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An Exploration of the Pendleton Act of 1883

The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act of 1883 marks a major shift in both the culture and legal framework of the United States government; however, it is not widely talked about. In this paper we will explore the events of the Pendleton Act and debate its effects today. This is a widely ignored subject, but an important one because it marks one of the most significant systematic changes made in the history of the United States government. It is important to be familiar and educate yourself about this topic so that you can better understand the government today and why we have elected to put certain systems in place. In the paper we will thoroughly explore the events that caused the Pendleton Act such as major political events shortly before its passing and the general culture of the U.S. government at that time. We will take time to explore that day in history when it was passed, go over the technicalities of the act, and understand what it really means for the country on a practical level. We will also explore the effects that the Pendleton Act has had since 1883 from what it changed the very next day to how our lives are different today because of it. I am also interested in exploring whether the Pendleton Act was wise as we need to decipher the numerous and varying opinions on it.

The Pendleton Civil Service Act was a law, passed in 1883, that legally switched our government and all its jobs from the spoils system to the merit system. The Pendleton Act birthed the United States Civil Service Commission which would act as an enforcer of these new policies as we transitioned into a new way of filling government positions. The Pendleton Act on the surface seems very straight forward in that its purpose is to begin electing and hiring government employees based on competency and capability rather than connections. However, the Civil Service Reform did far more than eliminate the spoils system and one of its more discrete purposes was to separate administrative agencies from all of the political corruption and therefore limit political influence. After the Pendleton Act was passed not all jobs were immediately impacted but this new protocol eventually made its way to each government position so that exams were given to potential employees and current employees became protected from new leaders replacing them with their friends.

Now that we better understand what the Pendleton Act of 1883 really was let us explore the events that sparked its passing. It is important to have historical context and better understand why that day was the right time in history to pass this act. There is a consensus among historians that if one event should be singularly blamed for the law passing on that January day in 1883 it was the assassination of President Garfield. To give a little bit of background on Garfield he is the only president to date who never sought office in any form, but when his party could not pick a candidate, they thrust him into the position, and he won. A disgruntled man, who had sought to be serve on the office of consul to Paris, shot President Garfield in the back four times at a train station. This event rocked the United States in a deep way and there was much fear that Garfield’s vice president, now incoming President Arthur, would be as cruel as he had been in the past. Arthur was a corrupt man who did many controversial things in office, and so was never elected, including taking obscene advantage of the spoils system. These events led to the Republican members of congress not being able to use the spoils system in any way, so they felt it was a good time for Civil Reform. This chain of events is credited with setting the country up for this massive change, but there were many other important events that lead to this day. The very first hint towards this movement actually came from our first commander in chief George Washington who believed all government jobs and jobs of service should be filled with the very best people. Of course, it would be 94 years until these ideas were acted upon in any meaningful way. After Washington’s wise words there were three major failed attempts to eliminate the spoils system. The first came from a Republican Congressmen, like the later successful attempt did, named Thomas Jenckes. Jenckes has several private interests tied up in the efficiency of the postal service and so deeply resented its corruption. Jenckes proposed a bill in 1865 to switch to a merit system, and though his motives were not altruistic his ideas were good, but he ultimately failed. Another attempt came only ten years later but did not get very far because it not got farther than being grass roots movements. Essentially small groups of every day people started putting out the idea of reforming their local governments and then allowing that change to spread up the ladder. This of course was unsuccessful, and nothing was tried again until a short-lived campaign by the National Civil Reform League. However, even this organization could not get very far, because the country was not ready. A key factor ended up being that the people in a position to push this law through could not have anything to gain from the spoils system and some benefit from switching to the merit system for it to happen.

Terms like ‘spoils system’ and ‘merit system’ may be unfamiliar to us because it has been so long since they were debated. Thomas Jefferson is considered the father of the spoils system because, even though he did not start it, he took time to innovate it and helped it become a staple of the way our government operates. When Thomas Jefferson beat Aaron Burr to become the third U.S. president, he refused to allow Burr to be the vice president, as was customary at that time, but instead gave the position to his friend James Madison. This was a big shakeup for the highest government office and an unprecedented decision that shows the dangers of the spoil system that Jefferson could even make that decision to not follow protocol. Evidently Jefferson thought this first decision went well as he made many more spoils system-based decisions creating a culture so that politicians following did the same. The spoils system essentially operates in a manner where the person who has been elected to a high position has the power to the choose who they would like to fill all their positions. This has the obvious downside of more qualified people losing jobs to those who made friends with powerful people and is just a breeding ground for corruption. Thankfully the Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act being passed set us down a rode of adopting the merit system. The merit system, in my opinion, really follows common sense as it acts under the belief system that the most qualified person should get the job regardless of who they are or who they know. This new merit system was enforced in two very tangible ways, the first is that many government jobs involve taking competitive examination so that the people who go to the interview are the people with the highest scores and second is that the senate now confirms cabinet members to make sure the president is operating of off merit and not spoils. The examinations are interesting because jobs like United States Postal Service workers are not so different from other midlevel jobs but require this intense examination. This shows how necessary precautions against government corruption are on every level.

The Pendleton Act may have been passed in 1883 but it still affects us today. The biggest impact of today would obviously be the change to the merit system in every facet of the government. This is often taken for granted as it has been in effect for so long, but it is an enormous change from before the Pendleton Act was passed. The government is now more balanced and so the president must face people with opposing views rather than their buddies that were given the jobs. The effect I think is the most encouraging is the increased stability of lower level Federal jobs like at the post office. Now these Americans are protected from shifts in power costing them their job. I also think that we are now getting a much more qualified government than we ever could have under the spoils system because of precautions like competitive exams to be considered for government jobs. I imagine that under the spoils system people in power were filling positions with either friends, people who would agree with them or people they were indebted to and that is not the best way to find qualified people. Even the presidential cabinet has been massively changed, even though the president picks who they would like to appoint, the senate is given the power to confirm or deny on merit.

As my final thoughts on the Pendleton Reform Act I want to debate whether it was wise. This is difficult to do, as we can never know for sure what the trajectory of the country would have been better or worse had the act not been passed. However, based on all the research I have done I do think it was wise. I also think the Pendleton Act is very complicated, as are most historic events that we imagine having altruistic intentions but never do when looked at with an ice-cold eye. I think the accountability brought about by the Pendleton Act had had a positive impact on the United States government as we no longer must fear who the people, we elect may owe debts to or favor unreasonably. The protection of government worker’s jobs that come from the Pendleton Act is a huge positive because it is immoral to fire those who have earned their jobs to employ a friend. The Pendleton Civil Service Reform Act is somewhat controversial and not all of its effects are good, but I believe it changed our country for the better and greatly reduced government corruption on every level.

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