The Progressive Era
1900–1917
It was late Saturday afternoon on March 25, 1911, but at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City, hundreds of young women and a few men remained at work. In the eighth- and ninth-floor workrooms, the clatter of sewing machines filled the air. Suddenly fire broke out, quickly turning the upper floors into an inferno. Panicked workers found some of the doors locked. Crushes of people jammed against doors that opened inward (a fire-law violation).

A few escaped. Young Pauline Grossman crawled to safety across a narrow alleyway when three male employees formed a human bridge. As others tried to cross, however, the weight became too great, and all fell to their deaths. Dozens leaped from the windows to certain death below.

Immigrant parents searched all night for their daughters; newspaper reporters could hear “a dozen pet names in Italian and Yiddish rising in shrill agony above the deeper moan of the throng.” Sunday’s headlines summed up the grim count: 141 dead.

The horrifying Triangle fire underscored what many citizens had long recognized. Industrialization, for all its benefits, had taken a heavy toll on American life. Many factory workers and slumdwellers endured a desperate cycle of poverty, exhausting labor, and early death.

Industrialization, urban growth, and the rise of great corporations affected all Americans. A new middle class of white-collar workers and urban professionals gained political influence. Middle-class women, joining clubs and reform organizations, focused attention on urgent social issues.

These developments produced a wave of reform that came to be called the progressive movement. Historians once portrayed this movement as a triumph of “the people” over evil corporations. More recent historians have complicated this picture, noting the role of special-interest groups (including big business) in promoting specific reforms, as well as the movement’s racist, anti-immigrant, and coercive social-control aspects.

The progressive movement was a response to vast changes that had overwhelmed an older America. Whatever their specific agendas, all progressives grappled with the new America of corporations, factories, cities, and immigrants. In contrast to the rural Populists, progressives concentrated on the social effects of the new urban-industrial order.

Emerging in the 1890s at the city and state levels, an array of organizations, many led by women, pursued varied reform objectives. As journalists, novelists, religious leaders, and politicians joined in, these grass-roots efforts evolved into a national movement.
As the twentieth century dawned, groups across the nation grappled with the problems of the new urban-industrial order. Workers protested unsafe and exhausting jobs. Experts investigated social conditions. Women's clubs embraced reform. Intellectuals challenged the ideological foundations of a business-dominated social order, and journalists exposed municipal corruption and industrialism's human toll. Throughout America, activists worked to make government more democratic, improve conditions in cities and factories, and curb corporate power.

Historians have grouped all these efforts under a single label: “the progressive movement.” In fact, “progressivism” was less a single movement than a spirit of discontent with the status quo and an exciting sense of new social possibilities. International in scope, this spirit found many outlets and addressed many issues (see Beyond America.)

The Many Faces of Progressivism

Who were the progressives, and what reforms did they pursue? To answer this, we must examine the social changes of the era. Along with immigration, a growing middle class transformed U.S. cities. From the men and women of this class—mostly white, native-born Protestants—came many of the progressive movement’s leaders and supporters.

By 1917, when reform gave way to war, America’s political and social landscape had been transformed. New laws, organizations, and regulatory agencies had arisen to address the consequences of urbanization, industrial expansion, and corporate growth. The progressives could be maddeningly moralistic. They had their blind spots (especially on such subjects as immigration and race), and their reforms didn’t always work as planned. But, on balance, their achievements left a powerful legacy.

FOCUS Questions

- How did intellectuals, novelists, and journalists inspire the progressive movement?
- How did state and local progressives seek to reform cities and the new industrial order?
- How did progressives try to control morality, and how did they view immigrants and blacks?
- What strategies did African-Americans, women, and industrial workers use to improve their lot?
- As progressivism became a national movement, what issues proved most important?
But for middle-class married women caring for homes and children, city life could bring stress and loneliness. The divorce rate rose from one in twelve marriages in 1900 to one in nine by 1916. As we shall see, middle-class women joined female white-collar workers and college graduates in leading a revived women’s movement. Cultural commentators wrote nervously of the “New Woman.”

This urban middle class rallied to the banner of reform. The initial reform impetus came not from political parties but from women’s clubs, settlement houses, and groups with names like the Playground Association of America, the National Child Labor Committee, and the American League for Civic Improvement. In this era of organizations, the reform movement, too, drew strength from organized interest groups.

But the native-born middle class was not alone in promoting reform. On issues affecting factory workers and slum dwellers, the urban-immigrant political machines—and workers themselves—often took the initiative. After the 1911 Triangle fire, New York’s machine politicians joined with middle-class reformers and union officials to investigate the disaster and push for protective legislation. Some corporate leaders promoted business regulations that served their interests.

What, then, was progressivism? Fundamentally, it was a broad-based response to industrialization and its social byproducts: immigration, urban growth, growing corporate power, and widening class divisions. In contrast to populism, it enlisted many more citydwellers, journalists, academics, and social theorists. Finally, most progressives were reformers, not radicals. They wished to make the new urban-industrial order more humane, not overturn it entirely.

But what specific remedies were required? Reaching different answers to this key question, progressive reformers embraced causes that sometimes overlapped, sometimes diverged. Many demanded stricter business regulation, from local transit companies to the almighty trusts. Others focused on protecting workers and the urban poor. Still others championed reform of municipal government. Some, fearful of urban disorder, favored immigration restriction or social-control strategies to regulate city-dwellers’ behavior. All this contributed to the mosaic of progressive reform.

Progressives believed that most social problems could be solved through study and organized effort. They respected science and expert knowledge. Since scientific and technological expertise had produced the new industrial order, such expertise could surely also correct the social problems spawned by industrialism. Progressives marshaled research data, surveys, and statistics to support their various causes.

Some historians have portrayed progressivism as an organizational stage that all modernizing societies pass through. This perspective is useful, provided we remember that it was not an automatic process unfolding independently of human will. Persistent journalists, activist workers, and passionate reformers all played a role. Human emotion—whether indignation over child labor, suspicion of corporate power, or raw political ambition—drove the movement forward.

Intellectuals Offer New Social Views

A group of innovative social thinkers provided progressivism’s underlying ideas. As we have seen, some Gilded Age intellectuals had argued that Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution justified unrestrained economic competition. In the 1880s and 1890s, sociologist Lester Ward, utopian novelist Edward Bellamy, and leaders of the Social Gospel movement had all attacked this harsh version of Social Darwinism (see Chapters 18 and 19). This attack intensified after 1900.

Economist Thorstein Veblen, a Norwegian-American from Minnesota, satirized America’s newly rich capitalists in The Theory of the Leisure Class (1899). Dissecting their lifestyle the way an anthropologist might study an exotic tribe, he argued that they built mansions, threw elaborate parties, and otherwise engaged in “conspicuous consumption” to flaunt their wealth and assert their claims to superiority.

The Harvard philosopher William James argued in Pragmatism (1907) that truth emerges not from abstract theorizing but from the experience of coping with life’s realities through practical action. James’s philosophy of pragmatism deepened reformers’ skepticism toward the older generation’s entrenched ideas and strengthened their belief in the necessity of social change.

Herbert Croly, the son of reform-minded New York journalists, shared this faith that new ideas could transform society. In The Promise of American Life (1909), Croly called for an activist government of the kind advocated by Alexander Hamilton, the first secretary of the treasury. But rather than serving the interests of the business class, as Hamilton had proposed, he argued that government should promote the welfare of all. In 1914, Croly founded the New Republic magazine to promote progressive ideas.

The settlement-house leader Jane Addams also helped shape the ideology of the Progressive Era. In Democracy and Social Ethics (1902) and other books, Addams rejected the claim that unrestrained competition offered the best path to social progress. Instead, she argued, in a complex industrial society, each
Global Interactions

Progressive Reformers Worldwide
Share Ideas and Strategies

Progressive reform was not an American invention. U.S. progressives drew ideas from Continental Europe, the British Isles, Canada, and even faraway Australia and New Zealand. Sometimes, the exchange flowed in the other direction, as reformers abroad found inspiration in America.

Industrialization and urbanization had transformed other societies as well. The smoky factory cities of Manchester and Birmingham in England; Glasgow in Scotland; Liège in Belgium; and Düsseldorf and Essen in Germany’s coal-rich Ruhr Valley all experienced the same social problems as did U.S. industrial cities like Pittsburgh, Chicago, and Cleveland. The grinding poverty of London’s East End was as notorious as that of New York’s Lower East Side.


Efforts to solve the problems of the new urban-industrial order crossed national boundaries, giving rise to a transnational reform movement. The breadth and diversity of this movement was showcased at the Paris Exposition of 1900 in a Musée Social (Social Museum) featuring exhibits of many nations’ reform innovations.

As early as the 1880s, Germany’s conservative Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, trying to keep the socialists from power, instituted a remarkable series of reforms, including a ban on child labor; maximum working hours; and illness, accident, and old-age insurance for workers. Britain’s Liberal party, in power in 1906–1914, introduced minimum-wage laws, unemployment insurance, and a health-insurance program on the German model. In France, a coalition of reform parties established a maximum working day, a progressive income tax (one with higher rates for wealthier taxpayers), and a program of medical aid for the elderly poor. Denmark adopted an old-age pension system. Not all the reforms were state sponsored; some relied on voluntary philanthropy. For example, the first settlement house, Toynbee Hall, was started in London in 1884 by the Anglican clergyman Samuel Augustus Barnett and others. While Australia introduced an ambitious program of water-resource planning to promote agricultural development in its vast interior, New Zealand’s trailblazing reforms included woman suffrage, arbitration courts to resolve labor disputes, and programs enabling small farmers to lease public lands.

