

Progressive Reform

Like Populism, Progressivism was a response to changing economic conditions and the apparent inability of government to effectively deal with these changes. However, while the Populists had focused largely on the plight of the American farmer, the Progressives were generally much more interested in addressing the problems emerging in American cities and factories.

While industrialization had brought many positive changes to American society, it had also created huge problems. Periods of rapid expansion were often followed by dramatic economic collapses, such as the depression of the 1890s. Corporations had tried to tame this boom-bust cycle through horizontal integration (monopolies) but this was both ineffective and ultimately unacceptable to the American public. This created tremendous pressure for the government to take steps to try and even out the erratic economic cycle – pressures which would ultimately peak in the New Deal reforms of the 1930s.

The incredible power of the new national corporations in this era was in itself a central problem. In many ways they had far more power than government at any level, and their wealth and influence was often exerted to corrupt the political process and keep it that way. They could easily manipulate and abuse consumers, sometimes offering them shoddy or unsafe goods at artificially elevated prices. Combining together into giant trusts, they crushed small competitors or forced them to merge with them. This era saw as well rising levels of social agitation caused by abusive labor practices as corporations sought to squeeze more of a profit margin out of their workers.

Industrialization, urbanization, and immigration also contributed to rising levels of social and cultural conflict. With fewer and fewer Americans actually owning their own farms or businesses there was a growing sense that the United States had become a “class” society, with a wealthy elite owning the means of production and the rest of the people simply working as “wage slaves”. This led in turn to concerns that this could lead to violent revolutionary sentiment and open class warfare. At the same time the massive wave of “New” immigrants sparked concerns that they were introducing new cultures and religions to the United States which some feared would “pollute” traditional American values. Particularly in the context of the cities, there were sharp tensions between different ethnic and racial groups as they competed for scarce resources, such as housing or jobs. Many Americans were also appalled by the conditions of poverty, disease, and pollution in the cities which grew far more rapidly than the political mechanisms necessary to effectively govern them.

Faced with gigantic economic and social changes, many Americans were fundamentally frustrated with government at all levels. The cities were often dominated by corrupt political machines that were concerned more with electing their candidates and ensuring the continuing power of their party than with actually providing effective government; more interested in serving the interests of wealthy special interests than the interests of the people. This was also true at the state and federal level.

Progressivism arose as well from particular social and cultural conditions. Of particular importance was the rise of a new “corporate” middle-class. An increasingly sophisticated economic order had led to growing demands for new types of workers: middle-managers and service providing professionals, such as civil engineers or architects. These were white-collar workers who employed their minds more than their hands, and they were often quite well educated. The number of people boasting of a high-school or college education rose dramatically in this era as these new types of jobs became more and more significant. This new middle-class shared many common experiences and expectations, not only in terms of their generally high level of education. They were often linked by membership in social organizations, such as the Rotary or Elks Lodge, and professional organizations, like the American Bar Association or the American Medical Association. In other words, they were used to functioning not as isolated individuals, but as large groups, making them potentially a potent force to change American society. One way of thinking about this new middle-class is to consider them as “social engineers”. They came from the new corporate order and they recognized and celebrated how better organization and the proper application of technology and scientific thinking could improve American life. At the same time they were struggling to impose greater controls over corporations, they were also trying to apply many of the lessons they had learned in the corporate world to make American society more efficient, fair, and orderly.

Another social/cultural factor that fueled the drive for Progressive reform was the changing status of American women. Prior to the Civil War American women had significant limitations on their legal rights. They could not vote and if they were married they could not hold property separate from their husbands. The right to seek a divorce was very limited. Socially and culturally women and men were seen as operating in “separate spheres”. The male sphere was the public world of work and government: arenas of aggressive competition and struggle. Women were seen as weaker and less rational than men and thus less able to compete in the rough and tumble world of the public sphere. Women were considered to be more moral, emotional, and nurturing: characteristics which made them more suitable to the protected private environment of the home where they were responsible for the raising of children and the orderly maintenance of the home.

This Victorian ideal of the separate spheres of men and women saw significant erosion by the beginning of the 20th century. One factor was the changing character of the economy. By 1910 women between 16 and 44 composed 21% of the country’s work force. The new corporate/industrial economy created many new job opportunities for women, not only as factory operatives but as teachers, sales clerks, and office occupations such as typist or telephone operator. There remained considerable wage differentials between men and women, and women were typically shut out of many occupations, but there was indisputably a growing reality that women were out in the world, working in the public sphere.

