

## THE PROGRESSIVE ERA, 1901–1917

*I am, therefore, a Progressive because we have not kept up with our own changes of conditions, either in the economic field or in the political field. We have not kept up as well as other nations have. We have not adjusted our practices to the facts of the case. . . .*

Woodrow Wilson, campaign speech, 1912

Large-scale industrialization, immigration, and urban expansion changed the United States dramatically during the last quarter of the 19th century. (See Chapters 16, 18, and 19.) By the turn of the century, a reform movement had developed that included a wide range of groups and individuals with a common desire to improve life in the industrial age. Their ideas and work became known as *progressivism*, because they wanted to build on the existing society, making moderate political changes and social improvements through government action. Most Progressives were not revolutionaries but shared the goals of limiting the power of big business, improving democracy for the people, and strengthening social justice. Achieving these goals often included a more active role for the federal government. This chapter will examine the origins, efforts, and accomplishments of the Progressive era. While Progressives did not cure all of America's problems, they improved the quality of life, provided a larger role for the people in their democracy, and established a precedent for a more active role for the federal government.

### Origins of Progressivism

Although the Progressive movement had its origins in the state reforms of the early 1890s, it acquired national momentum only with the dawn of a new century and the unexpected swearing into office of a young president, Theodore Roosevelt, in 1901. The Progressive era lasted through the Republican presidencies of Roosevelt (1901–1909) and William Howard Taft (1909–1913), and the first term of the Democrat Woodrow Wilson (1913–1917). U.S. entry into World War I in 1917 diverted public attention away from domestic issues and brought the era to an end—but not before major regulatory laws had been enacted by Congress and various state legislatures.

## ***Attitudes and Motives***

As they entered a new century, most Americans were well aware of rapid changes in their country. The relatively homogeneous, rural society of independent farmers of the past was transforming into an industrialized nation of mixed ethnicity centered in the growing cities. For decades, middle-class Americans had been alarmed by the rising power of big business, the uncertainties of business cycles, the increasing gap between rich and poor, the violent conflict between labor and capital, and the dominance of corrupt political machines in the cities. Most disturbing to minorities were the racist Jim Crow laws in the South that relegated African Americans to the status of second-class citizens. Crusaders for women's suffrage added their voices to the call for greater democracy.

**Who Were the Progressives?** The groups participating in the Progressive movement were extremely diverse. Protestant church leaders championed one set of reforms, African Americans proposed other reforms, union leaders sought public support for their goals, and feminists lobbied their state legislatures for votes for women. Loosely linking these reform efforts under a single label, Progressive, was a belief that society badly needed changes and that government was the proper agency for correcting social and economic ills.

**Urban Middle Class** Unlike the Populists of the 1890s, whose strength came from rural America, most Progressives were middle-class men and women who lived in cities. The urban middle class had steadily grown in the final decades of the 19th century. In addition to doctors, lawyers, ministers, and storekeepers (the heart of the middle class in an earlier era), thousands of white-collar office workers and middle managers employed in banks, manufacturing firms, and other businesses formed a key segment of the economy.

**Professional Class** Members of this business and professional middle class took their civic responsibilities seriously. Some were versed in scientific and statistical methods and the findings of the new social sciences. They belonged to the hundreds of national business and professional associations that provided platforms to address corrupt business and government practices and urban social and economic problems.

**Religion** A missionary spirit inspired some middle-class reformers. Protestant churches preached against vice and taught a code of social responsibility, which included caring for the less fortunate and insisting on honesty in public life. The Social Gospel popularized by Walter Rauschenbusch (see Chapter 18) was an important element in Protestant Christians' response to the problem of urban poverty. Most of these Protestants were native-born and older stock Americans, often from families of older elites who felt that their central role in society had been replaced by wealthy industrialists and urban political machines.

**Leadership** Without strong leadership, the diverse forces of reform could not have overcome conservatives' resistance to change. Fortunately for the Progressives, a number of dedicated and able leaders entered politics at the turn of the century to challenge the status quo. Theodore Roosevelt and Robert La Follette in the Republican party and William Jennings Bryan and Woodrow Wilson in the Democratic party demonstrated a vigorous style of political leadership that had been lacking from national politics during the Gilded Age.

**The Progressives' Philosophy** The reform impulse was hardly new. In fact, many historians see progressivism as just one more phase in a reform tradition going back to the Jeffersonians in the early 1800s, the Jacksonians in the 1830s, and the Populists in the 1890s. Without doubt, the Progressives—like American reformers before them—were committed to democratic values and shared in the belief that honest government and just laws could improve the human condition.

**Pragmatism** A revolution in thinking occurred at the same time as the Industrial Revolution. Charles Darwin, in his *Origin of Species*, presented the concept of evolution, which had an impact well beyond simply justifying the accumulation of wealth (see Chapter 16). The way people thought and reasoned was challenged, and the prevailing philosophy of romantic transcendentalism in America gave way to a balanced *pragmatism*. In the early 20th century, William James and John Dewey were two leading American advocates of this new philosophy. They defined “truth” in a way that many Progressives found appealing. James and Dewey argued that the “good” and the “true” could not be known in the abstract as fixed and changeless ideals. Rather, they said, people should take a pragmatic, or practical, approach to morals, ideals, and knowledge. They should experiment with ideas and laws and test them in action until they found something that would produce a well-functioning democratic society.

