



UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS PRESS

John Peter Altgeld as a Candidate for Mayor of Chicago in 1899

Author(s): C. David Tompkins

Source: *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)*, Vol. 56, No. 4 (Winter, 1963), pp. 654-676

Published by: University of Illinois Press on behalf of the Illinois State Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40189944>

Accessed: 13-09-2022 01:37 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Illinois State Historical Society, University of Illinois Press are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)*

C. DAVID TOMPKINS

John Peter Altgeld as a Candidate For Mayor of Chicago in 1899

C. David Tompkins is an instructor in history at Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo. He has B.S. and M.A. degrees from Northwestern University, an M.S. in Speech from the University of Wisconsin, and is completing the requirements for a Ph.D. in modern American history at the University of Michigan, for which he is writing a biography of the late Michigan Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg. Articles by him have been published in Michigan History, The Michigan Quarterly Review, and Quarterly Journal of Speech.

ONE NAME that should be added to the list of late nineteenth-century municipal reformers is that of Illinois Governor John Peter Altgeld, who had been concerned with municipal problems long before he was elected governor in 1892. Altgeld had clearly outlined his views on city government in an address before the Sunset Club of Chicago in 1890. Three fundamentals, he said, must be maintained: 1) no permanent office-holding class, 2) an independent officer for every important position, and 3) government by law, not by caprice of individuals.¹

During his term as governor, Altgeld was particularly concerned with urban problems. When the legislature presented him with several "monopoly bills" giving perpetual franchises to gas, water, and streetcar companies, he responded with a resounding veto and suggested that municipalities should take over the operation of some of these natural monopolies:

Some of the largest, most conservative and best governed cities

1. John P. Altgeld, *Live Questions* (Chicago, 1899), 185.

of Europe and America now furnish their inhabitants gas, electric light and even street car service, and do this at greatly reduced rates and yet derive a large revenue from this source, just as Chicago now does in furnishing water. If we had a law permitting cities to do the same in this state, then, if these bills were adopted, the people could at any time free themselves from the monopoly by building or acquiring plants and furnishing the service themselves, or, if the corporations could be compelled to pay a part of their gross earnings into the treasury, then the public would get some compensation.²

Altgeld was defeated by Republican John R. Tanner in his bid for re-election as governor in 1896 and returned to Chicago to practice law. But he was now a national political figure, as well as a popular speaker, and he spent much time traveling throughout the nation for speaking engagements. At Philadelphia on September 5, 1897, he delivered a stirring talk on "Corruption and Usurpation in Government, and Municipal and Governmental Ownership," in which he argued persuasively and convincingly for government ownership of public utilities. He warned of the evils of monopoly and urged the people to act to regain control of their municipal governments. He concluded his speech:

This is Labor Day throughout the United States, and many beautiful things will be said about the dignity of labor, but I want to say to you that if our government is not rescued from corporations and if the snaky form of government by injunction is not crushed, then it would have been better for your children if they had never been born.³

Although he no longer held public office, Altgeld was still the leader of the Democratic Party of Illinois and was determined to preserve the national Democratic Party platform of 1896 as a permanent part of the party philosophy. He had been the dominating figure in the national convention that year and had written much of the platform himself.⁴

2. *Ibid.*, 942.

3. *Ibid.*, 773.

4. Francis F. Browne, "The Presidential Contest — Altgeld of Illinois," *National Review*, XXVIII (Dec., 1896): 452.

Among its basic planks were those calling for the rights of local government, for an end to federal interference in local labor disputes, and for free silver.⁵

The following year, Altgeld played an important part in selecting a Democratic nominee for mayor of Chicago, and adherence to the 1896 national platform was the basic guide for selection. Consequently, several prominent "Gold-Bug" Democrats were refused the nod. Finally, to maintain party harmony and insure the principles he so strongly believed in, Altgeld chose Carter H. Harrison II as the nominee.⁶

Young Harrison had "immense personal presence" and was "a fine figure of a man with blazing eyes, a clean-cut jaw, a trim mustache, the guise and comport of a theater matinee idol."⁷ Although he was the kind of man who could be expected to sell the "Democracy" to Chicago, he would never have been considered for the nomination without Altgeld's support. Harrison ran on the Chicago platform⁸ and with the vigorous support of the former Governor was able to score 148,880 votes to 69,730⁹ for his nearest opponent.

Altgeld considered the election a vindication of his own political principles, but he had reservations about Harrison's loyalty to his backers. In a letter to Judge Lambert Tree, Altgeld wrote, "So a number of us — that is, the people — lifted young Carter H. Harrison into the saddle. . . . But his election was recognized by the country as a silver victory, and even if he should now betray us I feel that we did the

5. See Harvey Wish, "John Peter Altgeld and the Election of 1896," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society*, XXX (Dec., 1937): 353-81.

