Primary Source Analysis
Political Cartoons

☐ I can analyze political cartoons and apply my knowledge of the virtue of moderation and vice of immoderation (extremism).

Directions: Look closely at each image before answering the questions that follow.

Building Context
For several years, cartoonist Thomas Nast had attacked the corruption and outright theft carried out by the Tweed Ring and Tammany Hall in his memorable images published in Harper’s Weekly and The New York Times. In 1871, the Times published a series of news articles detailing the political machine’s abuses and naming the most powerful of its leaders. Nast redoubled his efforts to spotlight the perpetrators through his powerful cartoons. In fact, Tweed reportedly exclaimed, “I don’t care a straw for your newspaper articles; my constituents don’t know how to read, but they can’t help seeing them damned pictures!” The voters swept the Tweed Ring from power in the November election of 1871, and trials and prison followed shortly thereafter for Tweed and his henchmen. When Tweed escaped from prison in 1875 and fled to Spain, he was captured in Spain because the police there recognized him from Nast’s cartoons.
The caption reads: “The “Brains” that achieved the Tammany victory at the Rochester Democratic Convention.”

1. What is Nast implying about Boss Tweed’s political victory at the Democratic Convention?

2. How does this victory connect to the vice of immoderation?
3. Why was Tweed’s political victory a threat to a healthy republican government and healthy civil society?

As is the case in most of his work, Nast used rich symbolism in this image. Tweed himself had selected the snarling tiger as the symbol for the firemen’s company that he established, but Nast used Tweed’s own symbol against him. The tiger is shown mauling the female figure, Republic, whose helmet (the ballot) and sword representing power, lie broken nearby. The banner of Law and the American flag are tattered beneath her. The other female figure represents Justice, with her broken scales and sword at her side. The male figure represents Mercury, Roman god of commerce, with his winged helmet smashed at his left side. The arena is filled with a large audience taking in the spectacle, and the large figure of Boss Tweed can be seen in the central box.
4. What does the tiger represent about Tammany Hall and the Tweed Ring?

5. Judging by the figures that have been mauled and killed by the tiger and what they represent, what is Nast’s commentary about the health of government and civil society and moderation?