Progressive thinkers adopted the new philosophy of pragmatism because it enabled them to challenge fixed notions that stood in the way of reform. For example, they rejected laissez-faire theory as impractical. The old standard of rugged individualism no longer seemed viable in a modern society dominated by impersonal corporations.

**Scientific Management** Another idea that gained widespread acceptance among Progressives came from the practical studies of Frederick W. Taylor. By using a stopwatch to time the output of factory workers, Taylor discovered ways of organizing people in the most efficient manner—the scientific management system. Many Progressives believed that government too could be made more efficient if placed in the hands of experts and scientific managers. They objected to the corruption of political bosses partly because it was anti-democratic and partly because it was an inefficient way to run things.



## **The Muckrakers**

Before the public could be roused to action, it first had to be well-informed about the scandalous realities of politics, factories, and slums. Newspaper and magazine publishers found that their middle-class readers loved to read about underhanded schemes in politics. Therefore, many publications featured in-depth, investigative stories. Writers specializing in such stories were referred to as “muckrakers” by President Theodore Roosevelt.

**Origins** One of the earliest muckrakers was Chicago reporter Henry Demarest Lloyd, who in 1881 wrote a series of articles for the *Atlantic Monthly* attacking the practices of the Standard Oil Company and the railroads. Published in book form in 1894, Lloyd’s *Wealth Against Commonwealth* fully exposed the corruption and greed of the oil monopoly but failed to suggest how to control it.

**Magazines** An Irish immigrant, Samuel Sidney McClure, founded *McClure’s Magazine* in 1893, which became a major success by running a series of muckraking articles by Lincoln Steffens (*Tweed Days in St. Louis*, 1902) and another series by Ida Tarbell (*The History of the Standard Oil Company*, also in 1902). Combining careful research with sensationalism, these articles set a standard for the deluge of muckraking that followed. Popular 10- and 15-cent magazines such as *McClure’s*, *Collier’s*, and *Cosmopolitan* competed fiercely to outdo their rivals with shocking exposés of political and economic corruption.

**Books** The most popular series of muckraking articles were usually collected and published as best-selling books. Articles on tenement life by Jacob Riis, one of the first photojournalists, were published as *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). Lincoln Steffens’ *The Shame of the Cities* (1904) also caused a sensation by describing in detail the corrupt deals that characterized big-city politics from Philadelphia to Minneapolis.

Many of the muckraking books were novels. Two of Theodore Dreiser’s novels, *The Financier* and *The Titan*, portrayed the avarice and ruthlessness of an industrialist. Fictional accounts such as Frank Norris’ *The Octopus* (on the tyrannical power of railroad companies) and *The Pit* (grain speculation) were more effective than many journalistic accounts in stirring up public demands for government regulations.

**Decline of Muckraking** The popularity of muckraking books and magazine articles began to decline after 1910 for several reasons. First, writers found it more and more difficult to top the sensationalism of the last story. Second, publishers were expanding and faced economic pressures from banks and advertisers to tone down their treatment of business. Third, by 1910 corporations were becoming more aware of their public image and developing a new specialty: the field of public relations. Nevertheless, muckraking had a lasting effect on the Progressive era. It exposed inequities, educated the public about corruption in high places, and prepared the way for corrective action.

## Political Reforms in Cities and States

The cornerstone of Progressive ideology was faith in democracy. Progressives believed that, given a chance, the majority of voters would elect honest officials instead of the corrupt ones backed by boss-dominated political machines.

### ***Voter Participation***

Progressives advocated a number of reforms for increasing the participation of the average citizen in political decision-making.

**Australian, or Secret, Ballot** Political parties could manipulate and intimidate voters by printing lists (or “tickets”) of party candidates and watching voters drop them into the ballot box on election day. In 1888, Massachusetts was the first state to adopt a system successfully tried in Australia of issuing ballots printed by the state and requiring voters to mark their choices secretly within a private booth. By 1910, all states had adopted the secret ballot.

**Direct Primaries** In the late 19th century, Republicans and Democrats commonly nominated candidates for state and federal offices in state conventions dominated by party bosses. In 1903, the Progressive governor of Wisconsin, Robert La Follette, introduced a new system for bypassing politicians and placing the nominating process directly in the hands of the voters—the direct primary. By 1915, some form of the direct primary was used in every state. The system’s effectiveness in overthrowing boss rule was limited, as politicians devised ways of confusing the voters and splitting the antimachine vote. Some southern states even used white-only primaries to exclude African Americans from voting.

**Direct Election of U.S. Senators** Traditionally, U.S. senators had been chosen by the state legislatures rather than by direct vote of the people. Progressives believed this was a principal reason that the Senate had become a millionaires’ club dominated by big business. Nevada in 1899 was the first state to give the voters the opportunity to elect U.S. senators directly. By 1912, a total of 30 states had adopted this reform, and in 1913, adoption of the 17th Amendment required that all U.S. senators be elected by popular vote.

**Initiative, Referendum, and Recall** If politicians in the state legislatures balked at obeying the “will of the people,” then Progressives proposed two methods for forcing them to act. Amendments to state constitutions offered voters (1) the *initiative*—a method by which voters could compel the legislature to consider a bill and (2) the *referendum*—a method that allowed citizens to vote on proposed laws printed on their ballots. A third Progressive measure, the *recall*, enabled voters to remove a corrupt or unsatisfactory politician from office by majority vote before that official’s term had expired.

