

## The Reform Crusades

### THE REFORMERS' AIMS

In 1902 George Washington Plunkitt, a veteran of New York's legendary Tammany Hall machine organization, pontificated that reformers "were mornin' glories—looked lovely in the mornin' and withered up in a short time, while the regular machines went on flourishin' forever, like fine old oaks."<sup>1</sup> At the time Plunkitt delivered that piece of home-grown wisdom, he still had a valid point, but just barely. Even as he spoke, reform movements were springing up in cities all across the country. The reformers aimed to dismantle the party organizations that thrived on immigrant votes, but these movements tended to be short lived, exactly as Plunkitt observed. Reformers were often successful in persuading state legislatures to enact some reforms intended to undercut the machines; for example, some states took the administration of services out of the hands of boards of aldermen and city councils and put them under the control of professional administrators. But despite such measures, they found it hard to undermine the basic foundation of machine politics. Machine politicians were still able to maintain their electoral strength in the immigrant wards, and aldermen elected from those wards decided such matters as hiring for public jobs, streetcar and utility franchises, construction contracts, and the provision of city services. Plenty of patronage and money, the lifeblood of machine politics, were bound up in these decisions. Within a few years, however, the reformers succeeded in changing these facts of urban life.

To a great many middle- and upper-class Americans, the cities seemed to be in the hands of criminals who plundered the public purse for personal gain. Although reformers in Cleveland, New York, Chicago, and other cities sometimes succeeded at throwing machine politicians out of office and getting some of them prosecuted in the courts for corruption, the offending politicians were easily replaced by men cut from the same cloth. Commenting on this fact of life, Englishman James Bryce expressed the view that "the government of cities is the one conspicuous failure of the United States."<sup>2</sup> Reformers shared his