In the spring of 1903, I went to Kensington, Pennsylvania, where 75,000 textile workers were on strike. Of this number at least 10,000 were little children. The workers were striking for more pay and shorter hours. Every day little children came into Union Headquarters, some with their hands off, some with the thumb missing, some with their fingers off at the knuckle. They were stooped little things, round shouldered and skinny. Many of them were not over ten years of age.

We assembled a number of boys and girls one morning in Independence Park and from there we arranged to parade with banners to the court house where we would hold a meeting.

A great crowd gathered in the public square in front of the city hall. I put the little boys with their fingers off and hands crushed and maimed on a platform. I held up their mutilated hands and showed them to the crowd and made the statement that Philadelphia's mansions were built on the broken bones, the quivering hearts, and drooping heads of these children.

I [then] decided to go with the children to see President Roosevelt to ask him to have Congress pass a law prohibiting the exploitation of childhood. I thought that President Roosevelt might see these mill children and compare them with his own little ones spending the summer at the seashore at Oyster Bay.

Everywhere [en route] we had meetings, showing with little children the horrors of child labor... [In Princeton, New Jersey] a great crowd gathered, professors and students, and the people; and I told them that the rich robbed these little children of any education of the lowest order that they might send their sons and daughters to places of higher education....

[In New York City] I told an immense crowd of the horrors of child labor in the mills... and I showed them Gussie Rangnew, a little girl from whom all the childhood had gone. Her face was like an old woman's. Gussie packed stockings in a factory, eleven hours a day for a few cents a day.... [I said,] "Fifty years ago there was a cry against slavery and men gave up their lives to stop the selling of black children on the block. Today the white child is sold for two dollars a week to the manufacturers."
Women march in support of Mother Jones in Trinidad, Colorado. Dramatic tactics and careful organizing like those that marked this parade often helped secure reforms in the Progressive Era.
... We marched down to Oyster Bay but the president refused to see us and he would not answer my letters. But our march had done its work. We had drawn the attention of the nation to the crime of child labor. And while the strike of the textile workers in Kensington was lost and the children driven back to work, not long afterward the Pennsylvania legislature passed a child labor law that kept thousands of children home from the mills.


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The sweet-faced, white-haired "Mother" Jones was nearly seventy years old when she led the children's crusade" in 1903. Born Mary Harris in Ireland, she had survived famine, emigration, hard labor, and the horrible deaths of her husband and their four children. Indomitable, she had become a celebrated union organizer and powerful orator against what she saw as the economic injustices of America. In 1902, mill girls in Appalachia on strike against their dangerous working conditions had told a reporter, "Oh, we do wish Mother Jones would come and help us with our strike." The children, the reporter found, envisioned Mother Jones as "a sort of all-wise feminine providence who always turned up just in the nick of time." Another observer tried to explain Mother Jones's reception among workers: "Wherever she goes she enters into the lives of the toilers and becomes a part of them. She is indeed their mother in word and deed. She has earned the sweetest of all names honestly."

The journey of Mother Jones, with Gussie Rangnew and other maimed children, from Kensington, Pennsylvania, to Oyster Bay, New York, was thus just part of her legendary life journey. But it also illustrated critical features of life in the Progressive Era. Important movements challenged traditional relationships and attitudes—here involving working conditions, unregulated industrial development, concepts of opportunity and childhood itself—and often met strong resistance and only limited success. "Progressives" seeking change investigated problems, proposed solutions, organized their supporters, and attempted to mobilize public opinion—just as Mother Jones sought to do. And rather than rely only on traditional partisan politics, reformers adopted new political techniques, including lobbying and demonstrating as nonpartisan pressure groups. Reform work begun at the local and state levels—where the campaign against child labor had already met some success— inexorably moved to the national level as the federal government expanded its authority and became the focus of political interest. Finally, Mother Jones's march reveals the exceptional diversity of the progressive movement, for she and her followers were marching, in part, against the seemingly indifferent Theodore Roosevelt, perhaps the most prominent progressive.

The issue of child labor, then, did not define progressivism. Indeed, in a sense, there was no "progressive movement," for progressivism had no unifying organization, central leadership, or consensus on objectives. Instead, it represented the coalescing of different and sometimes even contradictory movements that sought changes in the nation's social, economic, and political life. But reformers did share certain convictions. They believed that industrialization and urbanization had produced serious social disorders, from city slums to corporate abuses.
They believed that new ideas and methods were required to correct these problems. In particular, they rejected the ideology of individualism in favor of broader concepts of social responsibility, and they sought to achieve social order through organization and efficiency. Finally, most progressives believed that government itself, as the organized agent of public responsibility, should address social and economic problems.