6. Walter S. Cooling, *The Chicago Democracy: A History of Recent Municipal Politics* (Chicago, 1899), 22; and Harry Barnard, "Eagle Forgotten," *The Life of John Peter Altgeld* (New York, 1938), 417.

7. Lloyd Wendt and Herman Kogan, *Lords of the Levee: The Story of Bathhouse John and Hinky Dink* (Indianapolis, 1943), 160.

8. The specific planks upon which he campaigned are mentioned in Cooling, *Chicago Democracy*, 28. They included: eight-hour day for municipal laborers, reduction of telephone rates, no franchises without full compensation to the city, and just salaries for city officials.

9. *The Chicago Daily News Almanac and Political Register for 1898* (George E. Plumbe, comp., Chicago, 1898), 349.

John P. Altgeld — this picture was taken in 1896, while he was governor.



right thing. . . . I hope all will be well.”¹⁰ Altgeld’s fear that Harrison might betray his supporters soon became a reality.

The ensuing break between Altgeld and Harrison — both known today as outstanding liberals who were in basic agreement on the vital issues of their times — resulted from their varying conceptions of political realities and responsibilities. Altgeld, the idealist, had hoped that young Harrison would use his administration to implement the policies he had espoused in the campaign. But this was not to be. The new mayor not only neglected to discuss his appointments with Altgeld and other silver Democrats but generally appointed gold Democrats to city posts — often on the advice of Altgeld’s most hated enemies.

It soon became apparent to Altgeld that Harrison was willing to accept political support from any Democrat. In 1897 “Marse Henry” Watterson, a gold Democrat who had fought bitterly against William Jennings Bryan and the 1896 platform, came out in his *Louisville Courier-Journal* for Harrison as President.¹¹ Not long thereafter, Harrison gave

10. Quoted in Waldo R. Browne, *Altgeld of Illinois: A Record of His Life and Work* (New York, 1924), 304.

11. Barnard, “*Eagle Forgotten*,” 413.

his support to the boss of Tammany, Richard Croker, an arch-enemy of Altgeld, who had also fought the Chicago platform and led the New York delegation from the Chicago convention in 1896. Nevertheless, Harrison accepted Croker's invitation to go to New York in October of 1897 to speak in behalf of the Tammany candidate for mayor. Another candidate in that election was Henry George, a close friend of Altgeld's and a silver Democrat, who was running as an independent. George was severely critical of the "monied interests" controlling politics in the nation, and Croker reasoned that there was no better way to cut into George's support than to bring in a silver Democrat who favored the Tammany candidate. When Harrison spoke for Croker and Tammany, he viciously attacked George, who was, he said, "unworthy of being entrusted with any share of American government. This republic of ours is good enough for you; this republic of ours is good enough for me. If it is not good enough for Mr. George, let us say to him: 'The world is wide, and there are daily sailings of steamers from the port of Greater New York!'"¹² This slur against George's loyalty was especially galling to Altgeld since George died a few days later. Altgeld was also aware now that the eastern gold interests were slowly crushing the silver forces in the Democratic Party. The Tammany Hall convention of 1897 not only ignored the 1896 platform but called its principles "socialistic."¹³

In Chicago, meanwhile, Harrison was gaining control of the city and county Democratic organizations, further increasing Altgeld's anxiety. In the 1898 county elections most of the candidates were chosen by the Harrison faction of the party. The results were disastrous, with the Democrats losing all of the contests. These overwhelming defeats further convinced the silver men that the party was going in the wrong direction under the leadership of Harrison.¹⁴

12. *Ibid.*, 418-19.

13. Cooling, *Chicago Democracy*, 14.

14. *Ibid.*, 52.

It was the traction issue, however, that finally caused an open split between Harrison and the former Governor. Charles T. Yerkes, traction king of Chicago, had repeatedly tried to gain tighter legal control of the city's streets. In 1896 he had lobbied a set of "Eternal Monopoly" bills through the legislature with lush bribes to the "People's representatives." Altgeld vetoed the bills, and spurned the bribes he was offered, but Yerkes refused to give up. When the new administration entered the statehouse in 1897, a new bill allowing cities to give fifty-year franchises to the street-car companies was introduced and passed. Subsequently, on December 20, 1898, an ordinance was introduced in the Chicago city council extending the franchises, including Yerkes', for the maximum fifty-year limit. Harrison assumed leadership of the movement against the bill, and at meetings throughout the city Harrison, Altgeld, and other public officials spoke against the ordinance.¹⁵

Despite their united opposition to the franchise extensions, Altgeld and Harrison split over the traction issue. Altgeld called for municipal ownership at once, while Harrison favored granting franchise extensions of twenty years. The city then would be in a position, Harrison said, to discuss public ownership. Meanwhile the five-cent fare should be guaranteed and the city should receive 10 per cent of the gross profits each year.¹⁶ "On the night when the vote was taken in the city council, City Hall was surrounded by a mob — armed with nooses and guns. The vote went against Yerkes." In January the council resolved that the state enabling legislation (the Allen Act) should be repealed, and in March the legislature wiped it from the books.¹⁷

At the last meetings of the protest groups in December of 1898 the break between Altgeld and Harrison had been evident to everyone, and the newspapers had begun to specu-

15. Ray Ginger, *Altgeld's America: the Lincoln Ideal versus Changing Realities* (New York, 1958), 179-80.

16. *Ibid.*, 180; *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 12, 1898, pp. 1-2.