A Poor Family in London’s East End, 1912  Grim urban slum conditions were a reality in Europe and Great Britain no less than in the United States, spurring reform efforts on both sides of the Atlantic. (Hulton Archive/Getty Images)
American reformers followed these developments carefully. Jane Addams visited Toynbee Hall repeatedly in the 1880s. In 1900, the muckraking U.S. journalist Henry Demarest Lloyd praised New Zealand as "the political brain of the modern world." American students in German and Swiss universities and the London School of Economics (founded by socialists in 1895) encountered challenges to the laissez-faire doctrine that prevailed back home. The federal government’s Bureau of Labor Statistics collected data on European social and labor conditions and labor-related issues, to give government officials and legislators a comparative perspective on issues of concern in America. For the same reason, reform-minded labor historian John R. Commons at the University of Wisconsin plastered his graduate-seminar room with charts showing labor laws around the world. American Social Gospel leaders kept in close touch with like-minded clergy in England and elsewhere. Experiments with publicly owned electric power companies in the Canadian province of Ontario offered a model for municipal reformers who were proposing this innovation in Cleveland and other U.S. cities.

Transatlantic conferences and delegations furthered the exchange of reform strategies. In 1910, ten Americans attended an International Congress on Unemployment in Paris while twenty-eight Americans came to Vienna for an International Housing Congress. The National Civic Federation sent fifteen experts to England and Scotland in 1906 to study new ideas in urban reform. A delegation from the Bureau of Municipal Research spent several months in Frankfurt in 1912 learning about administrative innovations in that city. In 1911, a sociology professor at the City College of New York offered social workers a package tour including visits to London settlement houses, planned cities elsewhere in England, workers’ cooperatives in Belgium, and infant nurseries in Paris.

Reformers committed to causes such as world peace or women’s rights often joined forces with kindred spirits abroad. The birth-control advocate Margaret Sanger, pacifist Jane Addams, and woman-suffrage leader Alice Paul all maintained close contact with activists elsewhere who shared their commitments. The introduction of woman suffrage in New Zealand (1893) and Australia (1902) energized the U.S. suffrage movement.

Housing reformers and city planners cultivated international ties as well. The New York State Tenement House Law of 1901, a key reform measure, owed much to the groundbreaking work of English housing reformers. Daniel Burnham’s 1909 Plan of Chicago (discussed later in this chapter) drew inspiration from classical Athens and Rome; Renaissance Florence and Siena; Georges Haussmann’s great Paris boulevards of the mid-nineteenth century; and Vienna’s Ringstrasse, itself inspired by the Paris model.

Magazines contributed to the global flow of reform ideas. The muckraking journalist Ray Stannard Baker reported on reforms in Germany for McClure’s magazine in 1900, providing a broader context for the magazine’s articles on reform in the United States. Not to be outdone, Everybody’s magazine sent Charles E. Russell around the world in 1905 to investigate reform initiatives in England, Switzerland, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere.

Reform-minded foreigners also visited the United States to report on the juvenile court system, the playground movement, innovative public schools, and other progressive developments. One English progressive visiting Madison, Wisconsin, in 1911 praised the university’s role in promoting reform legislation. “The State has been practically governed by the University…,” he wrote. “[E]very question is threshed out in class before it is threshed out by the legislature.” The Kansas editor William Allen White, recalling the Progressive Era in his 1946 autobiography, marveled at the movement’s transnational character: "We were parts, one of another,…the United States and Europe. Something was welding us into one social and economic whole with local political variations, [but]…all fighting [for] a common cause.”

American progressivism, in short, was simply one manifestation of a larger effort to cope with the social impact of rapid industrialization and urban growth. Through a dense network of publications, conferences, and personal ties, reformers of many nations kept in touch, shared strategies, and drew on a vast storehouse of ideas as they addressed the problems and circumstances of their societies.

**QUESTION FOR ANALYSIS**

- What early twentieth-century reforms transcended national boundaries, and how did reformers in different countries share ideas and strategies?
insisted that law must evolve as society changes. In a phrase much quoted by progressives, he had declared, “The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience.” Appointed to the United States Supreme Court in 1902, Holmes often dissented from the conservative Court majority. As the new social thinking took hold, the courts slowly grew more open to reform legislation.

Novelists, Journalists, and Artists
Spotlight Social Problems

While reform-minded intellectuals reoriented American social thought, novelists and journalists chronicled corporate wrongdoing, municipal corruption, slum conditions, and industrial abuses.

In his novel *The Octopus* (1901), Frank Norris of San Francisco portrayed the struggle between California railroad barons and the state’s wheat growers. Though writing fiction, Norris accurately described the railroad owners’ bribery, intimidation, rate manipulation, and other tactics.

Theodore Dreiser’s novel *The Financier* (1912) featured a hard-driving business tycoon utterly lacking
To gather material, some journalists worked as factory laborers or lived in slum tenements. One described her experiences working in a Massachusetts shoe factory where the caustic dyes rotted workers’ fingernails. The British immigrant John Spargo researched his 1906 book about child labor, *The Bitter Cry of the Children*, by visiting mines in Pennsylvania and West Virginia and attempting to do the work that young boys performed for ten hours a day, picking out slate and other refuse from coal in cramped workspaces filled with choking coal dust.

The muckrakers awakened middle-class readers to conditions in industrial America. Some magazine exposés later appeared in book form, including...
Urban political reformers soon began to probe the roots of municipal misgovernment, including the private monopolies that ran municipal water, gas, electricity, and transit systems. Reformers passed laws regulating the rates these utilities could charge and curbing their political influence. (Some even advocated public ownership of these companies.)

Reflecting the Progressive Era’s regard for expertise and efficiency, some municipal reformers advocated substituting professional city managers for mayors, and councils chosen in citywide elections for aldermen elected on a ward-by-ward basis. Dayton, Ohio, adopted a city-manager system after a ruinous flood in 1913. Supposedly above politics, these experts were expected to run the city like an efficient business.

Municipal reform attracted different groups, depending on the issue. The native-born middle class, led by clergymen, editors, and other opinion molders, provided the initial impetus and core


Artists and photographers played a role as well. A group of New York painters dubbed the Ashcan School portrayed the harshness as well as the vitality of slum life. The photographer Lewis Hine, working for the National Child Labor Committee, captured haunting images of child workers with stunted bodies and worn expressions.

**Grassroots Progressivism**

Middle-class citizens did more than read about the problems of urban-industrial America. They observed these problems firsthand in their own communities. In fact, the progressive movement began with grass-roots campaigns to end urban political corruption, regulate corporate behavior, and improve conditions in factories and slums. Eventually, these local efforts came together in a powerful national movement.

**Reforming Local Politics**

Beginning in the 1890s, middle-class reformers battled corrupt city governments that provided services and jobs to immigrants, but often at the price of graft and rigged elections (see Chapter 19). In New York City, Protestant clergy battled Tammany Hall, the city’s entrenched Democratic organization. In Detroit, the reform mayor Hazen Pingree (served 1890–1897) brought honesty to city hall, lowered transit fares, and provided public baths and other services. Pingree once slapped a health quarantine on a brothel, holding hostage a well-known business leader until he promised to back Pingree’s reforms.

In San Francisco, a courageous newspaper editor led a 1907 crusade against the city’s corrupt boss. When the original prosecutor was gunned down in court, attorney Hiram Johnson took his place, winning convictions against the boss and his cronies. Full of reform zeal—one observer called him “a volcano in perpetual eruption”—Johnson rode his newly won fame to the California governorship and the U.S. Senate.

In Toledo, Ohio, a colorful figure named Samuel M. (“Golden Rule”) Jones led the reform crusade. A businessman converted to the Social Gospel, Jones introduced profit sharing in his factory, and as mayor he established playgrounds, free kindergartens, and lodging houses for homeless transients.

One observer called Hiram Johnson “a volcano in perpetual eruption.”

**HIRAM JOHNSON PROSECUTING BOSS RUEF, AS REPORTED IN THE SAN FRANCISCO CALL, DECEMBER 11, 1908**

Progressive across the nation battled political corruption at the local level. One of the more notorious city bosses, Abraham Ruef of San Francisco, was convicted in 1908 and sent to prison. Hiram Johnson went on to win the California governorship in 1910, serve as Theodore Roosevelt’s vice-presidential running mate in 1912, and in 1916 win election to the U.S. Senate as a Republican. (The San Francisco Call, Friday, December 11, 1908)
support. Business interests often pushed for city-wide elections and the city-manager system, since these changes reduced immigrants’ political clout and increased the influence of the corporate elite. Reforms that promised improved services or better conditions for ordinary city-dwellers won support from immigrants and political bosses who realized that the old, informal system of patronage could no longer meet constituents’ needs.

The electoral-reform movement soon spread to the state level. By 1910, for example, all states had replaced the old system of voting, involving pre-printed ballots bearing the names of specific candidates, with the secret ballot, which made it harder to rig elections. The direct primary, introduced in Wisconsin in 1903, enabled rank-and-file voters rather than party bosses to select their parties’ candidates for public office.

Hoping to trim the political power of corporate interests, some western states inaugurated the initiative, referendum, and recall. By an initiative, voters can instruct the legislature to consider a specific bill. In a referendum, citizens can actually enact a law or express their views on a proposed measure. By a recall petition, voters can remove a public official from office if they muster enough signatures.

While these reforms aimed to democratize voting, party leaders and interest groups soon learned to manipulate the new electoral machinery. Ironically, the new procedures may have weakened party loyalty and reduced voter interest. Voter-participation rates dropped steeply in these years, while political activity by organized interest groups increased.

Regulating Business, Protecting Workers

The corporate consolidation that produced giants like Carnegie Steel and Standard Oil (see Chapter 18) continued after 1900. The United States Steel Company created by J. P. Morgan in 1901 controlled 80 percent of all U.S. steel production. A year later, Morgan combined six competing companies into the International Harvester Company, which dominated the farm-implement business. The General Motors Company, formed in 1908 by William C. Durant with backing from the DuPont Corporation, brought various independent automobile manufacturers, from the inexpensive Chevrolet to the luxury Cadillac, under one corporate umbrella.

Many workers benefited from this corporate growth. Industrial workers’ average annual real wages (defined in terms of actual purchasing power) rose from $487 in 1900 to $687 by 1915. In railroading and other unionized industries, wages climbed still higher. But even with the cost of living far lower than today, such wages barely supported a family and provided little cushion for emergencies.