Other Americans resented the progressives' plans. The interaction among the reformers and the conflict with their opponents made the two decades before World War I a period of remarkable ferment and excitement. The progressives' achievements, and their failures, profoundly shaped America.
The Ferment of Reform

The diversity of progressivism reflected the diverse impulses of reform. Reformers responded to the tensions of industrialization and urbanization by formulating programs according to their own interests and priorities. Clergy and professors provided new ideas to guide remedial action. Journalists exposed corporate excesses and government corruption and stirred public demand for reform. Business leaders sought to curtail disorder through efficiency and regulation, while industrial workers struggled to improve the horrible conditions in which they worked and lived. Women organized to protect their families and homes from new threats and even to push beyond domestic issues. Nearly every movement for change encountered fierce opposition. But in raising new issues and proposing new ideas, progressives helped America grapple with the problems of industrial society. (See Overview, Major Progressive Organizations and Groups.)

The Context of Reform: Industrial and Urban Tensions

The origins of progressivism lay in the crises of the new urban-industrial order that emerged in the late nineteenth century. The severe depression and mass suffering of the 1890s, the labor violence and industrial armies, the political challenges of Populism and an obviously ineffective government shattered the complacency many middle-class Americans had felt about their nation and made them aware of social and economic inequities that rural and working-class families had long recognized. Many Americans began to question the validity of Social Darwinism and the laissez-faire policies that had justified unregulated industrial growth. They began to reconsider the responsibilities of government and, indeed, of themselves for social order and betterment.

By 1900, returning prosperity had eased the threat of major social violence, but the underlying problems intensified. Big business, which had disrupted traditional economic relationships in the late nineteenth century, suddenly became bigger in a series of mergers between 1897 and 1903, resulting in huge new business combinations. The formation in 1901 of the United States Steel Corporation, the world's largest firm, symbolized this development. Such gigantic corporations threatened to squeeze opportunities for small firms and workers, dominate markets, and raise social tensions. They also inspired calls for public control.

Industrial growth affected factory workers most directly. Working conditions were difficult and often dangerous. Most workers still toiled nine to ten hours a day; steelworkers and textile employees worked 12-hour shifts. Wages were minimal; an economist in 1905 calculated that 60 percent of all adult male breadwinners made less than a living wage. Family survival, then, often required women and children to work, often in the lowest paid, most exploited positions. Southern cotton mills employed children as young as 7; coal mines paid 12-year-old slate-pickers 39 cents for a ten-hour day. Poor ventilation, dangerous fumes, open machinery, and the absence of safety programs threatened not only workers' health but their lives as well. Such conditions were gruesomely illustrated in 1911, when a fire killed 146 workers, most of them young women, trapped inside the factory of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company in New York because management had locked the exits. The fire chief found "skeletons bending over sewing machines." The United States had the highest rate of industrial accidents in the world. Half a million workers were injured and 30,000 killed at work each year. These terrible conditions cried out for reform.

Other Americans saw additional social problems in the continuing flood of immigrants who were transforming America's cities. From 1900 to 1917, more than 14 million immigrants entered the United States. Most of the arrivals were so-called new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe, rather than the British, Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians who had arrived earlier. Several hundred thousand Japanese also arrived, primarily in California, as did increasing numbers of Mexicans. Crowding into urban slums, immigrants overwhelmed municipal sanitation, education, and fire protection services. One Russian described his new life as "all filth and sadness."

Many native-born Americans associated the immigrants with rampant urban crime and disease and with city bosses and government corruption. Ethnic prejudices


**OVERVIEW**

Major Progressive Organizations and Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Gospel movement</td>
<td>Urged churches and individuals to apply Christian ethics to social and economic problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muckrakers</td>
<td>Exposed business abuses, public corruption, and social evils through investigative journalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Settlement House movement</td>
<td>Attempted through social work and public advocacy to improve living and working conditions in urban immigrant communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Consumers' League (1898)</td>
<td>Monitored businesses to ensure decent working conditions and safe consumer products</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women’s Trade Union League (1903)</td>
<td>United workingwomen and their middle-class allies to promote unionization and social reform</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Child Labor Committee (1904)</td>
<td>Campaigned against child labor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Country Life movement</td>
<td>Attempted to modernize rural social and economic conditions according to urban-industrial standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>National American Woman Suffrage Association</td>
<td>Led the movement to give women the right to vote</td>
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<tr>
<td>Municipal reformers</td>
<td>Sought to change the activities and structure of urban government to promote efficiency and control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservationists</td>
<td>Favored efficient management and regulation of natural resources rather than uncontrolled development or preservation</td>
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abounded. In 1902, Woodrow Wilson, then president of Princeton University, declared that Italian and Polish immigrants had “neither skill nor energy, nor any initiative or quick intelligence.” Americans of the “Old Stock” often considered the predominantly Catholic and Jewish newcomers a threat to social stability and cultural identity and so demanded programs to reform either the urban environment or the immigrants themselves.