17. Ginger, *Altgeld's America*, 182.

late about a possible contest between Altgeld and Harrison for the office of mayor: When would a declaration of war come from Altgeld? Who would win? What would be the effect on the national Democratic Party?¹⁸ Everyone admitted that the former Governor was still a force to be considered in Illinois and national politics, and even the *Tribune* carried a glowing account of the power of persuasion of a man it hated:

Altgeld brought his audience [at the last franchise protest meeting] to its highest pitch of fervor when he declared that the city, not the traction companies should dictate terms, and that the time for consideration was not now, but 1903. The tension to which he moved his hearers was illustrated again when he declared municipal ownership attended by a pronounced reduction in fares the ultimate solution. There was first a moment of silence, then a shout as from a single throat.¹⁹

That meeting on the night of December 11, 1898, was the last time Altgeld and Harrison shared the same platform. Although the former Governor had not yet announced his intention to seek the mayor's chair, everyone in Chicago expected him to do so.

On December 19 Harrison supporters placed posters on every corner (tilted against the lampposts) which read: "Chicago and Harrison against Yerkes and boodle!" Some Chicago newspapers and political commentators interpreted this move as the beginning of the formal fight between the two Democrats; others interpreted it as an indication of the anxiety Altgeld caused the Harrison camp.²⁰ Regardless of the last-minute attempts to dissuade Altgeld from entering the mayoralty race, his candidacy was announced in the *Freie Presse* of December 20:

The Democrats of Chicago have noticed with alarm the effort of Mr. Harrison to renominate himself with the assistance of the 14,000 men employed in the city service, who will be whipped into

18. *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 12, 1898, pp. 1-2.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, Dec. 19, 1898, p. 7.

line, in order to carry the Democratic city primaries. It is the purpose of the City Hall ring to call a convention early in January to prevent the Democrats who are not controlled by Mr. Harrison's machine to form a powerful organization and to make an effective fight on the primaries.

Under the prevailing circumstances there is only one way open to the Democracy of Chicago to prevent another defeat: the party must nominate their strongest man by petition and this petition must be circulated without delay.

Ex-governor Altgeld has no desire to be Mayor of Chicago, but he has been convinced that he must accept the nomination and make the fight in order to save the Democracy from another overthrow. A document for this purpose will be circulated in a day or two. Every good Democrat and many Republicans will sign it.²¹

Altgeld's decision to run for mayor had come after prolonged consideration and hesitation. As early as the fall of 1898 many Chicago and Cook County Democrats had urged him to head an independent movement within the party to nominate fit candidates for the spring elections. He was then reluctant to take on the thankless and laborious task,²² but the pressures exerted on him to enter the political arena persisted. His change of mind in late 1898 came after several close friends, including Clarence Darrow, convinced him of the necessity for his running.²³ In a newspaper interview following the announcement of his candidacy, Altgeld said,

For several months I have had many people coming to me and asking me to make this fight. I have been opposed to it. I have no desire to be running around the city making speeches in an exhausting campaign. But those who have broached the matter to me have been insistent. I have told them I did not want the office; that I refused the nomination before I was Governor, and cared nothing for the position now. But I have always been ready and stand ready now to do anything I can to assist the Democratic party. If the making of this fight will do anything to stop the treachery which is destroying the local organization, and which threatens to ruin the national organization, then I am willing to

21. *Ibid.*, Dec. 20, 1898, p. 3.

22. Cooling, *Chicago Democracy*, 63.

23. Clarence Darrow, *The Story of My Life* (New York, 1932), 108.

MAYORAL CANDIDATE ALTGELD

make the fight. I will run for any office if my doing so will serve such an end.²⁴

Although Altgeld's candidacy did not come as a surprise, his backers were faced with the problem of either opposing Mayor Harrison in the Democratic primary in mid-March or of running Altgeld as an independent candidate. To run without the help of an organized political party was exceedingly difficult in Chicago. Since the mayor held the power of patronage and appointment, he could force city employees to support his campaign by active work as well as financial contributions. He could also dismiss any city worker who supported or actively worked for an opponent. If Altgeld ran as an independent, he would have to raise money, recruit volunteer workers, and find an experienced and competent campaign manager.