To survive, entire families went to work. Two-thirds of young immigrant women entered the labor force in the early 1900s, working as factory help or domestics or in small business establishments.

Even children worked. In 1910, the nonfarm labor force included some 1.6 million children aged ten to fifteen employed in factories, mills, tenement sweatshops, and street trades such as shoe shining and newspaper vending (see Table 21.1). The total may have been higher, since many “women workers” listed in the census were in fact young girls. One investigator found a girl of five working nights in a South Carolina textile mill.

Work was long and hazardous. Despite the eight-hour movement of the 1880s, in 1900 the average worker still toiled 9½ hours a day. Some southern textile mills required workdays of 12 or 13 hours. In one typical year (1907), 4,534 railroad workers and more than 3,000 miners were killed on the job. Few workers enjoyed vacations or retirement benefits.

Workers accustomed to the rhythms of farm labor faced the discipline of the factory. Efficiency experts used time-and-motion studies to increase production. In Principles of Scientific Management (1911), Frederick W. Taylor explained how to increase output by standardizing job routines and rewarding the fastest workers. “Efficiency” became a popular catchword, but workers resented the pressures to speed up.

Americans concerned about the social implications of industrialization deplored unregulated corporate power and the hazards facing industrial workers. The drive to regulate big business, inherited from the populists, became an important component of the Progressive movement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 21.1</th>
<th>CHILDREN IN THE LABOR FORCE,* 1880–1930</th>
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<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>1890</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total number of children aged 10–15 (in millions)</td>
<td>6.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of children employed (in millions)</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of children employed</td>
<td>6.8</td>
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Source: The Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present (Stamford, Conn.: Fairfield Publishers, 1965).

*Nonagricultural workers.
of progressivism. Since corporations had benefited from government policies such as high protective tariffs and railroad subsidies, reformers reasoned, they should also be subject to government regulation.

Wisconsin, under Governor Robert (“Fighting Bob”) La Follette, took the lead in regulating railroads, mines, and other businesses. As a Republican congressman, La Follette had feuded with the state’s conservative party leadership, and in 1900 he won the governorship as an independent. Challenging powerful corporate interests, La Follette and his administration adopted the direct-primary system, set up a railroad regulatory commission, increased corporate taxes, and limited campaign spending. Reflecting progressivism’s faith in experts, La Follette consulted reform-minded professors at the University of Wisconsin and set up a legislative reference library to help lawmakers draft bills. La Follette’s reforms gained national attention as the “Wisconsin Idea.”

If electoral reform and corporate regulation represented the brain of progressivism, the impulse to improve conditions for workers represented its heart. This movement, too, began at the local and state level. By 1907, for example, thirty states had outlawed child labor. A 1903 Oregon law limited women in industry to a ten-hour workday.

Campaigns for industrial safety and better working conditions won support from political bosses in the immigrant cities. State senator Robert F. Wagner, a leader of New York City’s Democratic organization, headed the Triangle-fire investigation. Thanks to his committee’s efforts, New York passed fifty-six worker-protection laws, including required fire-safety inspections. By 1914, twenty-five states had made employers liable for job-related injuries or deaths.

Florence Kelley of Hull House, the daughter of a conservative Republican congressman, spearheaded the drive to remedy industrial abuses. In 1893, after investigating conditions in factories and sweatshops, Kelley persuaded the Illinois legislature to outlaw child labor and limit working hours for women. In 1899, she became head of the National Consumers’ League, which mobilized consumer pressure for improved factory conditions.
Campaigning for a federal child-labor law, Kelley asked, “Why are . . . wild game in the national parks, buffalo, [and] migratory birds all found suitable for federal protection, but not children?”

Like many progressive reforms, the crusade for workplace safety relied on expert research. The bacteriologist Alice Hamilton, a pioneer in the new field of “industrial hygiene,” reported on lead poisoning among industrial workers in 1910. Later, as an investigator for the U.S. Bureau of Labor, Hamilton publicized other work-related medical hazards.

Workers themselves, who well understood the hazards of their jobs, provided further pressure for reform. For example, when the granite industry introduced new power drills that created a fine dust that workers inhaled, the Granite Cutters’ Journal called them “widow makers.” Sure enough, investigators soon linked the dust to a deadly lung disease, silicosis.

Making Cities More Livable

By 1920, the U.S. urban population passed the 50 percent mark, and sixty-eight cities boasted more than a hundred thousand inhabitants. New York City grew by 2.2 million from 1900 to 1920, Chicago by 1 million. America had become an urban nation.

Political corruption was only one of many urban problems. As manufacturing and businesses grew, a tide of immigrants and native-born newcomers engulfed the cities. Many cities became congested human warehouses, lacking adequate parks, public-health resources, recreational facilities, and basic municipal services. As the reform spirit spread, the urban crisis loomed large.

Extending the achievements of Frederick Law Olmsted and others (see Chapter 19), reformers campaigned for parks, boulevards, and street lights; opposed unsightly billboards and overhead electrical wires; and advocated city planning and beautification projects. Daniel Burnham, chief architect of the 1893 Chicago world’s fair, led a successful 1906 effort to revive a plan for Washington, D.C., first proposed in 1791. He also developed plans for Cleveland, San Francisco, and other cities.

Burnham’s 1909 Plan of Chicago offered a vision of a city both more efficient and more beautiful. He recommended wide boulevards; lakefront parks and museums; statuary and fountains; and a majestic domed city hall and vast civic plaza. Chicago spent more than $300 million on projects reflecting his ideas. Many urban planners shared Burnham’s faith that more beautiful cities and imposing public buildings would produce orderly, law-abiding citizens.

The municipal reform impulse also included such practical goals as decent housing and better garbage collection and street cleaning. Providing a model for other cities and states, the New York legislature imposed strict health and safety regulations on tenements in 1911.

With the discovery in the 1880s that germs cause cholera, typhoid fever, and other diseases, municipal hygiene became a high priority. Reformers distributed public-health information; promoted school vaccination programs; and called for safer water and sewer systems and the regulation of food and milk suppliers. When Mary Mallon, an Irish-immigrant cook in New York, was found to be a healthy carrier of the typhoid bacillus in 1907, she was confined by the city health authorities and demonized in the press as “Typhoid Mary.”

These efforts bore fruit. From 1900 to 1920, U.S. infant mortality (defined as death in the first year of life), as well as death rates from tuberculosis,
typhoid fever, and other infectious or communicable diseases, all fell sharply.

Urban reformers shared the era’s heightened environmental consciousness (see Chapter 17). Factory chimneys belching smoke had once inspired pride, but by the early 1900s physicians had linked factory smoke to respiratory problems, and civic reformers were deploiring the soot and smoke spewing from coal-fueled factory steam boilers.

The antismoke campaign combined expertise with activism. Civil engineers formed the Smoke Prevention Association in 1906, and researchers at the University of Pittsburgh—one of the nation’s smokiest cities with its steel mills—documented the hazards and costs of air pollution. Chicago merchant Marshall Field declared that the “soot tax” he paid to clean his buildings’ exteriors exceeded his real-estate taxes. As women’s clubs and other civic groups embraced the cause, many cities passed smoke-abatement laws.

Success proved elusive, however, as railroads and corporations fought back in the courts. With coal still providing 70 percent of the nation’s energy as late as 1920, cities remained smoky. Not until years later, with the shift to other energy sources, did municipal air pollution significantly diminish.

**Progressivism and Social Control**

Progressives’ belief in research, legislation, and aroused public opinion sprang from their confidence that they knew what was best for society. While municipal corruption, unsafe factories, and corporate abuses captured their attention, so, too, did issues of personal behavior, particularly immigrant behavior. The problems they addressed deserved attention, but their moralistic rhetoric and coercive remedies also betrayed an impulse to impose their own moral standards by force of law.

**Urban Amusements; Urban Moral Control**

Despite the slums, dangerous factories, and other problems, early-twentieth-century cities also offered fun and diversion with their department stores, vaudeville, music halls, and amusement parks (see Chapter 19). While some vaudeville owners sought respectability, bawdy routines full of sexual innuendo delighted working-class audiences.

Amusement parks offered families escape from tenements, and gave female workers an opportunity to socialize with friends, meet young men, and show off new outfits. New York City’s amusement park, Coney Island, a subway ride from the city, attracted several million visitors a year by 1914.

With electrification, streetcar rides and evening strolls on well-lit downtown streets became leisure activities in themselves. Orville and Wilbur Wright’s successful airplane flight in 1903, and the introduction of Henry Ford’s Model T in 1908, transforming the automobile from a toy of the rich to a vehicle for the masses, foretold exciting changes ahead, with cities central to the action.

Jaunty music-hall songs added to the vibrancy of city life. The blues, rooted in the chants of southern black sharecroppers, reached a broader public with such songs as W. C. Handy’s classic “St. Louis Blues” (1914). Ragtime, another import from the black South (see Chapter 19), enjoyed great popularity in early-twentieth-century urban America. Both the black composer Scott Joplin, with such works as “Maple Leaf Rag” (1899), and the white composer Irving Berlin, with his hit tune “Alexander’s Rag-Time Band” (1911), contributed to this vogue.

These years also brought a new entertainment medium—the movies. Initially a part of vaudeville shows, movies soon migrated to five-cent halls called “nickelodeons” in immigrant neighborhoods. At first featuring brief comic sequences like The Sneeze or The Kiss, movies began to tell stories like The Great Train Robbery (1903). A Fool There Was (1914), with its daring line, “Kiss me, my fool!”, made Theda Bara (really Theodosia Goodman of Cincinnati) the first female star. The British music-hall performer Charlie Chaplin immigrated to America and appeared in some sixty short comedies between 1914 and 1917. Like amusement parks, the movies allowed immigrant youth briefly to escape parental supervision. As a New York garment worker recalled, “The one place I was allowed to go by myself was the movies. My parents wouldn’t let me go anywhere else.”