**Church and Campus**

Many groups, drawing from different traditions and inspirations, responded to these economic and social issues. Reform-minded Protestant ministers were especially influential, creating the Social Gospel movement, which sought to introduce religious ethics into industrial relations and appealed to churches to meet their social responsibilities. Washington Gladden, a Congregational minister in Columbus, Ohio, was one of the earliest Social Gospelers. Shocked in 1884 by a bloody strike crushed by wealthy members of his own congregation, Gladden began a ministry to working-class neighborhoods that most churches ignored. He endorsed unions and workers’ rights and proposed replacing a cruelly competitive wage system with profit sharing.

A more profound exponent of the Social Gospel was Walter Rauschenbusch, a Baptist minister who had served impoverished immigrants in New York’s slums. In his book *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), he argued that Christians should support social reform to alleviate poverty, slums, and labor exploitation. He attacked low wages for transforming workers “into lean, sallow, hopeless, stupid, and vicious young people, simply to enable some group of stockholders to earn 10 percent.” Such ideas were popularized by Charles Sheldon, a Kansas minister, whose book *In His Steps* sold 23 million copies and called on Americans to act in their daily lives as they believed Jesus Christ would in the same circumstances.

The Social Gospel was part of an emerging liberal movement in American religion. Scholars associated with this movement discredited the literal accuracy of the Bible and emphasized instead its general moral and ethical lessons. As modernists, they abandoned theological dogmatism for a greater tolerance of other faiths and became more interested in social problems. Liberal Protestantism had its Jewish and Catholic counterparts in Reform Judaism and liberal Catholicism, but the Social Gospel movement flowered mainly among Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and
Methodists. It climaxed in 1908 in the formation of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America. The council, representing 33 religious groups, adopted a program that endorsed welfare and regulatory legislation to achieve social justice. By linking reform with religion (as “applied Christianity,” in the words of Washington Gladden), the Social Gospel movement gave progressivism a powerful moral drive that affected much of American life.

The Social Gospel movement provided an ethical justification for government intervention to improve the social order. Scholars in the social sciences also gradually helped turn public attitudes in favor of reform by challenging the laissez-faire views of the Social Darwinists and traditional academicians. In *Applied Sociology* (1906), Lester Ward called for social progress through rational planning and government intervention rather than through unrestrained and unpredictable competition. Economists rejected laissez-faire principles in favor of state action to accomplish social evolution. Industrialization, declared economist Richard T. Ely, “has brought to the front a vast number of social problems whose solution is impossible without the united efforts of church, state, and science.”

**Muckrakers**

Journalists also spread reform ideas by developing a new form of investigative reporting known as muckraking. Technological innovations had recently made possible the mass circulation of magazines, and editors competed to attract an expanding urban readership. Samuel S. McClure sent his reporters to uncover political and corporate corruption for *McClure's Magazine*. Sensational exposés sold magazines, and soon *Cosmopolitan*, *Everybody's*, and other journals began publishing investigations of business abuses, dangerous working conditions, and the miseries of slum life.

Muckraking articles aroused indignant public demands for reform. Lincoln Steffens detailed the corrupt links between “respectable” businessmen and crooked urban politicians in a series of articles called “The Shame of the Cities.” Ida Tarbell revealed John D. Rockefeller's sordid construction of Standard Oil. Muckraking novels also appeared. *The Octopus* (1901), by Frank Norris, dramatized the Southern Pacific Railroad's stranglehold on California's farmers, and *The Jungle* (1906), by Upton Sinclair, exposed the nauseating conditions in Chicago's meatpacking industry. Surveying the work of such muckrakers in 1906, one newspaper declared, “The public conscience has been awakened and wrong-doers have been stricken with fear. But henceforth the work of exposing evil must be transformed into a steady-going, constructive effort to prevent it.”

**The Gospel of Efficiency**

Many progressive leaders believed that efficiency and expertise could control or resolve the disorder of industrial society. President Theodore Roosevelt praised the “gospel of efficiency.” Like many other progressives, he admired the success of corporations in applying management techniques to guide economic growth. Drawing from science and technology as well as from the model of the corporation, many progressives attempted to manage or direct changes efficiently. They used scientific methods to collect extensive data and relied on experts for analysis and recommendations. “Scientific management,” a concept often used interchangeably with “sound business management,” seemed the key to eliminating waste and inefficiency in government, society, and industry. Rural reformers thought that “scientific agriculture” could bring prosperity to the impoverished southern countryside; urban reformers believed that improvements in medical science and the professionalization of physicians through uniform state-licensing standards could eradicate the cities' wretched health problems.