In spite of these difficulties, Altgeld decided that he could not hope to gain the nomination of the Democratic Party which was in the complete control of Harrison. In late December Altgeld said,

The only way to success in politics is to go squarely before the people, and that is what I always have done and always will do. Other persons can have the party machinery if they think it will do them any good. It is the people, however, who have the final disposal of all matters.²⁵

Altgeld established headquarters in the Unity Building, and his campaign began to move. As Clarence Darrow reported:

"Altgeld for Mayor" was a slogan that gathered from the highways and byways the old guard that had frantically followed him and Bryan to defeat. Day after day his headquarters were crowded with weird-looking idealists and worshippers — the poorly clad, the ill-fed, the unemployed, the visionaries gazing off toward the rainbow espying something farther on than the very stars themselves.²⁶

24. *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 20, 1898, p. 3.

25. *Ibid.*, Dec. 25, 1898, p. 11.

26. Darrow, *Story of My Life*, 108.

Clarence S. Darrow as he appeared at about the time he was backing Altgeld for mayor of Chicago.



For each of these people there was more than enough work to do; letters had to be addressed and a mass of literature sent to city and state employees who were known Democrats.²⁷ Not only the party regulars but voters all over the city received a circular stating that true Democrats had lost faith in Carter H. Harrison because of his betrayal of the party's true principles, his "talk[ing] silver, and act[ing] gold," his opposition to municipal ownership of the streetcars, and his generally corrupt administration of City Hall.²⁸ "Municipal Ownership and Chicago Platform" became the slogan of the Altgeld forces. People thronged to the office in the Unity Building to offer their support and active help. Hustlers were set up in each ward.²⁹ In addition to the Municipal Ownership League, other independent groups called special meetings throughout Chicago to endorse Altgeld. These meetings were generally crowded, and Harrison spies were often in attendance. If detected, they were thrown out bodily. Persons remaining signed pledges promising to vote for Altgeld and Altgeld-sponsored men.³⁰ Cam-

27. *Chicago Chronicle*, Jan. 19, 1899, p. 12.

28. *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 23, 1898, p. 12.

29. *Ibid.*, Dec. 21, 1898, p. 7.

30. *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, Jan. 20, 1899, as cited in J. C. Ambler scrapbooks for Citizens' Association of Chicago, Chicago Historical Society.

paign leaders hoped to have an Altgeld Club in each ward. All of this had to be supported by voluntary contributions.

When Altgeld decided to run as an independent, with the support of the Municipal Ownership League, he also decided to enter candidates for each of the city offices. The League nominees for the major city posts were Charles F. Driscoll for city treasurer, Charles H. Mitchell for city attorney, and Frank A. Stauber for city clerk. The candidate for South Town clerk was Joseph Harris, the first Negro nominated by the Democrats of Chicago for a public office.³¹

The Democratic Party was severely split by Altgeld's campaign. Most Harrison Democrats were surprised by the extent of the support which seemed to be rallying behind the former Governor. Among the prominent Democrats who quit the party to aid Altgeld were former Judge William Prentiss, city collector Joseph S. Martin and Congressman Thomas Cusack. Prentiss praised Altgeld for remaining faithful to the Chicago platform and the principles of Jefferson and Bryan. He likewise condemned Harrison for neglecting his campaign promises.³² Cusack resigned as county vice-chairman of the Democratic Party to join the Altgeld campaign, and Martin quit his job as city collector.³³

Harrison forces labeled those who worked for Altgeld as traitors to the Democratic Party.³⁴ One Harrison man, State Senator J. N. C. Shumway, accused the former Governor of destroying the Democratic Party:

No one in the country seems to know or understand why you, the former democratic governor of this state, upon whom the loyal democrats of Illinois have conferred the honor of their suffrage, should at this time declare yourself an independent candidate for the mayor of Chicago.

Shumway then demanded that Altgeld explain his reasons

31. *Chicago Chronicle*, March 15, 1899, p. 4.

32. Cooling, *Chicago Democracy*, 92-94.

33. *Chicago Chronicle*, March 23, 1899, p. 4; *Chicago Tribune*, Jan. 19, 1899, p. 5.

34. *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, Feb. 20, 1899, as cited in Ambler scrapbooks.

and position to all the Democrats of Illinois.³⁵ Altgeld immediately answered the query. He defined the issues of the Chicago situation as follows:

1. That of political decency and self-preservation. 2. The betrayal and utter destruction of that mighty reform movement for which the Democratic Party now stands. 3. Whether the people of Chicago shall be prevented from even making an effort to improve the condition of themselves and their children with reference to the Street car service.

