborers alike.

Progress and Poverty was ardent and earnest, like its author. (In a youthful phrenological examination, George had found the bumps of his head to be "large" in hope, though "small" in mirthfulness.) The book achieved international fame in 1882 when George toured Ireland and took the side of the peasants against their landlords. Four years later New York's fledgling Labor party asked him to help the underdog at home by running for mayor. A Democratic hack warned George that, however many votes he got, he would lose, since he would be "counted out," and offered him a congressional seat instead. George asked why, if he was sure to lose, the Democrat wanted him to withdraw. Because "your running will raise hell," the Democrat replied. George decided to run.

Abram Hewitt, the winner, is not totally forgotten today, for his name is preserved in the Cooper-Hewitt Museum. Hewitt was the son of a failed furniture maker, but his father had known Peter Cooper, the inventor and manufacturer. Hewitt started an iron mill in Trenton with Cooper's son, married Cooper's daughter, and was worth \$175,000 (a cool million today) by the time he was thirty.

Hewitt was an old-fashioned Jackson Democrat, for low tariffs and hard money. Since 1874 he had represented New York's Tenth Congressional District, which covered the Lower East Side and his own neighborhood, Gramercy Park. Hewitt had a better opinion of Irish Democrats than Roosevelt had. In Hewitt's first congressional campaign one of his young political operators, named Richard Croker, was charged with murdering a rival statesman during an election-day brawl. Hewitt paid for Croker's lawyer, and the case ended with a hung jury. In the summer of 1886, Croker became the leader of Tammany Hall.

How savvy was Hewitt? The question arises because his most notable political activity had been managing Samuel Tilden's presidential campaign in 1876. Tilden let the presidency be stolen from him by Republican fraud, but historians blame the candidate himself, not Hewitt, for bungling the endgame. In the small world of the city, Hewitt seemed cunning enough.

Each candidate led a divided party. For more than ten years there had been two Democratic organizations in New York: Tammany Hall, which was trying to recover from the fall of Boss Tweed, and the County Democracy, a reform movement to which Hewitt belonged. But the differences between them were slight. Tammany had renounced gross thievery for patronage—what George Washington Plunkitt would later call “honest graft”—while the County Democracy was itself a typical political machine. The common threat of Henry George drew the Democrats together, and Hewitt was nominated by the Tammany faction's convention on October 11. When reporters brought the news to him at his brother-in-law's house, Hewitt professed to be surprised, but he must have been in the know.

The Republicans had their own old guard and reform wings. Neither counted for much in New York City, but the machine of the old guard occasionally made deals with Tammany Hall in return for support in state or national elections. Roosevelt had a family grudge against the machine because it had blocked his father's appointment as collector of customs nine years earlier—in a fight so bitter it may have hastened the senior Roosevelt's death. The machine was now run by Thomas Collier Platt, or “Lean Rat Platt,” as Vachel Lindsay would call him. The Republican convention picked Roosevelt on October 15, while he awaited the news at the Union League Club.

Henry George had the support of an assortment of cranks and rabble-rousers, including Karl Marx's daughter. The four-year-old Labor party had assured him that he could count on thirty thousand supporters, and it had a platform calling for a list of liberal measures, including building codes enforced by inspectors and noninterference by police in strikes. But George saw the campaign as a way to promote his tax plan, even though he admitted he could not implement it from City Hall. George accepted Labor's nomination in a meeting at Cooper Union on October 5.

By today's standards the campaign passed in the blink of an eye. The weather throughout was foggy and damp. Roosevelt and George both gave numerous speeches, an innovation for those days. George sometimes spoke from carts in the street; Roosevelt stuck to halls. Hewitt, the front-runner, issued statements. The major papers supporting Hewitt were the *Daily News*, *Evening Post*, *Herald*, *Sun*, and *World*; Roosevelt had the *Times*, *Tribune*, *Commercial Advertiser*, and *Mail &*

Express. In George's corner stood only the *Irish World*, the *Volkszeitung*, a German Socialist paper, and his own campaign sheet.