Between 1898, when South Dakota adopted the initiative and referendum, and 1918 (the end of World War I), a total of 20 states—most of them west of the Mississippi—offered voters the initiative and the referendum, while 11 states offered the recall.



## ***Municipal Reform***

City bosses and their corrupt alliance with local businesses (trolley lines and utility companies, for example) were the first target of Progressive leaders. In Toledo, Ohio, in 1897, a self-made millionaire with strong memories of his origins as a workingman became the Republican mayor. Adopting “golden rule” as both his policy and his middle name, Mayor Samuel M. “Golden Rule” Jones delighted Toledo’s citizens by introducing a comprehensive program of municipal reform, including free kindergartens, night schools, and public playgrounds. Another Ohioan, Tom L. Johnson, devoted himself to tax reform and three-cent trolley fares for the people of Cleveland. As Cleveland’s mayor from 1901–1909, Johnson fought hard—but without success—for public ownership and operation of the city’s public utilities and services (water, electricity, and trolleys).

**Controlling Public Utilities** Reform leaders arose in other cities throughout the nation seeking to break the power of the city bosses and take utilities out of the hands of private companies. By 1915 fully two-thirds of the nation’s cities owned their own water systems. As a result of the Progressives’ efforts, many cities also came to own and operate gas lines, electric power plants, and urban transportation systems.

**Commissions and City Managers** New types of municipal government were another Progressive innovation. In 1900, Galveston, Texas, was the first city to adopt a commission plan of government, in which voters elected the heads of city departments (fire, police, and sanitation), not just the mayor. Ultimately proving itself more effective than the commission plan was a system first tried in Dayton, Ohio, in 1913, in which an expert manager was hired by an elected city council to direct the work of the various departments of city government. By 1923, more than 300 cities had adopted the manager-council plan of municipal government.

## ***State Reform***

At the state level, reform governors battled corporate interests and championed such measures as the initiative, the referendum, and the direct primary to give common people control of their own government. In New York, Charles Evans Hughes battled fraudulent insurance companies. In California, Hiram Johnson successfully fought against the economic and political power of the Southern Pacific Railroad. In Wisconsin, Robert La Follette established a strong personal following as the governor (1900–1904) who won passage of the “Wisconsin Idea”—a series of Progressive measures that included a direct primary law, tax reform, and state regulatory commissions to monitor railroads, utilities, and business such as insurance.

**Temperance and Prohibition** Whether or not to shut down saloons and prohibit the drinking of alcohol was one issue over which the champions of reform were sharply divided. While urban Progressives recognized that saloons were often the neighborhood headquarters of political machines, they generally had little sympathy for the temperance movement. Rural reformers, on the

other hand, thought they could clean up morals and politics in one stroke by abolishing liquor. The dries (prohibitionists) were determined and well organized. By 1915, they had persuaded the legislatures of two-thirds of the states to prohibit the sale of alcoholic beverages.

**Social Welfare** Urban life in the Progressive era was improved not only by political reformers but also by the efforts of settlement house workers (see Chapter 18) and other civic-minded volunteers. Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, and other leaders of the social justice movement found that they needed political support in the state legislatures for meeting the needs of immigrants and the working class. They lobbied vigorously and with considerable success for better schools, juvenile courts, liberalized divorce laws, and safety regulations for tenements and factories. Believing that criminals could learn to become effective citizens, reformers fought for such measures as a system of parole, separate reformatories for juveniles, and limits on the death penalty.

**Child and Women Labor** Progressives were most outraged by the treatment of children by industry. The National Child Labor Committee proposed model state child labor laws that were passed by two-thirds of the states by 1907. Ultimately state compulsory school attendance laws proved most effective in keeping children out of the mines and factories.

Florence Kelley and the National Consumers' League promoted the passage of state laws to protect women from long working hours. While in *Lochner v. New York* (1905) the Supreme Court ruled against a state law limiting workers to a ten-hour workday, later in *Muller v. Oregon* (1908) the high court ruled that health of women needed special protection from long hours. The Triangle Shirtwaist fire (1911) in a New York City high-rise garment factory took 146 lives, mostly women. The tragedy sparked greater women's activism and motivated states to pass laws to improve safety and working conditions in factories. One unforeseen consequence of efforts to protect women in the workplace was that the legislation kept women out of physically demanding but higher paying jobs in industry and mining. Later, many in the women's movement wanted these restrictions lifted so that women could compete as equals with men.

## Political Reform in the Nation

While Progressive governors and mayors were battling conservative forces in the state houses and city halls, three presidents—Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson—sought broad reforms and regulations at the national level.

### ***Theodore Roosevelt's Square Deal***

Following President McKinley's assassination in September 1901, Theodore Roosevelt became, at the age of 42, the youngest president in U.S. history. He was also one of the most athletic. He was unusual not simply because of his age and vigor but also because he believed that the president should do much more than lead the executive departments. He thought it was the president's job to set the legislative agenda for Congress as well. Thus, by the accident



of McKinley's death, the Progressive movement suddenly shot into high gear under the dynamic leadership of an activist, reform-minded president.