Family life was also changing. There was a considerable liberalization of the women’s rights within marriage. Many states gave married women the right to control their own property and earnings, give them a degree of economic independence from their husbands. As Susan B. Anthony noted in 1900: “...in comparatively few States is she left in the helpless condition of olden times.” At the same time divorce law changed, making it easier for women to sue for divorce and get out of bad marriages. The

overall divorce rate rose rapidly. In 1880 there was one divorce for every twenty-one marriages, but by 1910 this had risen to one out of every ten.

Just as women struggled to gain more rights over their married lives, they also sought to have greater control over their own bodies. In 1873 the Comstock Law had made it illegal to distribute contraceptives or information about birth control through the public mails. Twenty-four states passed similar laws making the distribution or use of contraceptives illegal. One of the key figures who sought to overturn these laws was Margaret Sanger. Having witnessed her mother die at age 50 after 18 pregnancies, Sanger became a nurse specializing in caring for pregnant women. Believing that women should be able to control whether they had children, she sought to distribute information about birth control techniques, leading the federal government to charge her with violations of the Comstock Laws. Her plight, however, aroused considerable public sympathy and the government dropped the charges, clearly indicating that American culture was changing. In 1916 she opened a birth control clinic in Brooklyn New York which catered primarily to Jewish and Italian immigrants. She was arrested and sentenced to 30 days in jail; an event which she used to further generate public support for her position. Although many anti-birth control laws remained on the books for decades, there was a slow easing of restrictions. In 1936, for instance, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the federal government had no right to restrict the ability of doctors to prescribe contraceptives to their patients.

The changing economy and legal reforms brought improvements to the lives of women and created the setting for them to move into the public sphere, where they would become increasingly important in the Progressive reform movement.

An early example of this can be found in the Settlement House movement. One of the first examples was Hull House, established by Jane Addams in 1889. Like many middle-class women of her age, Addams had enjoyed a good education, but then found that there were few opportunities for her to effectively use her knowledge and skills in the public sphere. In response she carved out a new role for herself as a voluntary social worker. Settlement houses were institutions, usually located in densely urbanized areas, which sought to provide basic educational and social services to poor families, usually immigrants.

Women also often became much more involved in politics. This violated the Victorian ethos that women should not become involved in public affairs, but many women argued that in order to fulfill their roles as guardians of morality and the family they HAD to move into the public sphere. As Jane Addams noted, "May we not say the city housekeeping has failed partly because women, the traditional housekeepers, have not been consulted as to its multiform activities?" These sentiments led to many concerned women and women's groups to push for a broad spectrum of basic social reforms. Women were active in campaigns to improve urban sanitation, ensure the purity and safety of the food supply, and advance education. They urged government to set aside public land for parks and playgrounds so children would have safe environments to enjoy. Ultimately they would play an important role in pushing for laws banning or limiting child labor and establishing state mandated minimum wages and maximum hours for women. In 1908 the United States Supreme Court upheld the right of states to establish these wage and hour laws for women in the landmark case of Muller v. Oregon. By 1915 eight

other states had passed similar laws. On the moral front, women also played a key role in campaigns against brothels, gambling dens and saloons. This last objective ultimately resulted in the passage of the 18th Amendment to the Constitution in 1919 which banned the manufacture or sale of alcohol in the United States. Women's activism in pushing for these social and moral reforms signaled the rapidly rising status of women in the public sphere. The ratification of the 19th Amendment to the Constitution in 1920 affirmed women's growing power by affirming their right to vote.

The social and moral reforms passed at the local and state levels represented an important component of the Progressive movement. Reformers, both men and women, were determined to clean up cities and factories, to provide a safer and fairer living and working conditions. By and large these were positive changes, but there were also problems. Many, for instance, were concerned about the increasingly heavy-handed government regulation of what they considered private leisure activities, such as gambling and drinking. For many working-class men saloons were not just drinking establishments: they were social clubs which provided relief from the heavy pressures of long work days. The failure to understand this reflected a key weakness in the social reform movement: most of the reformers were middle-class, native-born men and women who did not necessarily fully understand the lives and cultures of working men and women, particularly immigrants. Well intentioned reforms did not always work out as they intended, as witnessed by the ultimate collapse of the Prohibition movement.