In discussing his first point, Altgeld pointed to the nine thousand city appointees who were forced to do political work in the saloons, among contractors, and the semi-criminal classes. The net result, he said, was the easy domination of the party. After Harrison became mayor, Altgeld stated, he appointed only gold men, allowed corruption in the City Hall, and made no effort to carry out the reforms promised in the Chicago platform upon which he ran in 1897. Harrison's policy on the street railways, the former Governor charged, was in the interest of the monopolists rather than the people. Altgeld defended his willingness to depart from the party organization as follows:

Free institutions in this land must depend on a patriotic democracy. My life is tied up with the great principles that can only be established through such a democracy, and I am not willing to sit idly by while everything that I have toiled for and hold dear is threatened with betrayal and destruction. To bolt a party is to disagree with its declared principles, but a man who is ready to sacrifice everything he had to prevent the principles of the party from being betrayed is not a bolter. To worship a corrupt political organization as a fetish and blindly follow it when it is moving toward destruction, is unworthy of a free citizen, and this practice has done infinite harm to our republic. Political machinery is a curse when prostituted to base purposes.³⁶

Altgeld did not enter the March primary which elected delegates to the city Democratic convention, and, as a result, Harrison was easily nominated and the convention ended up

35. Cooling, *Chicago Democracy*, 64-69.

36. *Ibid.*, 68.

as a political rally for the Mayor. At the convention, Altgeld was read out of the party and condemned as a traitor. Although this may have been the sentiment of local Democrats, controlled as they were by Harrison, it did not express the opinion of the national organization. At first, national party leaders, including Bryan, tried to keep out of the fight, but they were eventually forced to take a stand, and on election eve the National Democratic Committee headquarters sent out bulletins, which said in part:

The Harrison Democrats of Chicago, in convention assembled, failed to announce allegiance to the national platform of 1896. This for the reason that they owe no allegiance to it. To tell the truth, there were no real Democrats in the convention. It was Democratic in name only. All the real Democrats of Chicago are supporting John P. Altgeld, who is running on the national platform.

Although elected as a Democrat, Harrison has never done anything while in office to entitle him to the honor of being called a Democrat. He no sooner got into the Mayor's chair than he placed himself under the protection of Mark Hanna's Chicago agents, and as a result the doors of the City Hall have for two years been closed to real Democrats.³⁷

The convention which had nominated Harrison completely ignored the promises made by Harrison in 1897. Even in his campaigning he made no references to Democratic principles, and much of his support came from groups who wore Harrison buttons but were dedicated to business or special interests. As an example, not one of his posters or buttons had the words "Democratic Party" inscribed.³⁸

Harrison had opened his campaign on February 4, 1899, at a meeting at Halsted and Forty-seventh streets. He predicted that he would get three Republican votes for every Democratic vote Altgeld took from him. He said,

I believe that when a man wants anything he ought to come out and say so. Go right to the people and tell them what you want. I want to be mayor again, and I expect to put up the best fight I

37. *Chicago Tribune*, April 1, 1899, p. 5.

38. Cooling, *Chicago Democracy*, 91-92.

know how for the renomination and then for the reelection. I am not ashamed to say that I have been a fair mayor.³⁹

In spite of his better advertised campaign with more posters, buttons, cigars, billboards, and lithographs, Harrison still felt he was in trouble. He was amazed by Altgeld's seeming strength, and his supporters made at least two attempts to persuade Altgeld to drop the fight.⁴⁰

Altgeld formally opened his campaign on Saturday, February 18, with a public address at the People's Institute, at Van Buren and Leavitt streets. It was one of the largest political meetings ever held on the West Side. The size and enthusiasm of the crowd surprised the City Hall politicians and demonstrated that Altgeld's movement was not to be sneered at. As the *Tribune* reported: "What made it remarkable also was the total absence of the ward worker and payroll patriot, who is always so prominent at political gatherings."⁴¹ The meeting had all appearances of being a genuine expression of the common man of Chicago.

Speaking with the indignation characteristic of the progressive reformer, Altgeld outlined the issues of the election:

The most remarkable phenomenon of our times is the formation of trusts and the concentration of capital, through which competition is wiped out, small dealers and small manufacturers are crushed out, wages are arbitrarily fixed on the one hand and the price of products arbitrarily named on the other, so that the great masses of our people are rendered helpless and their independence is being destroyed.

Thus, he went on, local, state, and national governments had been bought off and had become the servants of the monopolists. Formerly no one could afford to buy a piece of legislation, but bribes "are now being offered that are too powerful for the ordinary man to resist. Consequently everything of value that the public owns is turned over to the corruptionists through crime." The only method of stopping these

39. *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 5, 1899, p. 2.

40. *Ibid.*, Jan. 7, 1899, p. 9.

41. *Ibid.*, Feb. 19, 1899, p. 7.