Hewitt's strategy from the outset was to demonize George. "An attempt is being made to organize one class of our citizens against all other classes," Hewitt wrote in the letter accepting his nomination. "The ideas of anarchists, nihilists, communists, socialists, and mere theorists" were arrayed against "the democratic principle of individual liberty, which involves the right to private property. . . . The horrors of the French Revolution and the atrocities of the [Paris] Commune," Hewitt declared, "offer conclusive proof of the dreadful consequences of doctrines which can only be enforced by revolution and bloodshed."

The Hewitt strategy imposed on George the task of trying to make two points at once: denying that he was a monster, while simultaneously stoking the expectations of his supporters.

We have hordes of citizens living in want and in vice born of want, existing under conditions that would appall heathen.... Is this by the will of our Divine Creator? No. It is the fault of men; and as men and citizens, on us devolves the duty of removing this wrong.... We are beginning a movement for the abolition of industrial slavery, and what we do on this side of the water will send its impulse across the land and over the sea, and give courage to all men to think and act.

Was there any reason, apart from expediency, for Hewitt's harsh and dishonest characterization of George? Hewitt thought of himself as an industrial moderate; he had made a speech eight years earlier to a Christian group urging, without defining, cooperation between labor and management. He had offered to sell his plant to his workers, if they could raise enough money to compensate him, which of course they couldn't. George on the other hand was a true believer: since land belonged to the community as a matter of right, the profits landowners made from renting it out should be taken in taxes. George's radicalism was narrow, but within its limits, uncompromising. Hewitt, perhaps sincerely, felt it prudent to fear the worst.

Roosevelt was relegated to the sidelines of this class war, though he got in a shot at a Labor-party official who accused him of belonging to the landlord class. "If you had any conception of the true American spirit," Roosevelt replied, "you would know that we do not have 'classes' at all on this side of the water"—apparently the side, that is, opposite the side where "sodden" Irishmen originate. Hewitt, who was old enough to be Roosevelt's father, treated him as a fine young man who had a brilliant future ahead of him but warned that every vote he took now was in effect a vote for the hellish George.

The Catholic church got into the race in the homestretch. One of George's staunchest allies on the Irish land question was Father Edward Glynn [sic], pastor of St. Stephen's on East 29th Street, who considered George "one of the greatest geniuses that the world has ever seen." But Glynn was ordered not to politick for the duration of the campaign. At the same time, the Hewitt camp solicited from Monsignor Thomas Preston, vicar-general of the archdiocese, a letter condemning Georgism as "unsound, unsafe and contrary to the teachings of the Church. . . . Although we never interfere directly in elections," Msgr. Preston concluded, "we would not wish now to be misunderstood at a time when the best interests of society may be in danger." Msgr. Preston's statement of noninterference was distributed at church doors the Sunday before the election.

Saturday night, George's supporters had paraded through Union Square for two hours in a cold, drenching rain, chanting "Hi ho, the leeches must go." Election day was clear and Indian summery. Early returns showed a heavy vote for George. At two o'clock in the afternoon, Platt sent the word to the Republican machine: vote for Hewitt.

The final tally was 90,552 for Hewitt; 68,110 for George; 60,435 for Roosevelt. Georgeites believed for years afterward that their man had been "counted out," as he had been warned. Undoubtedly, fraud occurred. But the polls had been closely watched, and the larger factor was the Republican swing to Hewitt, which Roosevelt put at 15,000 votes and the Democrats themselves at 10,000.

"This is the end of my political career," a downcast Roosevelt told a friend, then sailed for London, where he married his second wife in December.

George soldiered on, urging men to think and act. Probably the major effect of his exertions was to prepare the way for socialism, a doctrine he deplored. He ran for mayor again 11 years later, despite ill health, and died of a stroke four days before election day. A dwindling band of followers honored his memory. When Henry George Jr. visited the aged Tolstoy, the writer said, "I shall see your father before you do. What shall I tell him?" "Tell him I kept the faith," the son answered.

Hewitt had a troubled term. He alienated Tammany Hall (despite reappointing Richard Croker fire commissioner), for he cracked down on gambling, whoring, and saloons that broke the blue laws, and he refused to review the St. Patrick's Day parade, on the grounds that he reviewed no others. Clearly his cunning had deserted him. When he stood for reelection two years later, Croker and Platt combined to unseat him.