In addition to social and moral reforms there was a strong movement at the state and local level for "structural" changes in politics that would make government more efficient and businesslike. Political corruption posed a fundamental problem. The "machines" which governed the nations' cities and states had created mechanisms that rewarded politicians and their parties, but typically they failed to provide the types of services that modern urban and industrial life demanded. All too often they heeded the call of wealthy special interests rather than what was best for the people and business in general. Progressives sought to address this by taking measures which they hoped would weaken the grip of special interests and professional politicians. During the 1890s, for instance, there was a growing movement to introduce the secret ballot, making it more difficult for voters to be manipulated by party operatives. In some states and cities we see the adoption of changes such as nonpartisan elections which eliminated party labels from the ballots in the hope that people would begin to support the best possible candidates rather than simply those associated with a particular party label. Another change seen in places was the creation of more democratic "open primaries" where candidates were chosen by the party's rank and file rather than simply selected by party leaders in a smoky backroom. Perhaps the most significant change was the spread of the civil service system which allotted government jobs on the basis of nonpartisan exams. Since the lifeblood of political machines was their ability to reward their workers with jobs, this was a fundamental blow to machine style politics.

There were a number of other ways in which reformers sought to remove control over government from the hands of professional politicians and political parties. During this era, for instance, the "city manager" system became more common. Under this form of government the chief executive for a city was not an elected mayor, but an expert administrator who was hired by the city council. Since these managers were at least partially insulated from the political process of hustling for votes, it was hoped

that they would provide more businesslike government. In other cases considerable political power was transferred from elected officials (politicians) to appointed boards or commissions; institutions which Progressives sought to staff with prominent businessmen. Indeed, one component of Progressive thought during this era was to conceive of government primarily as a corporation run by businessmen to efficiently provide the multitude of services needed in modern society. This could be quite elitist. Many Progressive, coming from the rising corporate middle-class, were deeply skeptical of the ability of ordinary people to choose their leaders wisely through electoral politics. They wanted people like themselves in power: well-educated managers and businessmen who they believed could run government more effectively.

However, in other instances the Progressives went in the opposite direction and pushed for greater democratic control. The "Direct Democracy" movement of this era called for transferring power from the hands of professional politicians directly to the people. Through initiatives and referendums the people as a whole would act as a super-legislature, voting to pass or reject laws which were presented to them. Through the recall they also did not have to wait for the normal electoral cycle to remove from office politicians who they believed were not serving the interests of the people. The ultimate expression of this democratic impulse was the passage of the 19th Amendment in 1920 which gave women the right to vote.

As with social and moral reform, the results were sometimes mixed. Conceiving of government as a business and appointing businessmen to administer it did help lessen corruption and make government more efficient. However, it reduced the ability of ordinary folk to have a voice in government. The Direct Democracy movement somewhat offset this, but it too had its limitations. These measures were typically promoted in cities or regions with largely native-born populations: many progressives were extremely uncomfortable with allowing immigrants and other minority groups access to this type of political power. This is also why these types of reforms tended to fail in larger cities. Urban voters were often suspicious of the motives of the reformers, recognizing their anti-democratic tendencies, and preferred to retain more traditional forms of government. Both the trend towards more businesslike government by experts and towards direct democracy also failed to fully curb underlying problems of corruption. While they weakened the power of politicians and parties, wealthy special interests quickly found ways to corrupt these new institutions as well. Their influence turned from electing officials towards assuring that the right people were appointed to boards and commission, or that key initiative measures succeeded or failed.

The grassroots of Progressivism lay at the local level, but by the turn of the 20th century there was also a growing movement to reform the national government. In the late 1880s and 1890s the federal government had taken tentative steps towards exerting greater control over the economy through measures such as the Interstate Commerce Commission and the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, but these proved to be largely weak and ineffective. The clamor for a stronger federal government which could stand up to powerful corporate interests grew.