MAYORAL CANDIDATE ALTGELD

crimes, he said, was to break the power of the trusts. Twenty years earlier stringent laws had been passed to prevent the formation of "these gigantic monsters, but these laws were only laughed at and have been productive of no good except to show the impotency of this line of procedure." Since concentration of capital was inevitable, he went on,

What we must therefore do is to give the whole public the benefit of this, instead of allowing a few individuals to have it. In other words, we must have the public take the monopoly and own it for the benefit of all the people. While this may not be feasible in every case, it has been demonstrated that it can be done in most cases. Particularly is this true of all matters relating to municipal affairs.

Altgeld then suggested that streetcar fares could be reduced and the service improved, thereby removing the temptation of corruption from municipal officials. For the first time, he said, the people of Chicago had the opportunity to vote in a municipal election that meant something:

We want an immediate reduction of street-railway fares, so as to lighten the burden of our people. We want to prepare to have the city take the local monopolies just as soon as we can get necessary legislation for that purpose, and we want to drag politics out of back alleys, out of rat holes into the open, where God's sunlight can get a chance at it. No man, be he republican or democrat, should be required to sneak down into dark places and either shut his eyes or hold his nose in order to stand by his party.

He then charged that Harrison was playing right into the hands of the "boodlers" by meeting their demands. First, the Mayor was willing to give a twenty-year extension of the streetcar franchises. Second, Harrison was originally willing to keep the five-cent fare. Third, he was bitterly opposed to municipal ownership until after twenty years. Fourth, he had asked for an insignificant 10 per cent of the earnings of the lines for the city. Altgeld admitted that Harrison appeared to be opposed to Yerkes and the gang, but he charged that this was a façade to deceive the voters as to his real intention and willingness to co-operate with the

monied interests. Altgeld cited examples of Harrison's receiving aid from the streetcar tycoon, to whom he later granted reciprocal "selected favors."

In addition to attacking Harrison's position on the traction issue, Altgeld criticized other aspects of the Mayor's record. He charged that the higher phone rates in Chicago than in other midwestern cities were due to poor city administration. Chicagoans paid higher phone bills, and the city received less revenue than other cities. He said that civil service principles had been flagrantly violated by Harrison with his appointment of hundreds of "temporary" city workers who were not required to take competitive examinations. And the school system had been used as a political machine. Harrison was guilty of criminality, Altgeld charged, in letting contracts; instead of taking competitive bids for contracts over \$600, favorite contractors were given the work, for which they billed the city in separate statements of less than \$600 — thus circumventing the requirement that all contracts of more than \$600 be subject to competitive bidding. He added that the same type of illegal buying was used in securing water meters, sidewalks, water pipes, catch-basins, dynamos, hydrants, and tunnel repairs. Altgeld also pointed out that Chicago's special assessments were higher than those of any other large city. Average special assessments were \$125 in New York, \$110 in Detroit, and \$215 in Chicago. One of the most fantastic examples of corruption charged by Altgeld involved the city's bill for cleaning and repairing the streets. In one two-year period a favorite contractor was paid \$334,000 for less than \$100,000 worth of street repairs — as both the contractor and the city comptroller admitted after the bills were paid.

The ex-Governor concluded his talk with an appeal:

I am not especially in pursuit of office. The mayoralty of Chicago is the last thing in the world that I covet. But I am making a fight for the establishment of great principles — the inauguration of policies that will help the present, and will be a blessing to the coming generations. I am not appealing to the low partisanship

MAYORAL CANDIDATE ALTGELD

of anybody; I am not asking political favors of any mortal. I am appealing to the intelligence, to the patriotism, to the honesty of our people, asking them to thoroughly investigate the great problems that are pressing upon us, and then to act upon their best judgment. I will simply assure our people that, if this movement succeeds, we will put an end to an order of abuses and wrongs that are now a curse to this city.⁴²

The Altgeld volunteers continued to work fervently at headquarters, entertaining interested persons, mailing out thousands of pieces of propaganda, and co-ordinating work in the precincts. On March 19, over three hundred men were organized for the purpose of securing the aid of "12 active men in every voting precinct. This will give us a working force of about 13,500."⁴³ Even Altgeld crowded in some work at headquarters, and attended the daily session of the executive committee there.⁴⁴

Getting coverage in the Chicago newspapers was one of the greatest problems Altgeld faced. Of the nine Chicago daily newspapers, two remained impartial, two advocated election of the Republican choice, and five supported Harrison. Two normally Republican papers, the *Times-Herald* and *Evening Post*, came out in support of Harrison. To get a fair hearing it was necessary for Altgeld partisans to start their own publication, the *Municipal Ownership Bulletin*,⁴⁵ which was sponsored by the Municipal Ownership League. Though it was dedicated to public ownership of monopolies, the *Bulletin* was not socialistic. More propaganda sheet than newspaper, the *Bulletin's* ten issues included announcements of Altgeld meetings, along with caustic and critical articles condemning the city government and Harrison in particular. It also printed all of Altgeld's speeches and public testimonials favoring his election. Among these was a

42. The full text of the speech is reproduced in Cooling, *Chicago Democracy*, 72-88.

43. *Chicago Tribune*, March 20, 1899, p. 2.