The diversions that eased city life for the poor struck some middle-class reformers as moral traps as dangerous as the physical hazards of the factory. Fearful of immorality and disorder, reformers campaigned to regulate amusement parks, dance halls, movies, and the darkened nickelodeons, which they saw as potential dens of vice. Several states and cities set up film censorship boards, and the Supreme Court upheld such measures in 1915.

Building on the moral-purity crusade of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and other groups (see Chapter 19), reformers also targeted prostitution, a major urban problem. Male procurers lured young women into prostitution and then took a share of their income. Women’s paltry wages for factory work or domestic service made this more-lucrative occupation tempting. Why “get up at 6:30 . . . and work in a close stuffy room . . . until dark for $6 or $7 a week,” reasoned one prostitute, “if an afternoon with a man could bring in more.”
Adopting the usual progressive approach, investigators gathered statistics on what they called "the social evil." The American Social Hygiene Association (1914), financed by John D. Rockefeller, Jr., sponsored research on sexually transmitted diseases, paid for "vice investigations" in major cities, and drafted antiprostitution laws.

As prostitution came to symbolize urban America's larger moral dangers, a "white slave" hysteria took hold. Novels, films, and magazine articles warned of kidnapped farm girls forced into urban brothels. The Mann Act (1910) made it illegal to transport a woman across a state line "for immoral purposes." Amid much fanfare, reformers shut down the red-light districts of New Orleans, Chicago, and other cities.

Racism, anti-immigrant prejudice, and anxieties about changing sexual mores all fueled the antiprostitution crusade. Authorities employed the new legislation to pry into private sexual behavior. Blackmailers entrap men into Mann Act violations. In 1913, the African-American boxer Jack Johnson, the heavyweight champion, was convicted under the Mann Act for crossing a state line with a (white) woman for "immoral purposes." Johnson went abroad to escape imprisonment.

**Battling Alcohol and Drugs**

Temperance had long been part of America's reform agenda, but reformers' objectives changed in the Progressive Era. Earlier campaigns had urged individuals to give up drink. By contrast, the Anti-Saloon League (ASL), founded in 1895, called for a total ban on the sale of alcoholic beverages. In typical Progressive fashion, full-time professionals ran the ASL, with Protestant ministers staffing state committees. ASL publications offered statistics documenting alcohol's role in many social problems. As churches and temperance groups worked for prohibition at the municipal, county, and state levels, the ASL moved to its larger goal: national prohibition.

Alcohol abuse did indeed contribute to domestic violence, health problems, and workplace injuries. But like the antiprostitution crusade, the prohibition campaign became a symbolic battleground pitting native-born citizens against immigrants. The ASL, while raising legitimate issues, also embodied...
of urban growth. More than 17 million newcomers arrived from 1900 to 1917 (many passing through New York’s immigration center, Ellis Island), and most settled in cities (see Figure 21.1). As in the 1890s (see Chapter 19), the influx came mainly from southern and eastern Europe, but more than two hundred thousand Japanese arrived between 1900 and 1920. An estimated forty thousand Chinese entered in these years, despite the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (see Chapter 18), which remained in force until 1943. Thousands of Mexicans came as well, many seeking railroad work.

The dismay that middle-class Americans felt about urban slum conditions stimulated support not only for protective legislation, but also for immigration restriction. If the immigrant city bred social problems, some concluded, immigrants should be excluded. Prominent Bostonians formed the Immigration Restriction League in 1894. The American Federation of Labor, fearing job competition, also endorsed restriction.

Like most Progressive Era reformers, immigration-restriction advocates tried to document their case. A 1911 congressional report allegedly proved the new immigrants’ innate degeneracy. One prominent sociologist described the newcomers as “low-browed, big-faced persons of obviously low mentality.”

**Immigration Restriction and Eugenics**

While many new city-dwellers came from farms and small towns, immigration remained the main source of urban growth. More than 17 million newcomers arrived from 1900 to 1917 (many passing through New York’s immigration center, Ellis Island), and most settled in cities (see Figure 21.1). As in the 1890s (see Chapter 19), the influx came mainly from southern and eastern Europe, but more than two hundred thousand Japanese arrived between 1900 and 1920. An estimated forty thousand Chinese entered in these years, despite the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (see Chapter 18), which remained in force until 1943. Thousands of Mexicans came as well, many seeking railroad work.

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Led by Massachusetts senator Henry Cabot Lodge, Congress passed literacy-test bills in 1896,
Progressivism and Social Control

1913, and 1915, only to see them vetoed. These measures would have excluded immigrants over sixteen years old who could not read either English or their native language, thus discriminating against persons lacking formal education. In 1917, Lodge's bill became law over President Woodrow Wilson's veto.

Anti-immigrant fears helped fuel the eugenics movement. Eugenics is the control of reproduction to alter a plant or animal species, and some U.S. eugenicists believed that human society could be improved by this means. Leading eugenicists urged immigration restriction to protect America from "inferior" genetic stock.

In *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916), Madison Grant, a prominent progressive and eugenics advocate, used bogus data to denounce immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, especially Jews. He also viewed African-Americans as inferior. Anticipating the program of Adolf Hitler in the 1930s (covered in Chapter 25), Grant called for racial segregation, immigration restriction, and the forced sterilization of the "unfit," including "worthless race types." The vogue of eugenics gave "scientific" respectability to racism and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Inspired by eugenics, many states legalized the sterilization of criminals, sex offenders, and persons adjudged mentally deficient. In the 1927 case *Buck v. Bell*, the Supreme Court upheld such laws.

Racism and Progressivism

Progressivism arose at a time of intense racism in America as well of major African-American population movements. These realities are crucial to an understanding of the movement.

In 1900, the nation's 10 million blacks lived mostly in the rural South as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. As devastating floods and the cotton boll weevil, which spread from Mexico in the 1890s, worsened their lot, many southern blacks left the land. By 1910, over 20 percent of blacks lived in cities, mostly in the South, but many in the North. Black men in the cities took jobs in factories, docks, and railroads or became carpenters, plasterers, or bricklayers. Many black women became domestic servants, seamstresses, or workers in laundries and tobacco factories. By 1910, 54 percent of America's black women held jobs.

Across the South, legally enforced racism peaked after 1900. Local "Jim Crow" laws segregated streetcars, schools, parks, and even cemeteries. The facilities for blacks, including the schools, were invariably inferior. Many southern cities imposed residential segregation by law until the Supreme Court restricted it in 1917. Most labor unions excluded black workers. Disfranchised and trapped in a cycle of poverty, poor education, and discrimination, southern blacks faced bleak prospects.

Fleeing such conditions, two hundred thousand blacks migrated north between 1890 and 1910. Wartime job opportunities drew still more in 1917–1918 (as discussed in Chapter 22), and by 1920, 1.4 million African-Americans lived in the North, mostly in cities. Here, too, racism worsened after 1890 as hard times and immigration heightened social tensions. (Immigrants, competing with blacks for jobs and housing, sometimes exhibited intense racial prejudice.) Segregation, though not imposed by law, was enforced by custom and sometimes by violence. Blacks lived in run-down "colored districts," attended dilapidated schools, and worked at the lowest-paying jobs.

Their ballots—usually cast for the party of Lincoln—brought little political influence. The only black politicians tolerated by Republican party
leaders distributed low-level patronage jobs and otherwise kept silent. African-Americans in the segregated army faced hostility from white soldiers and from nearby civilians. Even the movies preached racism. D. W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) disparaged blacks and glorified the Ku Klux Klan.

Smoldering racism sometimes exploded in violence. Anti-black rioters in Atlanta in 1906 murdered twenty-five blacks and burned many black homes. From 1900 to 1920, an average of about seventy-five lynchings occurred yearly. Blacks whose assertive behavior or economic aspirations angered whites were especially vulnerable to lynch mobs. Some lynchings involved incredible sadism, with large crowds on hand, victims’ bodies mutilated, and graphic photo postcards sold later. Authorities rarely intervened. At a 1916 lynching in Texas, the mayor warned the mob not to damage the hanging tree, on city property.

In such trying times, African Americans developed strong institutions. Black churches proved a bulwark of support. Working African-American mothers, drawing on strategies dating to slavery days, relied on relatives and neighbors for child care. A handful of black higher-education institutions carried on against heavy odds. John Hope, who became president of Atlanta’s Morehouse College in 1906, assembled a distinguished faculty, championed African-American education, and fought segregation. His sister Jane (Hope) Lyons was dean of women at Spelman College, another black institution in Atlanta.

The urban black community included black-owned insurance companies and banks, and a small elite of entrepreneurs, teachers, and ministers. Although major-league baseball excluded blacks, a thriving Negro League attracted many African-American fans.

In this racist age, progressives compiled a mixed racial record. Lillian Wald, director of a New York City settlement house, protested racial injustice. Muckraker Ray Stannard Baker documented racism in *Following the Color Line* (1908). Settlement-house worker Mary White Ovington helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (discussed in the next section) and wrote *Half a Man* (1911), about racism’s psychological toll.

But most progressives kept silent as blacks enduring lynching, disfranchisement, and discrimination. Viewing African-Americans, like immigrants, not as potential allies but as part of the problem, white progressives generally supported or tolerated segregated schools and housing; restrictions on black voting rights; strict moral oversight of black communities; and, at best, paternalistic efforts to “uplift” this supposedly backward and childlike people. Viciously racist southern politicians like Mississippi governor James K. Vardaman and South Carolina senator Ben Tillman also supported progressive reforms. Southern woman-suffrage leaders argued that enfranchising women would strengthen white supremacy.

At the national level, President Theodore Roosevelt’s racial record was marginally better than that of other politicians in this racist age. He appointed a black to head the Charleston customs house despite white opposition, and closed a Mississippi post office rather than yield to demands to dismiss the black postmistress. In a symbolically important gesture, he dined with Booker T. Washington at the White House. In 1906, however, he approved the dishonorable discharge of an entire regiment of black soldiers in Brownsville, Texas, because some members of the unit, goaded by racist taunts, had killed a local civilian. The “Brownsville Incident” incensed African Americans. (In 1972, after most of the men were dead, Congress reversed the dishonorable discharges.)