**“Square Deal” for Labor** Presidents in the 19th century had consistently taken the side of owners in conflicts with labor (most notably Hayes in the railroad strike of 1877 and Cleveland in the Pullman strike of 1894). However, in the first economic crisis in his presidency, Roosevelt quickly demonstrated that he favored neither business nor labor but insisted on a *Square Deal* for both. The crisis involved a strike of anthracite coal miners through much of 1902. If the strike continued, many Americans feared that—without coal—they would freeze to death when winter came. Roosevelt took the unusual step of trying to mediate the labor dispute by calling a union leader and coal mine owners to the White House. The mine owners' stubborn refusal to compromise angered the president. To ensure the delivery of coal to consumers, he threatened to take over the mines with federal troops. The owners finally agreed to accept the findings of a special commission, which granted a 10 percent wage increase and a nine-hour workday to the miners. However, the owners did not have to recognize the union.

Voters seemed to approve of Roosevelt and his Square Deal. They elected him by a landslide in 1904.

**Trust-Busting** Roosevelt further increased his popularity by being the first president since the passage of the Sherman Antitrust Act in 1890 to enforce that poorly written law. The trust that he most wanted to bust was a combination of railroads known as the Northern Securities Company. Reversing its position in earlier cases, the Supreme Court in 1904 upheld Roosevelt's action in breaking up the railroad monopoly. Roosevelt later directed his attorney general to take antitrust action against Standard Oil and more than 40 other large corporations. Roosevelt did make a distinction between breaking up “bad trusts,” which harmed the public and stifled competition, and regulating “good trusts,” which through efficiency and low prices dominated a market.

**Railroad Regulation** President Roosevelt also took the initiative in persuading a Republican majority in Congress to pass two laws that significantly strengthened the regulatory powers of the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC). Under the Elkins Act (1903), the ICC had greater authority to stop railroads from granting rebates to favored customers. Under the Hepburn Act (1906), the commission could fix “just and reasonable” rates for railroads.

**Consumer Protection** *The Jungle*, a muckraking book by Upton Sinclair, described in horrifying detail the conditions in the Chicago stockyards and meatpacking industry. The public outcry following the publication of Sinclair's novel caused Congress to enact two regulatory laws in 1906:

1. The *Pure Food and Drug Act* forbade the manufacture, sale, and transportation of adulterated or mislabeled foods and drugs.



2. The *Meat Inspection Act* provided that federal inspectors visit meatpacking plants to ensure that they met minimum standards of sanitation.

**Conservation** As a lover of the wilderness and the outdoor life, Roosevelt enthusiastically championed the cause of conservation. In fact, Roosevelt's most original and lasting contribution in domestic policy may have been his efforts to protect the nation's natural resources. Three actions were particularly important.

1. Roosevelt made repeated use of the Forest Reserve Act of 1891 to set aside 150 million acres of federal land as a national reserve that could not be sold to private interests.
2. In 1902, Roosevelt won passage of the Newlands Reclamation Act, a law providing money from the sale of public land for irrigation projects in western states.
3. In 1908, the president publicized the need for conservation by hosting a White House Conference of Governors to promote coordinated conservation planning by federal and state governments. Following this conference, a National Conservation Commission was established under Gifford Pinchot of Pennsylvania, whom Roosevelt had earlier appointed to be the first director of the U.S. Forest Service.

### ***Taft's Presidency***

The good-natured William Howard Taft had served in Roosevelt's cabinet as secretary of war. Honoring the two-term tradition, Roosevelt refused to seek reelection and picked Taft to be his successor. The Republican party readily endorsed Taft as its nominee for president in 1908 and, as expected, defeated for a third time the Democrats' campaigner, William Jennings Bryan.

**More Trust-Busting and Conservation** Taft continued Roosevelt's Progressive policies. As a trustbuster, Taft ordered the prosecution of almost twice the number of antitrust cases as his predecessor. Among these cases was one against U.S. Steel, which included a merger approved by then President Theodore Roosevelt. An angry Roosevelt viewed Taft's action as a personal attack on his integrity. As a conservationist, Taft established the Bureau of Mines, added large tracts in the Appalachians to the national forest reserves, and set aside federal oil lands (the first president to do so).

Two other Progressive measures were at least equal in importance to legislation enacted under Roosevelt. The Mann-Elkins Act of 1910 gave the Interstate Commerce Commission the power to suspend new railroad rates and oversee telephone, telegraph, and cable companies. The Sixteenth Amendment, ratified by the states in 1913, authorized the U.S. government to collect an income tax. (This reform was originally proposed by the Populists in their 1892 platform.) Progressives heartily approved the new tax because, at first, it applied only to the very wealthy.

**Split in the Republican Party** Progressives in the Republican party were unimpressed with Taft's achievements. In fact, they became so disenchanted with his leadership that they accused him of betraying their cause and joining the conservative wing of the party. These were their reasons:

**1. Payne-Aldrich Tariff** During his 1908 campaign, Taft had promised to lower the tariff. Instead, conservative Republicans in Congress passed the Payne-Aldrich Tariff in 1909, which raised the tariff on most imports. Taft angered Progressives in his party not only by signing the tariff bill but by making a public statement in its defense.