Business leaders especially advocated efficiency, order, and organization. Industrialists were drawn to the ideas of Frederick Taylor, a proponent of scientific management, for cutting factory labor costs. Taylor proposed to increase worker efficiency through imposed work routines, speedups, and mechanization. Workers, Taylor insisted, should “do what they are told promptly and without asking questions… It is absolutely necessary for every man in our organization to become one of a train of gear wheels.” By assigning workers simple and repetitive tasks on machines, Taylorization made their skills expendable and enabled managers to control the production, pace of work, and hiring and firing of personnel. Stripped of their influence and poorly paid, factory workers shared little of the wealth generated by industrial expansion and scientific management. When labor complained, one business leader declared that unions failed “to appreciate the progressivism of the age.”

Sophisticated managers of big business saw some forms of government intervention as another way to promote order and efficiency. In particular, they favored regulations that could bring about safer and more stable conditions in society and the economy. Government regulations, they reasoned, could reassure potential consumers, open markets, mandate working conditions that smaller competitors could not provide, or impose systematic procedures that competitive pressures would otherwise undercut.

**Labor Demands Its Rights**

Industrial workers with different objectives also hastened the ferment of reform. Workers resisted the new rules of efficiency experts and called for improved wages and working conditions and reduced work hours. They and their middle-class sympathizers sought to achieve some of these goals through state intervention, demanding laws to compensate workers injured on the job, curb child labor, and regulate the employment of women. Sometimes they succeeded. After the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, for example, urban politicians with
working-class constituencies created the New York State Factory Commission and enacted dozens of laws dealing with fire hazards, machine safety, and wages and hours for women.

Workers also organized unions to improve their lot. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) claimed 4 million members by 1920, recruiting mainly skilled workers, particularly native-born white males. New unions organized the factories and sweatshops where most immigrants and women worked. Despite strong employer resistance, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (1900) and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (1914) organized the garment trades, developed programs for social and economic reforms, and led their members—mostly young Jewish and Italian women—in spectacular strikes. The “Uprising of the 20,000,” a 1909 strike in New York City, included months of massive rallies, determined picketing, and police repression. One observer marveled at the women strikers “emotional endurance, fearlessness, and entire willingness to face danger and suffering.”

A still more radical union tried to organize miners, lumberjacks, and Mexican and Japanese farm workers in the West, black dockworkers in the South, and immigrant factory hands in New England. Founded in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), whose members were known as “Wobblies,” used sit-down strikes, sit-ins, and mass rallies, tactics adopted by other industrial unions in the 1930s and the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. “Respectable people” considered the Wobblies violent revolutionaries, but most of the violence was committed against IWW members. Private employers and public officials used every method, legal and illegal, to destroy the Wobblies, but broader labor unrest nonetheless stimulated the reform impulse.

**Extending the Woman’s Sphere**

Women reformers and their organizations played a key role in progressivism. Women responded not merely to the human suffering caused by industrialization and urbanization but also to related changes in their own status and role. By the early twentieth century, more women than before were working outside the home—in the factories, mills, and sweatshops of the industrial economy and as clerks in stores and offices. In 1910, more than one-fourth of all workers were women, increasing numbers of them married. Their importance in the workforce and participation in unions and strikes challenged assumptions that women's “natural” role was to be a submissive housewife. Shrinking family size, labor-saving household equipment, and changing social expectations enabled middle-class women to find more time and opportunities to pursue activities outside the home. Better educated than previous generations, they also acquired interests, information, skills, and confidence relevant to a larger public setting.

The women’s clubs that had begun multiplying in the late nineteenth century became seedbeds of progressive ideas in the early twentieth century. Often founded for cultural purposes, women’s clubs soon adopted programs for social reform and gave their members a route to public influence. In 1914, an officer of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs proudly declared that every cause for social reform had “received a helpful hand from the clubwomen.”

Women also joined or created other organizations that pushed beyond the limits of traditional domesticity. “Woman’s place is in the home,” observed one progressive, but “no longer is the home encompassed by four walls.” By threatening healthy and happy homes, urban problems required that women become “social housekeepers” in the community. The National Congress of Mothers, organized in 1897, worried about crime and disease and championed kindergartens, foster-home programs, juvenile courts, and compulsory school attendance.