This movement for national reform first began to flower under the Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Roosevelt had enjoyed a rapid rise to national prominence because of his reputation as an aggressive

reformer and a hero of the Spanish-American War. This made him an attractive running mate for William McKinley in 1900. Roosevelt, however, served only briefly as vice-president. In 1901 President McKinley was assassinated by an anarchist and Roosevelt stepped into his position, becoming at age 42 the youngest President the United States had ever seen. Roosevelt was determined to strengthen the federal government and use it as a check against the unbridled power of the corporations. Like many Americans he was ambivalent about the corporate transformation of American life. On one hand he admired the tremendous economic progress that these giants had promoted as they found better ways to mass produce goods. This process created countless jobs and made consumer goods available to more and more Americans. Many progressive reformers saw corporations as admirable models of efficiency that they sought to emulate in the political sphere. Yet, they also recognized the problems associated with the rise of powerful corporations. These companies often acted in selfish and arrogant ways, abusing consumers and workers, stifling competition, and corrupting the political process. Many Americans worried that expanding the power of the central government would infringe upon the individualism that they had traditionally cherished, but there was also a widespread belief that without a powerful government to check and regulate the actions of giant corporations Americans would suffer an even greater loss of democratic control over their lives. Roosevelt himself argued that American society was being fundamentally transformed as it shifted from being a nation of small farmers to a country of great factories and cities. "A simple and poor society," he observed, "can exist as a democracy on the basis of sheer individualism. But a rich and complex society cannot so exist." In other words, he believed that the limited government of the past was no longer effective: government had to expand to meet the demands of modern society.

During this era the government and the executive branch in particular, became much more aggressive in regulating the economy. One way that President Roosevelt tried to achieve this was by vigorously using the Sherman Antitrust Act against corporations that he believed were acting badly. One of the first and most high-profile instances of this was the Northern Securities case of 1904 in which Roosevelt's Justice Department successfully prosecuted a transportation corporation which had sought to monopolize rail traffic in the Northwest. At the same time Congress strengthened the ability of the Interstate Commerce Commission to regulate the railroads through the Hepburn Act in 1906. That same year the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act dramatically expanded federal regulatory authority over these industries. They also created the Department of Labor and Commerce which began exhaustive collection of data on business and labor conditions. This reflected a key progressive belief that economic and social issues could be best addressed through first scientifically collecting relevant data and then carefully analyzing this information to reach appropriate solutions.

Roosevelt sought as well to create a new role for the federal government in mediating the relationship between business and labor. In the past the government had more often than not automatically sided with business in labor disputes, but Roosevelt envisioned the federal government as an impartial mediator that would help solve these types of conflicts fairly, before they escalated into violent confrontations. Thus, when the United Mine Workers struck against the coal industry in 1902 Roosevelt didn't send in troops; he appointed a commission to study the miners' grievances so he could come up with a mutually acceptable solution. The mine owners were outraged and refused to allow the federal

government to arbitrate the strike until Roosevelt threatened to send in the army --- against them. The ultimate outcome was a compromise with the workers receiving higher wages and lower hours, but the owners were not required to recognize the union.

He also extended greater federal authority over the natural environment. Roosevelt believed that the government had a duty to conserve the nation's resources rather than simply allowing them to be rapidly depleted by private enterprise. He was not opposed to corporate exploitation of these resources, but he believed the government had a responsibility to scientifically manage and regulate this process. In pursuit of this goal he increased the amount of land in the federal park system. Another example of government seeking to better manage resources can be found in the Newlands Reclamation Act of 1902. Ever since Americans had begun to settle the far West water and water scarcity had been a key issue plaguing this region. The Newlands Act put federal money and power behind an ambitious program of as dams, reservoirs, and canals, which would radically reshape the waterscape of the west and provide the water necessary to irrigate crops and support growing populations.

Overall, Roosevelt sought to create a model of government which would impartially regulate the economy through more scientific and systematic methods.. He believed that because corporations had become so powerful, the federal government had to become even more powerful so it could act as a check against their excesses. While he gained a reputation as a "trust buster", the truth is that Roosevelt was not opposed to large corporations – he simply sought to use the government to mediate their behavior.

Roosevelt was succeeded in the presidency by William Howard Taft. Taft was a distinguished lawyer, judge, and administrator who had been the governor of the Philippines and Roosevelt's Secretary of War. In many ways he continued to seek progressive reforms such as the Mann-Elkins Act of 1910 which further strengthened the ICC. He supported labor reforms such as the 8-hour day and mine safety legislation and he set up the Industrial Relations Commission to study labor problems and propose solutions. Yet, many progressives believed that Taft was too conservative and cautious in seeking changes, that a more aggressive reformer was needed. These critics included Theodore Roosevelt who, bored and restless in retirement, decided to challenge his old protégé for the Republican presidential nomination in 1912.