**2. Pinchot-Ballinger Controversy** The Progressives respected the chief of the Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, as a dedicated conservationist. On the other hand, they distrusted Taft's secretary of the interior, Richard Ballinger, especially after he opened public lands in Alaska for private development. In 1910, when Pinchot criticized Ballinger, Taft stood by his cabinet member and fired Pinchot for insubordination. Conservatives applauded; Progressives protested.

**3. House Speaker Joe Cannon** Taft angered Progressive Republicans when he failed to support their effort to reduce the dictatorial powers of Congress' leading conservative, Speaker of the House Joseph Cannon.

**4. Midterm Elections** Fighting back against his Progressive critics, Taft openly supported conservative candidates for Congress in the midterm elections of 1910. It was a serious political mistake. Progressive Republicans from the Midwest easily defeated the candidates endorsed by Taft. After this election, the Republican party was split wide open between two opposing groups: a conservative faction loyal to Taft and a Progressive faction. The latter group of Republicans fervently hoped that their ex-president and hero, Theodore Roosevelt, would agree to become their candidate again in 1912.

### ***Rise of the Socialist Party***

A third party developed in the first decade of the 1900s that was dedicated to the welfare of the working class. Originally called the Socialist Labor party in 1897, it changed its name in 1901 to the Socialist Party of America. The Socialist platform called for more radical reforms than the Progressives favored: public ownership of the railroads, utilities, and even of major industries such as oil and steel.

**Eugene V. Debs** One of the Socialist party's founders, Eugene Debs, was the party's candidate for president in five elections from 1900 to 1920. A former railway union leader, Debs adopted socialism while jailed for the Pullman strike. He was an outspoken critic of business and a champion of labor.

**Influence** On such issues as workers' compensation and minimum wage laws, Progressives and some Socialists joined forces. For the most part, however, Progressives wanted to distance themselves from the ideas of Socialists, since the majority of voters favored only mild reforms, not radical causes. Eventually, however, some Socialist ideas were accepted: public ownership of utilities, the eight-hour workday, and pensions for employees.

## The Election of 1912

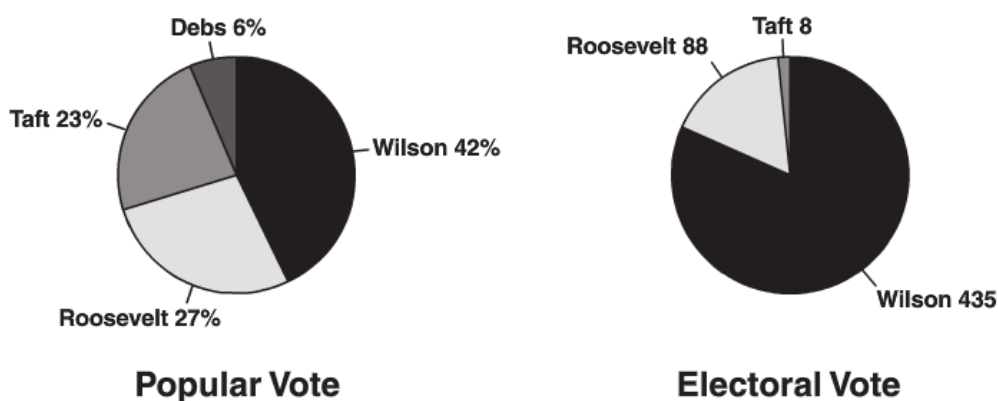
Reform efforts dominated a campaign that involved four notable presidential candidates.

**Candidates** President Taft was renominated by the Republicans after his supporters excluded Theodore Roosevelt's delegates from the party's convention. Progressive Republicans then formed a new party and nominated Theodore Roosevelt. (Roosevelt's claim that he was as strong as a bull moose gave the new Progressive party its nickname: the Bull Moose party.) After lengthy balloting, Democrats united behind Woodrow Wilson, a newcomer who had first been elected to office in 1910 as governor of New Jersey. The Socialist party, at the peak of its strength, again nominated Eugene V. Debs.

**Campaign** With Taft enjoying little popularity and Debs considered too radical, the election came down to a battle between Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Roosevelt called for a New Nationalism, with more government regulation of business and unions, women's suffrage, and more social welfare programs. Wilson pledged a New Freedom, which would limit both big business and big government, bring about reform by ending corruption, and revive competition by supporting small business.

**Results** Wilson won less than a majority of the popular vote, but with the Republicans split, he won a landslide in the electoral college and the Democrats gained control of Congress. The overwhelming support for the Progressive presidential candidates ensured that reform efforts would continue under Wilson, while the failure of the Progressive party to elect local candidates suggested that the new party would not last. But the idea contained in Roosevelt's New Nationalism—of strong federal government regulations helping the people—did have a lasting influence for much of the century (see, in Chapter 24, the New Deal, and, in Chapter 28, the Great Society).

### PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, 1912



**Source:** U.S. Bureau of the Census. *Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970*



## ***Woodrow Wilson's Progressive Program***

Wilson, who grew up in Virginia during the Civil War, was only the second Democrat elected president since the war (Cleveland was the other), and the first southerner to occupy the White House since Zachary Taylor (1849–1850). Wilson was idealistic, intellectual, righteous, and inflexible. Like Roosevelt, he believed that a president should actively lead Congress and, as necessary, appeal directly to the people to rally support for his legislative program.

In his inaugural address in 1913, the Democratic president pledged again his commitment to a New Freedom. To bring back conditions of free and fair competition in the economy, Wilson attacked “the triple wall of privilege”: tariffs, banking, and trusts.