44. *Chicago Chronicle*, March 30, 1899, as cited in Ambler scrapbooks.

45. The only complete file of the ten issues of the *Municipal Ownership Bulletin* is in the John Crerar Library, Chicago.

letter from Hazen Pingree, Republican reform governor of Michigan, who offered best wishes to the Altgeld campaign.⁴⁶ The *Bulletin* was mailed directly to more than 600,000 voters in Chicago. But as one of its chief writers later said, "It was, at best, a poor makeshift for a party organ, and its weekly chirp was drowned in the whirr, cackle, buzz and roar of the great 'gabble machines' of the daily press."⁴⁷

The Harrison organization also had a campaign paper, the *Chicago Champion*, "published in the interest of the people." The *Champion* published some vicious charges against the integrity of Altgeld. One front-page story accused him of raiding the state treasury when he was governor. "Altgeld is surrounded by a despicable gang of moral and polluted cripples, but he himself is preeminently the financial cripple of the crowd." In another story, the *Champion* stated that Altgeld had appointed criminal bankers to state offices. In a typical criticism of Altgeld, the paper stated:

If the people were disposed to do so, it would be abundantly warranted, from all the circumstances, in charging Mr. Altgeld with being the ally of Charles T. Yerkes in the latter's struggle for fifty year franchises. It is perfectly clear that in attacking Mayor Harrison Mr. Altgeld is fighting for Yerkes, either with or without a commission from that eminent captain-general of the brotherhood of corporate greed.⁴⁸

Throughout the entire election campaign, countercharges answered charges regarding the relationship of the candidates to Yerkes. Altgeld charged that Harrison had been supported by Yerkes in 1897 and had given many favors in return. He also maintained that Yerkes was secretly helping Harrison in the 1899 election. Harrison denied both accusations,⁴⁹ but in a public letter Yerkes verified Altgeld's contention that Harrison had solicited and obtained aid from

46. *Municipal Ownership Bulletin*, Feb. 4, 1899.

47. Cooling, *Chicago Democracy*, 71.

48. The only issue of the *Chicago Champion* is in the Chicago Historical Society.

49. See Chicago newspapers for March 1 through 5, 1899.

him in 1897.⁵⁰ Harrison was never able adequately to refute that charge, but there is no evidence that he was receiving direct help from Yerkes in 1899.

In a similar manner, Harrison maintained that Yerkes was the only person who wanted Altgeld to win, and was willing to pay for Harrison's defeat. In a published interview in the *Chicago Chronicle*, Colonel J. H. Monroe denied that Altgeld was receiving financial support from Yerkes: "That is a lie. This is a people's campaign — a poor man's campaign. It is supported entirely by the contributions of the people. There is no other source of funds."⁵¹ But Clarence Darrow admitted that some money may have come to the Altgeld coffers from Yerkes, but that Altgeld knew nothing of it.⁵² Yerkes probably hoped that both Harrison and Altgeld would be defeated by the Republican candidate, Zina Carter, who was the least opposed to an extension of the franchises. Yerkes knew, of course, that Carter could win only if the vote were sufficiently split between the two Democrats.

All of the candidates concentrated their energies in making speeches throughout the city. There were as many as ninety-six ward meetings in one night, and each nominee made from four to six addresses per evening.⁵³

The main issue Altgeld hammered on in his talks was municipal ownership of the street railways. At every meeting he addressed, he called for city ownership and reduced fares. He also continued to charge that the city administration was corrupt and did not serve the interest of the common man, but no new issues were brought out after the middle of the campaign.

One of the most moving speeches Altgeld made was at a meeting of twelve hundred Illinois railway men at Ken-

50. *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, March 2, 1899, p. 1, March 3, 1899, p. 5; Cooling, *Chicago Democracy*, 28.

51. *Chicago Chronicle*, March 28, 1899, p. 6.

52. Barnard, "Eagle Forgotten," 420-21.

53. *Chicago Record*, March 28, 1899, p. 3.

sington, the former site of Pullman's city. After a demonstration of several minutes, Altgeld said:

I am gratified to meet such a large audience, the last time I was in Kensington was under different circumstances. At that time I came here to see the model town of America — to see the starving people at Pullman when the great railroad strike was in progress. I remember that I had to appeal to the charity of the people of this great city to provide for these suffering men, women and children. But conditions have changed and in this respect, at least, for the better.