The 1912 election illustrated the country's continued desire for reform. The most conservative candidate was Taft, a moderate Republican. Roosevelt, having failed to win the Republican nomination, created his own party which took the name "Progressives." His platform, "The New Nationalism", called for a federally mandated 8-hour day, better regulation of workplace safety, a national income tax, and better regulation of the stock market. The Democratic candidate, Woodrow Wilson, offered a slightly different vision through what he termed "The New Freedom". While he agreed with Roosevelt that government had to become more activist, he suggested that his opponents program gave too much power to the central government. "If America is not to have free enterprise," Wilson proclaimed, " he can have freedom of no sort whatever." His recommendations included a dramatic decrease in protective tariffs to allow foreign goods to freely compete with American goods, measures to reform the banking and monetary system, and new laws to weaken corporate monopolies and strengthen the

ability of smaller producers to compete against them. Another third-party candidate, the Socialist Eugene Debs, ran on a radical program of full public ownership of transportation, communications, and financial institutions. With Roosevelt's Progressive Party drawing off many votes that would have gone to the Republican Taft, Wilson easily won the election and the Democrats won control of Congress.

Wilson immediately began to pursue his objectives. The 1913 Underwood-Simmons Act lowered taxes on foreign imports: the first major tariff revision since the Civil War. To offset the loss of revenue the Constitution was amended to allow the federal government to collect income taxes. Wilson also pushed for financial and banking reform through the Federal Reserve Act. It established a system of twelve regional reserve banks governed by a central board. It was hoped that this would create a more "elastic" currency which could respond more rapidly to the booms and busts of the modern economy and more effectively regulate the country's banking system. Wilson also believed that this would help break up the concentrated power of eastern banking interests and make regional banks more competitive. Finally, through the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914, he attempted to curb corporate excesses and prevent the development of monopolies. The Federal Trade Commission, created the same year, was authorized to enforce the provisions of the Clayton Act and investigate unfair trade practices.

Wilson's efforts to restore competition to the economy through government action had limited success. Even with reductions, trade was still heavily regulated by tariffs. The Federal Reserve proved to be a powerful tool for the federal government to regulate the money supply and through it the economy, but it didn't really increase competition in the banking system. Similarly, the Clayton Act and the Federal Trade Commission did expand federal regulation over the economy, but failed to really halt the economic march towards larger and larger corporations.

His administration did help make the political system somewhat more democratic. Prior to the progressive age, the voice of big business had had a clearly dominant role in shaping policy. Roosevelt had moved away from this, but he was still wary of "special interests." In his vision of government a core of nonpartisan experts would carefully analyze the country's problems and come up with rational solutions that all parties would accept. This was not a process of negotiation and compromise -- it was a top-down solution which rejected the idea that there were fundamentally different classes and interests in American society. This was why Roosevelt remained wary of labor unions throughout his administration. He believed that it was government's responsibility to look out for the interests of all Americans in an impartial manner -- unions, he argued, represented selfish special interests who only represented one class of people. In contrast, Wilson believed that as in economic affairs, the political system should be based on free and open competition. This meant that all groups would be able to have a seat at the table and a voice in deciding public policy through a competitive process of negotiation and compromise.

This was particularly evident in his attitude towards organized labor. The Clayton Act included a provision which the American Federation of Labor hailed as "labor's bill of rights"; it exempted unions from anti-trust prosecution (a tool which had been used against them in the 1890s) and defined strikes as legitimate and fair techniques. Wilson also supported a national workman's compensation law for

federal employees and he signed the Keating-Owen Act which sought to sharply curb the use of child labor -- a key issue for unions. In 1916 railroad workers demanded an 8-hour day. When the railroad owners refused their demands, Congress passed the Adamson Act which imposed the 8-hour day on all railroads operating in interstate traffic.

Wilson's attitude towards democratic participation, however, didn't extend to all groups. He only reluctantly came around to support the 19th Amendment which gave women the right to vote. Wilson, a Southerner by birth, also had no interest in protecting the civil rights of African-Americans. Under his administration the government imposed racial segregation in Washington, D.C., and no efforts were made to address the egregious violations of basic civil liberties that African-Americans suffered from throughout the country.