**Tariff Reduction** Wasting no time to fulfill a campaign pledge, Wilson on the first day of his presidency called a special session of Congress to lower the tariff. Past presidents had always sent written messages to Congress, but Wilson broke this longstanding tradition by addressing Congress in person about the need for lower tariff rates to bring consumer prices down. Passage of the Underwood Tariff in 1913 substantially lowered tariffs for the first time in over 50 years. To compensate for the reduced tariff revenues, the Underwood bill included a graduated income tax with rates from 1 to 6 percent.

**Banking Reform** Wilson's next major initiative concerned the banking system and the money supply. He was persuaded that the gold standard was inflexible and that banks, rather than serving the public interest, were too much influenced by stock speculators on Wall Street. The president again went directly to Congress in 1913 to propose a plan for building both stability and flexibility into the U.S. financial system. Rejecting the Republican proposal for a private national bank, he proposed a national banking system with 12 district banks supervised by a Federal Reserve Board. After months of debate, Congress finally passed the Federal Reserve Act in 1914. Ever since, Americans have purchased goods and services using the Federal Reserve Notes (dollar bills) issued by the federally regulated banking system.

**Business Regulation** Two major pieces of legislation in 1914 completed Wilson's New Freedom program:

**1. Clayton Antitrust Act** This act strengthened the provisions in the Sherman Antitrust Act for breaking up monopolies. Most important for organized labor, the new law contained a clause exempting unions from being prosecuted as trusts.

**2. Federal Trade Commission** The new regulatory agency was empowered to investigate and take action against any “unfair trade practice” in every industry except banking and transportation.

**Other Reforms** Wilson was at first opposed to any legislation that seemed to favor special interests, such as farmers' groups and labor unions. He was finally persuaded, however, to extend his reform program to include the following Progressive measures:

**1. Federal Farm Loan Act** In 1916, 12 regional federal farm loan banks were established to provide farm loans at low interest rates.

**2. Child Labor Act** This measure, long favored by settlement house workers and labor unions alike, was enacted in 1916. It prohibited the shipment in interstate commerce of products manufactured by children under 14 years old. However, the Supreme Court found this act to be unconstitutional in the 1918 case of *Hammer v. Dagenhart*.

## African Americans in the Progressive Era

In championing greater democracy for the American people, most leaders of the Progressive movement thought only in terms of the white race. African Americans were, for the most part, ignored by Progressive presidents and governors. President Wilson, with a strong southern heritage and many of the racist attitudes of the times, acquiesced to the demands of southern Democrats and permitted the segregation of federal workers and buildings.

The status of African Americans had declined steadily since Reconstruction. With the Supreme Court's "separate but equal" decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), racial segregation had been the rule in the South and, unofficially, in much of the North. Ironically and tragically, the Progressive era coincided with years when thousands of blacks were lynched by racist mobs. Few Progressives did anything about segregation and lynching. Most shared in the general prejudice of their times. In addition, many considered other reforms (such as lower tariffs) to be more important than antilynching laws because such reforms benefited everyone, not just one group.

### **Two Approaches: Washington and Du Bois**

Though lacking widespread white support, African-Americans took action to alleviate poverty and discrimination. Economic deprivation and exploitation was one problem; denial of civil rights was another. Which problem was primary was a difficult question that became the focus of a debate between two African American leaders: Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois.

**Washington's Stress on Economics** The most influential African American at the turn of the century was the head of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Booker T. Washington. In his Atlanta Exposition speech in 1895, Washington argued that blacks' needs for education and economic progress were of foremost importance, and that they should concentrate on learning industrial skills for better wages. Only after establishing a secure economic base, said Washington, could African Americans hope to realize their other goal of political and social equality. (See Chapter 17.)

**Du Bois' Stress on Civil Rights** Unlike Washington, who had been born into slavery on a southern plantation, W. E. B. Du Bois was a northerner with a college education, who became a distinguished scholar and writer. In his book

*The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois criticized Booker T. Washington's approach and demanded equal rights for African Americans. He argued that political and social rights were a prerequisite for economic independence.

Washington's pragmatic approach to economic advancement and Du Bois' militant demands for equal rights framed a debate in the African American community that continued throughout much of the 20th century.

### ***The Great "Migration"***

At the close of the 19th century, about nine out of ten African Americans lived in the South. In the next century, this ratio steadily shifted toward the North. This internal migration began in earnest between 1910 and 1930 when about a million people traveled north to seek jobs in the cities. Motivating their decision to leave the South were: (1) deteriorating race relations, (2) destruction of their cotton crops by the boll weevil, and (3) job opportunities in northern factories that opened up when white workers were drafted in World War I. The Great Depression in the 1930s slowed migration, but World War II renewed it. Between 1940 and 1970, over 4 million African Americans moved north. Although many succeeded in improving their economic conditions, the newcomers to northern cities also faced racial tension and discrimination.

### ***Civil Rights Organizations***

Racial discrimination during the Progressive era prompted black leaders to found three powerful civil rights organizations in a span of just six years.