This spring you are to decide whether you are to change in part the industrial system which now prevails, whether or not you will take the first step toward owning the natural monopolies — whether you are to vote for Carter H. Harrison, who stands for them, or try to relieve yourself from the burdens which oppress you.⁵⁴

Altgeld delivered another effective appeal at the end of a speech at Englewood on March 27. After talking about municipal ownership, high payroll costs, and city hall collusion with the monopolies and trusts, he concluded:

Since '96 the great Democratic Party has stood for the principles of Jefferson and Lincoln, two of the greatest Democrats that ever lived; it has stood for the great toiling masses. That is Democracy; higher justice, better institutions — not spoils and back alley politics. On the great subject of Democracy I do not stand aside for any man in America.

The questions before you are vital. They concern you and your children and your children's children. Will you close your eyes and vote as the machine dictates? I appeal to your intelligence, your manhood; and self respect, and urge you to act on your best judgment.⁵⁵

In the closing days of the campaign, the Altgeld forces were optimistic. A poll conducted by the *Chicago Chronicle* in mid-March showed Altgeld ahead in the race. Altgeld himself predicted that he would win by at least 30,000 votes,⁵⁶ and his campaign manager was even more confident,

54. *Chicago Tribune*, March 25, 1899, p. 2.

55. *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, March 28, 1899, as cited in Ambler scrapbooks.

56. *Chicago Chronicle*, March 16, 1899, p. 4.

saying Altgeld would win by 125,000 votes.⁵⁷ The feelings of the thousands of Altgeld supporters were expressed by Clarence Darrow, who said,

This is the first campaign in Chicago in which I have felt that there was something worth voting for. We have elected many platforms and men who stood on them, but that has been the last heard of the platforms. . . . The only salvation is in electing a man who is the friend of the common people. That man is John P. Altgeld. No one can doubt his sincere interest in the great mass of the people.⁵⁸

On the eve of the election, the former Governor was still confident of carrying the city.⁵⁹ The Chicago *Inter-Ocean* reported on one of his final speeches and the reaction of the six thousand people who attended the meeting:

No political leader that Chicago has produced ever received a more enthusiastic reception than fell to the lot of ex-Governor John P. Altgeld. When the modest, unassuming, homely champion of the Illinois Democrats appeared on the stage the demonstration that followed was startling even to people who have been familiar with the politics of Chicago for years. Men stood on their seats and waved handkerchiefs and others hung from precarious places along the railings of balconies and boxes to cheer their leader, while at every door those kept outside pushed in, despite all opposition, to join in the great demonstration.⁶⁰

But Altgeld could not overcome the machine. Harrison was re-elected on April 4, 1899, with 146,175 votes to Carter's 107,355 and Altgeld's 45,395.⁶¹ Before the actual voting, Altgeld had appeared to be a sure winner. But the appearance had been deceptive, Darrow explained, "for the same footsore and weary would travel from one end of the city to another and attend meetings night after night."⁶²

57. Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, March 27, 1899, p. 3.

58. Chicago *Chronicle*, March 16, 1899, p. 4.

59. *Ibid.*, April 4, 1899, p. 4.

60. Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, March 31, 1899, as cited in Ambler Scrapbooks.

61. Chicago *History*, II: 77 (No. 3) Fall, 1948-Summer, 1951, Chicago Historical Society.

62. Darrow, *Story of My Life*, 109.

Carter H. Harrison II who, in 1899, was elected to his second of five terms as mayor of Chicago.



Thus the same people had come to meeting after meeting to hear the ex-Governor.

At least three of the Chicago newspapers reported fraud in voting places all over the city.⁶³ An Altgeld partisan went further and maintained that some fifty thousand votes had been stolen — enough to have insured Altgeld's election.⁶⁴ He reported that "Altgeld watchers were driven away; some were bought off; many were inexperienced men who could not follow the shuffling of the ballots. In many places there was only one Altgeld watcher or none at all. It takes at least two to watch the count of ballots."⁶⁵

Despite his defeat it would be unfair to think that Altgeld had accomplished nothing in running for mayor. Perhaps more than any single event in municipal politics of the time his campaign represented the revolt of the middle class against the monied interests that had controlled the political parties. Shortly after the election the *Chicago Times-Herald* published tables showing that the very areas that had been

63. *Chicago Chronicle*, April 5, 1899, pp. 3-4; *Chicago Inter-Ocean*, April 6, 1899, p. 2; *Chicago Record*, April 5, 1899, p. 3.

64. Cooling, *Chicago Democracy*, 106-108.

65. *Ibid.*, 104.



Zina R. Carter, who placed second in Chicago's 1899 mayoralty race.

strongest for William McKinley in 1896 did not vote for Zina Carter, the Republican candidate. Instead they voted for Harrison.⁶⁶ Altgeld had succeeded in awakening many people to the need for reform, but these same voters rejected his program of municipal ownership or actual control of the monopolies as radical and socialistic.

66. *Chicago Herald*, April 6, 1899.