Under President Woodrow Wilson, racism became rampant in Washington. A southerner, Wilson displayed at best a patronizing attitude toward blacks, praised the racist movie *The Birth
in 1892 after a white mob destroyed her offices, Wells-Barnett mounted a national antilynching campaign, in contrast to Booker T. Washington’s public silence on the subject. Documenting the grim facts in *A Red Record* (1895), she toured the United States and Great Britain lecturing against lynching and other racial abuses.

Booker T. Washington’s principal black critic was **W. E. B. Du Bois** (1868–1963). After earning a Ph.D. in history from Harvard in 1895, Du Bois taught at Ohio’s Wilberforce College, the University of Pennsylvania, and Atlanta University. In *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), Du Bois rejected Washington’s call for patience and his exclusive emphasis on manual skills. Instead, Du Bois demanded full racial equality, including equal educational opportunities, and urged resistance to all forms of racism.

In 1905, under Du Bois’s leadership, blacks committed to battling racism held a conference at Niagara Falls. For the next few years, participants in the “Niagara Movement” met annually. Meanwhile, white reformers led by newspaper publisher Oswald Garrison Villard, grandson of abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, had also grown dissatisfied with Washington’s cautiousness. In 1909, Villard and his allies joined with Du Bois and other blacks from the Niagara Movement to form the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People** (NAACP). This new organization called for sustained activism, including legal challenges, to achieve political equality for blacks and
full integration into American life. Attracting the urban black middle class, the NAACP by 1914 had six thousand members in fifty branches.

**Revival of the Woman-Suffrage Movement**

As late as 1910, women could vote in only four western states: Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Idaho. But women’s active role in progressive reform movements revitalized the suffrage cause. A vigorous suffrage movement in Great Britain reverberated in America as well. Like progressivism itself, this revived campaign had grass roots origins. A 1915 suffrage campaign in New York State, though unsuccessful, underscored the new momentum.

Developments in California illustrate both the movement’s new momentum and its limitations. In the early 1900s, California’s women’s clubs shifted from their earlier focus on cultural and domestic themes to become a potent force for reform, addressing city-government and public-school issues. In the process, many women activists became convinced that full citizenship meant the right to vote. While working with labor leaders and male progressives, the woman-suffrage strategists also insisted on the unique role of “organized womanhood” in building a better society. Success came in 1911 when California voters approved woman suffrage.

But “organized womanhood” in California had its limits. Elite and middle-class women, mainly based in Los Angeles and San Francisco, led the campaign. Working-class and farm women played a small role, while African-American, Mexican-American, and Asian-American women were almost totally excluded.

New leaders translated the momentum in New York, California, and other states into a revitalized national movement. In 1900, Carrie Chapman Catt of Iowa succeeded Susan B. Anthony as president of the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA). Under Catt, NAWSA adopted the so-called Winning Plan: grass-roots organization with tight central coordination, focused on state-level campaigns.

Adopting techniques from the new urban consumer culture, suffragists ran newspaper ads; put up posters; waved banners with catchy slogans; organized parades in open cars; arranged photo opportunities for the media; and distributed fans and other items emblazoned with the suffrage message. Gradually, state after state fell into the suffrage column (see Map 21.1).

As in California (and like progressive organizations generally), NAWSAs’s membership remained largely white, native-born, and middle class. Few black, immigrant, or working-class women joined. Some upper-class women opposed the reform. Women already enjoyed behind-the-scenes influence, they argued; invading the male realm of electoral politics would tarnish their moral and spiritual role.

Not all suffragists accepted Catt’s strategy. Alice Paul, influenced by the British suffragists’ militant tactics, rejected NAWSA’s state-by-state approach. In 1913, Paul founded the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage, renamed the National Woman’s Party in 1916, to pressure Congress to enact a woman-suffrage constitutional amendment. Targeting “the party in power”—in this case, the Democrats—Paul and her followers in the 1916 election opposed President Woodrow Wilson and congressional Democrats who had failed to endorse a suffrage amendment. In 1917–1918, with the United States at war, the suffrage cause prevailed in New York and Michigan (see Map 21.1) and advanced toward final success (further discussed in Chapter 22).

**Enlarging “Woman’s Sphere”**

The suffrage cause did not exhaust women’s energies in the Progressive Era. Women’s clubs, settlement-house residents, and individual activists liked Florence Kelley, Alice Hamilton, and Ida Wells-Barnett promoted an array of reforms. These included the campaigns to bring playgrounds and day nurseries to the slums, abolish child labor, and ban unsafe foods and quack remedies. As Jane Addams observed, women’s concern for their own
families’ welfare could also draw them into political activism in an industrial age when hazards came from outside the home as well as inside.

Cultural assumptions about “woman’s sphere” weakened as women invaded many fronts. Katherine Bement Davis served as New York City’s commissioner of corrections. Emma Goldman crisscrossed the country lecturing on politics, feminism, and modern drama while coediting a radical monthly, Mother Earth. A vanguard of women in higher education included the chemist Ellen Richards of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Marion Talbot, first dean of women at the University of Chicago.

In Women and Economics (1898) and other works, Charlotte Perkins Gilman explored the cultural roots of gender roles and linked women’s subordinate status to their economic dependence on men. Confining women to the domestic sphere, Gilman argued, was an evolutionary throwback that had become outdated and inefficient. She advocated gender equality in the workplace; the collectivization of cooking and other domestic tasks; and state-run child-care centers. In the utopian novel Herland (1915), Gilman wittily critiqued patriarchal assumptions by injecting three naïve young men into an exclusively female society.

Some Progressive Era reformers challenged laws banning the distribution of contraceptives and birth-control information. Although countless women, particularly the poor, suffered exhaustion and ill health from frequent pregnancies, artificial contraception was widely denounced as immoral. In 1914, Margaret Sanger of New York, whose mother had died after bearing eleven children, began her crusade for birth control, a term she coined. When her journal The Woman Rebel faced prosecution on obscenity charges, Sanger fled to England. Returning in 1916, she opened the nation’s first birth-control clinic in Brooklyn; launched The Birth Control Review; and founded the American Birth Control League, forerunner of today’s Planned Parenthood Federation.

Meanwhile, another New Yorker, Mary Ware Dennett, had also emerged as an advocate of birth control and sex education. While Sanger championed direct action to promote the cause, Dennett urged lobbying efforts to change the law. Sanger insisted that only physicians should supply contraceptives; Dennett argued for widespread distribution. These differences, plus personal rivalries, produced divisions in the movement.

The birth-control and sex-education movements stand as important legacies of progressivism. At the time, however, conservatives and religious leaders bitterly opposed them. Dennett’s frank 1919 informational pamphlet for youth, The Sex Side of Life, was long banned as obscene. Not until 1965 did the Supreme Court fully legalize the dissemination of contraceptive materials and information.

Workers Organize; Socialism Advances

In this age of organization, labor unions continued to expand. In 1900–1920, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) grew from 625,000 to 4 million members. This still represented only about 20 percent of the industrial work force. With recent immigrants hungry for jobs, union activities posed risks. The boss could always fire an “agitator” and hire a newcomer. Judicial hostility also retarded unionization. In the 1908 Danbury Hatters case, for example, the Supreme Court ruled that boycotts in support of strikes were a “conspiracy in restraint of trade,” and thus a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. The AFL’s strength remained in the traditional skilled trades, not in the factories, mills, and sweatshops where most immigrants and women worked.

A few unions did try to reach these laborers. The International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU), founded in 1900 by immigrant workers in New York City’s needle trades, conducted successful strikes in 1909 and after the 1911 Triangle fire. The 1909 strike began when young Clara Lemlich jumped up as speechmaking droned on at a union meeting and passionately called for a strike. Some
Other workers, along with some middle-class Americans, turned to socialism. All socialists advocated an end to capitalism and public ownership of factories, utilities, railroads, and communications systems, but they differed on how to achieve these goals. The revolutionary ideology of German social theorist Karl Marx won a few converts, but the vision of democratic socialism achieved at the ballot box proved more appealing. In 1900 democratic socialists formed the Socialist Party of America (SPA). Members included Morris Hillquit, a New York City labor organizer; Victor Berger, leader of Milwaukee’s German socialists; and Eugene V. Debs, the Indiana labor leader. Debs, a popular orator, ran for president five times between 1900 and 1920. Many Greenwich Village cultural rebels embraced socialism and supported the radical magazine *The Masses*, founded in 1911.

Socialism’s high-water mark came around 1912 when SPA membership stood at 118,000. Debs won more than 900,000 votes for president that year (about 6 percent of the total), and the Socialists elected a congressman (Berger) and many municipal officials. The party published over three hundred newspapers, including foreign-languages papers targeting immigrants.

Picketers lost their jobs or endured police beatings, but the strikers did win higher wages and improved working conditions.

Another union that targeted the most exploited workers was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), nicknamed the Wobblies, founded in Chicago in 1905. The IWW’s leader was William “Big Bill” Haywood, a Utah-born miner who in 1905 was acquitted of complicity in the assassination of an antilabor former governor of Idaho. IWW membership peaked at around thirty thousand, mostly western miners, lumbermen, fruit pickers, and itinerant laborers. It captured the imagination of young cultural rebels in New York City’s Greenwich Village, where Haywood, a compelling orator, often visited.

The IWW led strikes of Nevada gold miners; Minnesota iron miners; and timber workers in Louisiana, Texas, and the Northwest. Its victory in a bitter 1912 textile strike in Massachusetts owed much to Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, a fiery Irish-American orator who publicized the cause by sending strikers’ children to sympathizers in New York City for temporary care. With an exaggerated reputation for violence, the IWW faced government harassment, especially during World War I, and by 1920 its strength was broken.