1. In 1905, W. E. B. Du Bois met with a group of black intellectuals in Niagara Falls, Canada, to discuss a program of protest and action aimed at securing equal rights for blacks. They and others who later joined the group became known as the *Niagara Movement*.
2. On Lincoln's birthday in 1908, Du Bois, other members of the Niagara Movement, and a group of white Progressives founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Their mission was no less than to abolish all forms of segregation and to increase educational opportunities for African American children. By 1920, the NAACP was the nation's largest civil rights organization, with over 100,000 members.
3. Another organization, the National Urban League, was formed in 1911 to help people migrating from the South to northern cities. The league's motto, "Not Alms But Opportunity," reflected its emphasis on self-reliance and economic advancement.



## Women, Suffrage, and the Progressive Movement

The Progressive era was a time of increased activism and optimism for a new generation of feminists. By 1900, the older generation of suffrage crusaders led by Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had passed the torch to younger women. They sought allies among male Progressives, but not always with success. For example, President Wilson refused to support the suffragists' call for a national amendment until late in his presidency.

### *The Campaign for Women's Suffrage*

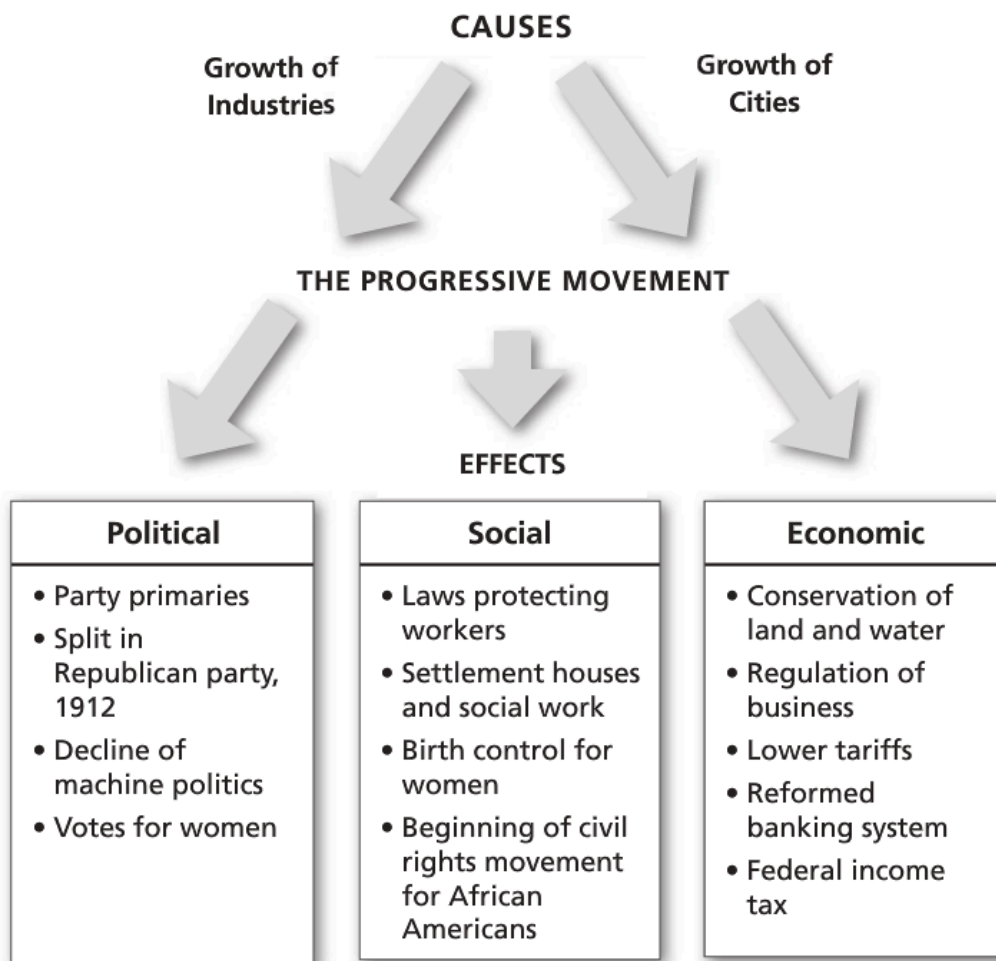
Carrie Chapman Catt, an energetic reformer from Iowa, became the new president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1900. Catt argued for the vote as a broadening of democracy which would empower women, thus enabling them to more actively care for their families in an industrial society. At first, Catt continued NAWSA's drive to win votes for women at the state level before changing strategies and seeking a suffrage amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

**Militant Suffragists** A more militant approach to gaining the vote was adopted by some women, who took to the streets with mass pickets, parades, and hunger strikes. Their leader, Alice Paul of New Jersey, broke from NAWSA in 1916 to form the National Woman's party. From the beginning, Paul focused on winning the support of Congress and the president for an amendment to the Constitution.

**Nineteenth Amendment (1920)** The dedicated efforts of women on the home front in World War I finally persuaded a two-thirds majority in Congress to support a women's suffrage amendment. Its ratification as the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 guaranteed women's right to vote in all elections at the local, state, and national levels. Following the victory of her cause, Carrie Chapman Catt organized the League of Women Voters, a civic organization dedicated to keeping voters informed about candidates and issues.

### *Other Issues*

In addition to winning the right to vote, Progressive women worked on other issues as well. Margaret Sanger advocated birth-control education, especially among the poor. Over time, the movement developed into the Planned Parenthood organization. Women made progress in securing educational equality, liberalizing marriage and divorce laws, reducing discrimination in business and the professions, and recognizing women's rights to own property.



### HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES: REFORM OR REACTION?

Historians have generally agreed that the Progressive movement was a response to industrialization and urbanization. They do not agree, however, on whether the Progressives were truly seeking to move society in new directions or whether they were reacting *against* new trends and attempting to maintain society as it once was.

Progressives saw themselves as genuine reformers, and for many years, historians accepted this view. Historians said that Progressives were simply acting in the tradition of earlier reformers: the Jeffersonians, Jacksonians, and Populists. William Allen White argued that the Progressives adopted the complete Populist package of reforms except for free silver. Historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., thought that U.S.

history moved in a liberal-conservative cycle and that progressivism was a predictable phase in that cycle following the conservatism of late-19th century politics.

Another, complementary view of the Progressives, depicts them not as democratic champions of “the people” but as modernizers who wanted to apply rational, scientific methods to the operations of social and political institutions. Samuel P. Hay’s study of municipal reform, for example, shows that Progressive leaders were an educated, upper-class elite working to make government more efficient under the direction of skilled experts. Some historians fault the Progressive movement’s emphasis on scientific expertise, boards, and commissions for creating institutions that seem to take away power from the voters and elected officials. For example, the chair of the Federal Reserve Board is often considered the second most powerful person in government after the president, but once appointed, this individual is largely independent of the president and Congress.

Those historians who view Progressives as conservatives in disguise—or even as reactionaries—stress how disturbed these citizens were by labor strife, by the agrarian discontent of the Populists, and by signs of revolutionary ferment among the urban masses. Gabriel Kolko argues that the business elite, far from being opposed to government regulation, in fact wanted regulation as a means of stabilizing industry. Kolko points out that the regulation of the meatpacking industry, although inspired by muckraking literature, benefitted the large meatpackers, who lobbied behind the scenes for government controls.

Historians have debated the relationship between Progressives and the working class. Did the middle-class Progressives act out of sympathy for the workers or out of fear of a socialist revolution? George Mowry in the early 1950s characterized the Progressive movement as a reaction of middle-class professionals and small-business owners to pressures both from above (large corporations) and from below (labor unions). In this view, the middle class was attempting to maintain its traditional leadership of society by directing reform. The neglect of unions and African Americans by Progressives provides further evidence that the reformers were conservative at heart.

On the other hand, some historians argue that middle-class motives for reform might have been an expression of that group’s strong sense of social conscience. The Protestant churches had cultivated a sense of responsibility and justice. The muckrakers’ articles stirred their readers’ conscience and aroused genuine feelings of guilt with respect to the poor and outrage with respect to dishonest politics.



## KEY TERMS BY THEME

### **Progressive Movement (CUL)**

urban middle class  
male and female  
white, old stock  
Protestants  
professional associations  
Pragmatism  
William James  
John Dewey  
Frederick W. Taylor  
scientific management

### **Muckrakers (CUL)**

Henry Demarest Lloyd  
Standard Oil Company  
Lincoln Steffans  
Ida Tarbell  
Jacob Riis  
Theodore Dreiser

### **Voting Rights (POL)**

Australian ballot  
direct primary  
Robert La Follett  
Seventeenth Amendment  
direct election of senators  
initiative, referendum, and recall

### **City and State Government (POL)**

municipal reform  
Samuel M. Jones  
Tom L. Johnson  
commission plan  
city manager plan  
Charles Evans  
Hughes Hiram Johnson  
“Wisconsin Idea”  
regulatory commissions

### **Social and Labor Reform (POL)**

state Prohibition laws  
state regulation of education and safety  
National Child Labor Committee  
compulsory school attendance  
Florence Kelley  
National Consumers’ League  
*Lochner v. New York*  
*Muller v. Oregon*  
Triangle Shirtwaist fire

### **Theodore Roosevelt Presidency (POL, ENV)**

Square Deal  
anthracite coal miners’ strike (1902)  
trust-busting  
bad vs. good trusts  
Elkins Act (1903)  
Hepburn Act (1906)  
Upton Sinclair  
*The Jungle*; Pure Food and Drug Act (1906)  
Meat Inspection Act (1906)  
conservation of public lands  
Newlands Reclamation Act (1902)  
White House Conference  
Gifford Pinchot

### **Election of 1912, POL**

Socialist Party of America  
Eugene V. Debs  
Bull Moose party  
New Nationalism  
New Freedom

### **William Howard Taft Presidency (POL)**

Mann-Elkins Act (1910)  
Sixteenth Amendment, federal income tax  
Payne-Aldrich Tariff (1909)  
firing of Pinchot

### **Woodrow Wilson Presidency (POL)**

Underwood Tariff (1913)  
Federal Reserve Act (1914)  
Federal Reserve Board  
Clayton Antitrust Act (1914)  
Federal Trade Commission  
Federal Farm Loan Act (1916)

### **African Americans (ID, PEO)**

racial segregation laws  
increased lynching  
Booker T. Washington  
W. E. B. Du Bois  
National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
National Urban League

### **Women’s Movement (ID, POL)**

Carrie Chapman Catt  
National American Woman Suffrage Association  
Alice Paul  
National Woman’s party  
Nineteenth Amendment  
League of Women Voters  
Margaret Sanger