PROTESTING CHILD LABOR Carrying American flags and wearing banners proclaiming “Abolish Child Slavery” in English and Yiddish, these young marchers in a 1909 New York City May Day parade urged an end to the employment of children in factories and street occupations. (Library of Congress)
Woodrow Wilson, espousing a somewhat different reform vision, won the presidency in 1912.

Roosevelt’s Path to the White House

On September 6, 1901, in Buffalo, anarchist Leon Czolgosz shot William McKinley. At first recovery seemed likely, and Vice President Theodore Roosevelt continued a hiking trip in New York’s Adirondack Mountains. But on September 14, McKinley died. At age forty-two, Theodore Roosevelt became president.

Many Republican leaders shuddered at the thought of what one called “that damned cowboy” in the White House. Roosevelt did, indeed, display traits associated with the West. The son of an aristocratic New York family of Dutch origins, he overcame a sickly childhood through bodybuilding exercises and summers in Wyoming to become a model of physical fitness. When his young wife died in 1884, he stoically carried on. Two years on a Dakota ranch deepened his enthusiasm for what he termed “the strenuous life.”

Although his social peers scorned politics, Roosevelt served as a state assemblyman, New York
City police commissioner, and a U.S. civil-service commissioner. In 1898, fresh from his Cuban exploits, he was elected New York's governor. Two years later, the state's Republican boss, eager to be rid of him, arranged for Roosevelt's nomination as vice president.

As with everything he did, TR found the presidency energizing. "I have been President emphatically..." he boasted. "I believe in a strong executive." He enjoyed public life and loved the limelight. "When Theodore attends a wedding he wants to be the bride," his daughter observed, "and when he attends a funeral he wants to be the corpse." With his toothy grin, machine-gun speech, and amazing energy, he dominated the political landscape. When he refused to shoot a bear cub on a hunting trip, a shrewd toy maker marketed a cuddly new product, the Teddy Bear.

**Labor Disputes, Trustbusting, Railroad Regulation**

Events soon tested the new president's political skills. In May 1902, the United Mine Workers Union (UMW) called a strike to gain not only higher wages and shorter hours but also recognition as a union. The mine owners resisted, and in October, with winter looming, TR acted. Summoning the two sides to the White House and threatening to seize the mines, he forced them to accept arbitration. The arbitration commission granted the miners a 10 percent wage increase and reduced their working day from ten to nine hours.

TR's approach to labor disputes differed from that of his predecessors, who typically sided with management, sometimes using troops as strikebreakers. Though not consistently prolabor, he defended workers' right to organize. When a mine owner insisted that the miners' welfare should be left to those "whom God in his infinite wisdom has given control of the [country's] property interests," Roosevelt derided such "arrogant stupidity."

With his elite background, TR neither feared nor much liked business tycoons. The prospect of spending time with "big-money men," he once wrote, "fills me with frank horror." While believing that corporations contributed to national greatness, he also embraced the progressive conviction that they must be regulated. A strict moralist, he held corporations, like individuals, to a high standard.

Yet as a political realist, Roosevelt also understood that many Washington politicians abhorred his views—among them Senator Nelson Aldrich of Rhode Island, a wily defender of business interests.

Roosevelt's progressive impulses thus remained in tension with his grasp of power realities in capitalist America.

Another test came when J. P. Morgan in 1901 formed the United States Steel Company, the nation's first billion-dollar business. As public distrust of big corporations deepened, TR dashed to the head of the parade. His 1902 State of the Union message called for breaking up business monopolies, or "trustbusting." Roosevelt's attorney general soon sued the Northern Securities Company, a giant holding company recently created by Morgan and other tycoons to control railroading in the Northwest, for violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. On a speaking tour in the summer of 1902, TR called for a "square deal" for all Americans and denounced special treatment for capitalists. "We don't wish to destroy corporations," he said, "but we do wish to make them... serve the public good." In 1904, a divided Supreme Court ordered the Northern Securities Company dissolved.

The Roosevelt administration filed over forty antitrust lawsuits. In two key rulings in 1911, the Supreme Court ordered the breakup of the Standard Oil Company and the reorganization of the American Tobacco Company to make it less monopolistic.

As the 1904 election neared, Roosevelt made peace with Morgan and other business magnates. The GOP convention that nominated Roosevelt adopted a probusiness platform, stimulating $2 million in corporate contributions. The Democrats, meanwhile, eager to erase the taint of radicalism lingering from the 1890s, embraced the gold standard and nominated a conservative New York judge.

Winning easily, Roosevelt turned to a major goal: railroad regulation. He now saw corporate regulation as more effective than trust-busting, and this shift underlay the 1906 Hepburn Act. This law empowered the Interstate Commerce Commission to set maximum railroad rates and to examine railroads' financial records. It also curtailed the railroads' practice of distributing free passes to ministers and other shapers of public opinion.

The Hepburn Act displayed TR's political skills. In a key compromise with Senator Aldrich and other conservatives, he agreed to delay tariff reform in return for railroad regulation. Although failing to fully satisfy reformers, the Hepburn Act did expand the government's regulatory powers.

**Consumer Protection**

Of all progressive reforms, the campaign against unsafe food, drugs, and medicine proved especially popular. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) graphically described conditions in some meatpacking plants. Wrote Sinclair in one vivid passage, "[A]
Environmentalism Progressive-Style

Environmental concerns loomed large for Theodore Roosevelt. Describing conservation in his first State of the Union message as America’s “most vital internal question,” he highlighted an issue that still reverberates.

By 1900, decades of expansion and urban-industrial growth had taken a heavy toll on the land. In the West, mining and timber interests, farmers, ranchers, sheep growers, and preservationists advanced competing land-use claims. While business interests and boosters preached exploitation of the West’s resources, and agricultural groups sought government aid for irrigation projects, John Muir’s Sierra Club (founded in San Francisco in 1892) urged wilderness preservation. Under a law passed in 1891, Presidents Harrison and Cleveland had set aside some 35 million acres of public lands as national forests.

In the early twentieth century, amid spreading cities and factories, a wilderness vogue swept America. Popular writers evoked the tang of the campfire and the lure of the primitive. Summer camps, as well as the Boy Scouts (founded in 1910) and Girl Scouts (1912), gave city children a taste of wilderness living. Socially prominent easterners embraced the cause (see Going to the Source).
John Muir on America’s Parks and Forests

John Muir (1838–1914), born in Scotland and reared in Wisconsin, founded the Sierra Club, an early environmental organization, in San Francisco in 1892. Intimately familiar with America’s wilderness areas through his travels and camping trips, Muir became an eloquent advocate for their preservation. The extracts below are from a series of articles he first published in The Atlantic Monthly, and then gathered in book form in 1901.

The tendency nowadays to wander in wildernesses is delightful to see. Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and [forest] reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life. . . . This is fine and natural and full of promise. So also is the growing interest in the care and preservation of forests and wild places in general, and in the half wild parks and gardens of towns. . . . Few in these hot, dim, strenuous times are quite sane or free; choked with care like clocks full of dust, laboriously doing so much good and making so much money,—or so little,—they are no longer good for themselves. . . .

But the continent’s outer beauty is fast passing away, especially the plant part of it, the most destructible and most universally charming of all.

Only thirty years ago, the great Central Valley of California . . . was one bed of golden and purple flowers. Now it is ploughed and pastured out of existence, gone forever. . . .[T]he noble forests [of the Sierra mountains] . . . are sadly hacked and trampled, . . . the ground, once divinely beautiful, is desolate and repulsive, like a face ravaged by disease. This is true also of many other Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain valleys and forests. The same fate, sooner or later, is awaiting them all, unless awakening public opinion comes forward to stop it. . . .

The forests of America, however slighted by man, must have been a great delight to God; for they were the best He ever planted. The whole continent was a garden, and from the beginning it seemed to be favored above all the other wild parks and gardens of the globe. . . . American forests! the glory of the world! . . . [F]rom the east to the west, from the north to the south, they are rich beyond thought, immortal, immeasurable. . . .

So they appeared a few centuries ago. . . . The Indians with stone axes could do them no more harm than could gnawing beavers and browsing moose. . . . But when the steel axe of the white man rang out on the startled air their doom was sealed. . . . [Here Muir discusses late-19th century legislation that permitted unregulated logging and pasturing on western lands, with little government oversight or management.]

Land commissioners and Secretaries of the Interior have repeatedly called attention to this ruinous state of affairs, and asked Congress to enact the requisite legislation for reasonable reform. But, busied with tariffs, etc., Congress has given no heed to these or other appeals, and our forests, the most valuable and the most destructible of all the natural resources of the country, are being robbed and burned more rapidly than ever. . . .

Any fool can destroy trees. They cannot run away; and . . . few that fell trees plant them. . . . Through all the . . . eventful centuries . . . God has cared for these trees, saved them from drought, disease, avalanches, and a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods; but he cannot save them from fools—only Uncle Sam can do that.


QUESTIONS
1. In Muir’s view, what benefits can the citizens of urban-industrial America gain from the nation’s parks, forests, and wilderness areas?
2. Do you agree with Muir that preserving wilderness areas should be left entirely to the federal government? Why, or why not?

Go to the website at www.cengage.com/history/boyerenduring7e for additional primary sources on this period.
Between the wilderness enthusiasts and the developers stood government experts like Gifford Pinchot who saw the public domain as a resource to be managed wisely. Appointed by TR in 1905 to head the new U.S. Forest Service, Pinchot stressed not preservation but conservation—the planned use of forest lands for public and commercial purposes.

Wilderness advocates welcomed Pinchot's opposition to mindless exploitation, but worried that the multiple-use approach would despoil wilderness areas. “[T]rees are for human use,” conceded a Sierra Club member, but added that these uses included “the spiritual wealth of us all, as well as the material wealth of some.”

At heart Roosevelt was a preservationist. In 1903, he spent a blissful few days camping in Yosemite National Park with John Muir. He once compared “the destruction of a species” to the loss of “all the works of some great writer.” But TR the politician backed the conservationists’ call for planned development. He supported the National Reclamation Act (1902), which designated the money from public-land sales for water management in arid western regions, and set up the Reclamation Service to construct dams and irrigation projects.

This measure (also known as the Newlands Act for its sponsor, a Nevada congressman) ranks with the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 for promoting the settlement and productivity of a vast continental region—this one between the Rockies and the Pacific. Arizona’s Roosevelt Dam spurred the growth of Phoenix; dams and waterways in Idaho’s Snake River valley stimulated the production of potatoes and other commodities on hitherto barren acres. The law required farmers who benefited from these projects to repay the construction costs, creating a federal fund for further projects. The Newlands Act and other measures of these years transformed the West from a series of isolated “island settlements” into a thriving, interconnected region.

The competition for scarce water resources in the West sparked bitter political battles. The Los Angeles basin, for example, with 40 percent of California’s population in 1900, found itself with only 2 percent of the state’s surface water. In 1907, the city derailed a Reclamation Service project intended for the farmers of California’s Owens Valley, more than 230 miles to the north, and diverted the precious water to Los Angeles.

Meanwhile, President Roosevelt, embracing Pinchot’s multiple-use land-management program, set aside 200 million acres of public land (85 million of them in Alaska) as national forests, mineral reserves, and waterpower sites. But the national-forest provisions provoked corporate opposition, and in 1907 Congress revoked the president’s authority to create national forests in six timber-rich western states. Before signing the bill, Roosevelt designated 16 million more acres in the six states as national forests. TR also created fifty-three wildlife reserves, sixteen national monuments, and five new national parks.

Congress established the National Park Service in 1916 to manage them.

In 1908, Gifford Pinchot organized a White House conservation conference for the nation’s governors. There, experts discussed the utilitarian benefits of resource management. John Muir and other wilderness preservationists were not invited. But the struggle between wilderness purists and multiple-use advocates went on. Rallying support through magazine articles, preservationist groups and women’s organizations saved a large grove of California’s giant redwoods and a lovely stretch of the Maine coastline from logging.

The Sierra Club lost a battle to save the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park when Congress in 1913 approved a dam on the Tuolumne River to provide water and hydroelectric power for San Francisco, 150 miles away. (Other opponents of the dam were less interested in preserving Hetch Hetchy as a wilderness than in developing it for tourism.) While the preservationists lost this battle, the controversy focused attention on environmental issues, as Americans for the first time weighed the aesthetic implications of a major public-works project.

**Taft in the White House, 1909–1913**

Roosevelt had pledged not to seek a third term, and as the 1908 election approached, the Republican Party’s most conservative leaders regained control. They nominated TR’s choice, Secretary of War William Howard Taft, for president but selected a conservative vice-presidential nominee and adopted a deeply conservative platform. The Democrats, meanwhile, nominated William Jennings Bryan for a third time. The Democratic platform called for a lower tariff, denounced the trusts, and embraced the cause of labor.

With Roosevelt’s endorsement, Taft coasted to victory. But Bryan bested the Democrats’ 1904 vote total by 1.3 million, and progressive Republican state candidates outran the national ticket. Overall, the outcome suggested a lull in the reform movement, not its end.

Republican conservatives welcomed Roosevelt’s departure to hunt big game in Africa. Quipped
and Congressman George Norris of Nebraska, had challenged their party’s conservative congressional leadership. In 1909, the Insurgents and Taft fought a bruising battle over the tariff. Taft first backed the Insurgents’ call for a lower tariff. But when high-tariff advocates in Congress pushed through a measure raising duties on hundreds of items, Taft not only signed it but praised it extravagantly, infuriating the Insurgents.

The Insurgents next set their sights on House Speaker Joseph G. Cannon of Illinois, a reactionary Republican who prevented most reform bills from even reaching a vote. In March 1910, the Insurgents joined with the Democrats to trim Cannon’s power by removing him from the pivotal Rules Committee. This directly challenged Taft, who supported Cannon.

The so-called Ballinger-Pinchot controversy widened the rift. Taft’s interior secretary, Richard Ballinger, was a Seattle lawyer who favored unregulated private development of natural resources. In one of several decisions galling to conservationists, Ballinger in 1909 approved the sale of several million acres of coal-rich public lands in Alaska to a Seattle

Senator Aldrich, “Let every lion do its duty.” But even an ocean away, TR’s presence remained vivid. “When I am addressed as ‘Mr. President,’” Taft wrote him, “I turn to see whether you are not at my elbow.”

Taft, from a prominent Ohio political family, differed from TR in many respects. Whereas TR kept in fighting trim, Taft was obese. Roosevelt had installed a boxing ring in the White House; Taft preferred golf. TR loved speechmaking and battling evildoers; Taft disliked controversy. His happiest days would come later, as chief justice of the United States.

Pledged to support TR’s program, Taft backed the Mann-Elkins Act (1910), which beefed up the Interstate Commerce Commission’s regulatory authority and extended it to telephone and telegraph companies. Taft’s administration actually prosecuted more antitrust cases than had Roosevelt’s, but with little publicity. To the public, TR remained the mighty trustbuster.

The reform spotlight, meanwhile, shifted to Congress, where a group of reform-minded Republicans, nicknamed the Insurgents, including Senators La Follette and Albert Beveridge of Indiana and Congressman George Norris of Nebraska, had challenged their party’s conservative congressional leadership. In 1909, the Insurgents and Taft fought a bruising battle over the tariff. Taft first backed the Insurgents’ call for a lower tariff. But when high-tariff advocates in Congress pushed through a measure raising duties on hundreds of items, Taft not only signed it but praised it extravagantly, infuriating the Insurgents.

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business consortium that promptly resold it to J. P. Morgan and other financiers. When an Interior Department official protested, he was fired. In true muckraking style, he went public, blasting Ballinger in a Collier's magazine article. When Gifford Pinchot of the Forest Service also criticized Ballinger, he too got the ax. TR's supporters seethed.

Upon Roosevelt's return to America in June 1910, Pinchot met the boat. Openly breaking with Taft, Roosevelt campaigned for Insurgent candidates in that year's midterm elections. In a speech that alarmed conservatives, he endorsed the radical idea of reversing by popular vote judicial rulings that struck down reform laws favored by progressives. Borrowing a term from Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life*, TR proposed a “New Nationalism” that would powerfully engage the federal government in reform.

The Democrats captured the House in 1910, a coalition of Democrats and Insurgent Republicans controlled the Senate, and TR increasingly sounded like a presidential candidate.

### The Four-Way Election of 1912

In February 1912, Roosevelt announced his candidacy for the Republican nomination. But Taft wanted a second term. Roosevelt generally walloped Taft in the Republican state primaries and conventions. Taft controlled the party machinery, however, and the Republican convention in Chicago disqualified many of Roosevelt's hard-won delegates. Outraged, TR's backers walked out and formed the **Progressive Party**. What had been a general term for a broad reform movement now became the official name of a political party. Riding an emotional high, the cheering delegates nominated their hero, with California senator Hiram Johnson as his running mate.

“I feel fit as a bull moose,” Roosevelt trumpeted, giving his organization its nickname, the Bull Moose Party. The convention platform endorsed most reform causes of the day, including lower tariffs, woman suffrage, business regulation, the abolition of child labor, the eight-hour workday, workers' compensation, the direct primary, and the popular election of senators. The new party attracted a diverse following, united mainly by affection for Roosevelt.

Meanwhile, the reform spirit had also infused the Democratic Party. In New Jersey in 1910, voters had elected a political novice, Woodrow Wilson, as governor. A “Wilson for President” boom soon arose, and at the Democratic convention in Baltimore, Wilson won the nomination, defeating several established party leaders.

In the campaign, Taft more or less gave up, satisfied to have kept his party safe for conservatism. The Socialist candidate Eugene Debs proposed an end to capitalism and a socialized economic order. TR preached his New Nationalism: corporations must be regulated in the public interest, the welfare of workers and consumers safeguarded, and the environment protected.

Wilson, by contrast, called his political vision the “New Freedom.” Warning that corporations were choking off opportunity for ordinary Americans, he nostalgically evoked an era of small government, small businesses, and free competition. “The history of liberty,” he said, “is the history of the limitation of governmental power, not the increase of it.”

Roosevelt outpolled Taft by 630,000 votes, but the Republicans' split proved costly (see Map 21.2). Wilson easily won the presidency, and

![Map 21.2](image)

Woodrow Wilson and William Howard Taft Having just squared off in the 1912 election campaign, the two politicians share a light moment before Wilson’s inauguration on March 4, 1913. *Library of Congress*

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**TABLE 21.2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate (Party)</th>
<th>Electoral Vote</th>
<th>Popular Vote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wilson (Democrat)</td>
<td>435</td>
<td>6,296,547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roosevelt (Progressive)</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>4,118,571</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taft (Republican)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3,486,720</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debs (Socialist)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>900,672</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

National Progressivism, Phase I: Roosevelt and Taft, 1901–1913

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The 1912 election linked the Democrats firmly with reform (except on the issue of race)—a link that Franklin D. Roosevelt would strengthen in the 1930s. TR’s third-party campaign demonstrated the continued appeal of reform among many grass-roots Republicans.

### National Progressivism, Phase II: Woodrow Wilson, 1913–1917

The son and grandson of Presbyterian ministers, Wilson grew up in Virginia and Georgia in a churchly atmosphere that shaped his oratorical style and moral outlook. Despite a learning disability (probably dyslexia), he graduated from Princeton and earned a Ph.D. in political science from Johns Hopkins University. Joining Princeton’s faculty, he became its president in 1902. A rigid unwillingness to compromise cost him faculty support, and in 1910 Wilson resigned to enter politics. Three years later, he was president of the United States.

Impressive in bearing, with piercing gray eyes, Wilson was an eloquent orator. But the idealism that inspired people could also alienate them. At his best, he excelled at political dealmaking. “He can walk on dead leaves and make no more noise than a tiger,” declared one awed politician. But under pressure, he could retreat into a fortress of absolute certitude. As president, all these facets of his personality would come into play.

The progressive movement gained fresh momentum in Wilson’s first term (see Table 21.2). Under his leadership, Congress enacted an array of reform measures. Despite the nostalgia for simpler times in his campaign rhetoric, he proved ready to address the problems of the new corporate order.

### Tariff and Banking Reform

Lowering tariff rates—long a goal of southern and agrarian Democrats—heeded Wilson’s agenda. Many progressives agreed that high protective tariffs increased corporate profits at the public’s expense. Breaking a precedent dating from Thomas Jefferson’s presidency, Wilson appeared personally before Congress in April 1913 to read his tariff message. A low-tariff bill quickly passed the House but bogged down in the Senate. Showing his flair for drama, Wilson denounced the lobbyists flooding into Washington. His censure led to a Senate investigation of lobbyists and of senators who profited from high tariffs. Stung by the publicity, the Senate slashed tariff rates even more than the House had done. The Underwood-Simmons Tariff reduced rates an average of 15 percent.

Wilson again addressed Congress in June, this time calling for banking and currency reform. The nation’s banking system clearly needed overhauling. Totally decentralized, it lacked a strong central institution, a “lender of last resort” to help banks survive fiscal crises. A financial panic in 1907, when many banks had failed, remained a vivid memory.

No consensus existed on specifics, however. Many reformers wanted a publicly controlled central banking system. But the nation’s bankers, whose Senate spokesman was Nelson Aldrich, favored a privately controlled central bank similar to the Bank of England. The large banks of New York City advocated a strong central bank, preferably privately owned, so they could better compete with London banks in international finance. Others, including influential Virginia congressman Carter Glass, opposed any central banking authority, public or private.

No banking expert, Wilson did insist that the monetary system ultimately be publicly controlled. As the bargaining unfolded, Wilson’s behind-the-scenes role proved crucial. The result was the Federal Reserve Act (1913). This compromise measure created twelve regional Federal Reserve banks under mixed public/private control. Each could issue U.S. dollars, called Federal Reserve notes, to the banks in its district to make loans to corporations and individual borrowers. Overall control of the system was shared by the heads of the twelve regional banks and the members of a Washington-based Federal Reserve Board, appointed by the president for fourteen-year terms.

The Federal Reserve Act stands as Wilson’s greatest legislative achievement. Initially, the Federal Reserve Board’s authority was diffuse, but eventually “the Fed” grew into the strong central monetary institution it remains today, setting interest rates and adopting fiscal policies to prevent financial panics, promote economic growth, and combat inflation.

### Regulating Business; Aiding Workers and Farmers

In 1914, Wilson and Congress turned to that perennial progressive cause, business regulation. The two laws that resulted sought a common goal, but embodied different approaches.

“[Wilson] can walk on dead leaves and make no more noise than a tiger.”
The Federal Trade Commission Act took an administrative approach. This law created a new “watchdog” agency, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), with power to investigate violations of federal regulations, require regular reports from corporations, and issue cease-and-desist orders (subject to judicial review) when it found unfair methods of competition.

The Clayton Antitrust Act, by contrast, took a legal approach. It listed corporate activities that could lead to federal lawsuits. The Sherman Act of 1890, although outlawing business practices in
Other 1916 laws helped farmers. The Federal Farm Loan Act and the Federal Warehouse Act enabled farmers, using land or crops as collateral, to get low-interest federal loans. The Federal Highway Act, providing funds for highway programs, benefited not only the new automobile industry but also farmers plagued by bad roads.

Progressivism and the Constitution

The probusiness bias of the courts weakened a bit in the Progressive Era. In *Muller v. Oregon* (1908), the Supreme Court upheld an Oregon law limiting female laundry and factory workers to a ten-hour workday. Defending this law’s constitutionality, Boston attorney Louis Brandeis not only cited legal precedent, but offered economic, medical, and sociological evidence documenting the ways long hours harmed women workers. While making an exception based on gender, the Court continued to hold (as it had in the 1905 case *Lochner v. New York*) that in general such worker-protection laws violated the due-process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Nevertheless, *Muller v. Oregon* marked an advance in making the legal system more responsive to new social realities.

In 1916 (an election year), Wilson and congressional Democrats enacted three important worker-protection laws. The Keating-Owen Act barred from interstate commerce products manufactured by child labor. (This law was declared unconstitutional in 1918, as was a similar law enacted in 1919.) The Adamson Act established an eight-hour day for interstate railway workers. The Workmen’s Compensation Act provided accident and injury protection to federal workers. As we have seen, however, Wilson’s sympathies for the underdog stopped at the color line.

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National Progressivism, Phase II: Woodrow Wilson, 1913–1917 659

(ratified in 1913) empowered Congress to tax incomes, thus ending a long legal battle. A Civil War income tax had been phased out in 1872. Congress had again imposed an income tax as part of an 1894 tariff act, but the Supreme Court had promptly denounced it as “communistic” and ruled it unconstitutional. With the constitutional issue resolved, Congress in 1913 imposed a graduated federal income tax with a maximum rate of 7 percent on incomes over five hundred thousand dollars. Income-tax revenues helped pay for the government’s expanded regulatory duties under various progressive reform measures.

The Seventeenth Amendment (1913) provided for the direct election of U.S. senators by the voters, rather than their selection by state legislatures, as described in Article I of the Constitution. This reform, earlier advocated by the Populists, sought to make the Senate less subject to corporate influence and more responsive to the popular will.

The Eighteenth Amendment (1919) prohibited the manufacture, sale, or importation of “intoxicating liquors.” The Nineteenth (1920) granted women the vote. This remarkable wave of amendments underscored the Progressive Movement’s profound impact on the political landscape.

1916: Wilson Edges Out Hughes

As Wilson won renomination in 1916, the Republicans turned to Charles Evans Hughes, a Supreme Court justice and former New York governor. Progressive Party loyalists again courted Theodore Roosevelt. But TR, now obsessed with the war in Europe (covered in the next chapter), told them to endorse Hughes, which they did, effectively removing the Progressive Party from the contest.

With the Republicans more or less reunited, the election was extremely close. War-related issues loomed large. Wilson won the popular vote, but the Electoral College outcome remained in doubt for several weeks as the California tally seesawed back and forth. Ultimately, Wilson carried the state by fewer than four thousand votes and, with it, the election.

The progressive movement lost momentum as attention turned from reform to war. Final success for the prohibition and woman-suffrage campaigns came in 1919–1920, and Congress enacted a few reform measures in the 1920s. But, overall, the movement faded as America marched to war in 1917.

In 1916, Woodrow Wilson nominated Brandeis to the Supreme Court. Disapproving of Brandeis’s innovative approach to the law, the conservative American Bar Association protested, as did Republican congressional leaders and other prominent conservative voices. Anti-Semites opposed Brandeis because he was a Jew. But Wilson stood firm, and Brandeis won Senate confirmation.

These years also produced four Constitutional amendments, the first since 1870. The Sixteenth
CONCLUSION

What we call the progressive movement began as preachers, novelists, journalists, photographers, and painters highlighted appalling conditions in America’s cities and factories. Intellectuals offered ideas for reform through the creative use of government.

At the local and state level, reform-minded politicians, together with a host of reform organizations, worked to combat political corruption, make cities safer and more beautiful, regulate corporations, and improve conditions for workers.

Progressivism had its coercive side. Some reformers concentrated on regulating urban amusements and banning alcohol consumption. Racism and hostility to immigrants are part of the progressive legacy as well.

Progressivism crested as a national movement under presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. These years saw advances in corporate regulation, environmental conservation, banking reform, and consumer and worker protection. Constitutional amendments granted Congress the power to tax incomes and provided for the direct election of senators, woman suffrage, and national prohibition of alcohol—all aspects of the progressive impulse.

Along with specific laws, progressivism’s legacy included an enlarged view of government’s role in society. Progressives expanded the meaning of democracy and challenged the cynical view of government as a tool of the rich and powerful. They did not seek “big government” for its own sake. Rather, they recognized that in an industrial age of great cities and concentrated corporate power, government, too, must grow to serve the public interest and protect society’s more vulnerable members.

This ideal sometimes faltered in practice. Reform laws and regulatory agencies often fell short of their purpose as bureaucratic routine set in. Reforms designed to promote the public good sometimes mainly benefited special interests. Corporations
proved adept at manipulating the new regulatory state to their own advantage.

Still, the Progressive Era stands as a time when American politics seriously confronted the social upheavals caused by industrialization. It was also an era when Americans learned to think of government as an arena of possibility where public issues and social problems could be thrashed out. The next great reform movement, the New Deal of the 1930s, would draw on progressivism’s legacy.

KEY TERMS

“Muckrakers” (p. 635)    Carrie Chapman Catt (p. 646)
Robert La Follette (p. 638) Margaret Sanger (p. 647)
Anti-Saloon League (p. 641) Industrial Workers of the
Ida Wells-Barnett (p. 645) World (p. 648)
W. E. B. Du Bois (p. 645) Eugene V. Debs (p. 648)
National Association for the Theodore Roosevelt (p. 649)
Advancement of Colored Hepburn Act (p. 650)
People (p. 645) Pure Food and Drug Act (p. 651)

National Reclamation Act
(Newlands Act) (p. 653)
William Howard Taft (p. 653)
Progressive Party (p. 655)
Woodrow Wilson (p. 655)
Federal Reserve Act (p. 656)
Federal Trade Commission (p. 657)
Louis Brandeis (p. 658)

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE


Leon Fink, Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment (1997). Insightful exploration of the tensions between democratic theory and the Progressive Era focus on expertise and specialized knowledge.


Ann-Marie E. Szymbanski, Pathways to Prohibition: Radicals, Moderates, and Social Movement Outcomes (2003). An innovative study by a political scientist showing how the Anti-Saloon League used local campaigns to promote its larger national goal.