Led by the crusading Florence Kelley, the National Consumers’ League, founded in 1898, tried to protect both women wage earners and middle-class housewives by monitoring stores and factories to ensure decent working conditions and safe products. The Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL, founded in 1903) united working women and their self-styled middle-class “allies” to unionize women workers and eliminate sweatshop conditions. Its greatest success came in the 1909 garment workers’ strike, when the allies assisted strikers with relief funds, bail money, food supplies, and a public-relations campaign. This cooperation, declared one WTUL official, demonstrated the “sisterhood of women.”

The campaign against child labor attracted passionate support from many Americans. Here two girls, wearing “Abolish Child Slavery” banners in Yiddish and English, participate in a labor parade in New York City on May 1, 1909.
Although most progressive women stressed women’s special duties and responsibilities as social housekeepers, others began to demand women’s equal rights. In 1914, for example, critics of New York’s policy of dismissing women teachers who married formed a group called the Feminist Alliance and demanded “the removal of all social, political, economic and other discriminations which are based upon sex, and the award of all rights and duties in all fields on the basis of individual capacity alone.” With these new organizations and ideas, women gave important impetus and direction to the reform sentiments of the early twentieth century.

**Transatlantic Influences**

A major source of America’s progressive impulse lay outside its borders. European nations were already grappling with many of the problems that stemmed from industrialization and urbanization, and they provided guidance, examples, and possible solutions. Progressive reformers soon learned that America’s political, economic, and social structures made it necessary to modify, adapt, or even abandon these imported ideas, but their influence was obvious.

University study in Europe taught Americans the limits of their traditional laissez-faire attitudes and the possibilities of state action. Trained in Germany, the economist Richard T. Ely returned to academic posts in America to teach that government “is the agency through which we must work.” International influences were especially strong in the Social Gospel movement, symbolized by William T. Stead, a British social evangelist, whose idea of a “Civic Church” (a partnership of churches and reformers) captured great attention in the United States. Stead himself went to Chicago to promote “a broad and clear social programme,” and his book *If Christ Came to Chicago* helped inspire Sheldon’s *In His Steps*. Muckrakers not only exposed American problems but looked for foreign solutions. *McClure’s* sent Ray Stannard Baker to Europe in 1900 “to see why Germany is making such progress”; *Everybody’s* sent Charles E. Russell around the world in 1905 to describe the social advances in Europe and New Zealand. (See Global Connections, *The New Zealand Way*.)

Institutional connections also linked progressives with European reformers. The American Association for Labor Legislation, for example, was formed in 1905 as a offshoot of the International Association for Labor Legislation, founded in 1900 by French, Belgian, and German social economists. By 1912, American consumer activists, trade unionists, factory inspectors, and feminists regularly participated in international conferences on labor legislation, child welfare, social insurance, and housing reform and returned home with new ideas and strategies. State governments organized commissions to analyze European policies and agencies for lessons that might be applicable in the United States.

**Socialism**

The growing influence of socialist ideas also promoted the spirit of progressivism. Socialism never attracted a large following in the United States, but its criticism of the industrial economy gained increasing attention in the early twentieth century. American socialists condemned social and economic inequities, criticized limited government, and demanded public ownership of railroads, utilities, and communications. They also campaigned for tax reforms, better housing, factory inspections, and recreational facilities for all.

Muckrakers like Lincoln Steffens and Upton Sinclair were committed socialists, as were some Social Gospel ministers and labor leaders, but the most prominent socialist was the dynamic and engaging Eugene V. Debs. An Indiana labor leader who had converted to socialism while imprisoned for his role in the 1894 Pullman strike, Debs had evangelical energy and a generous spirit. He decried what he saw as the dehumanization produced by industrial capitalism and hoped for an egalitarian society where everyone would have the opportunity “to develop the best there is in him for his own good as well as the good of society.” Even a critical journalist concluded: “There was more of goodness in him than bubbled up in any other American.”

In 1901, Debs helped organize the Socialist Party of America; thereafter, he worked tirelessly to attract followers to a vision of socialism deeply rooted in American political and religious traditions. In the next decade, the party won many local elections, especially in Wisconsin and New York, where it drew support from German and Russian immigrants, and in Oklahoma, where it attracted poor tenant farmers.

Most progressives considered socialist ideas too drastic. Nevertheless, socialists contributed importantly to the reform ferment, not only by providing support for reform initiatives but often also by prompting progressives to push for changes to undercut increasingly attractive radical alternatives.

**Opponents of Reform**

Not all Americans supported progressive reforms, and many people regarded as progressives on some issues opposed change in other areas. Social Gospelers Rauschenbusch, for instance, opposed expanding women’s rights. More typically, opponents of reform held consistently traditional attitudes, like the conservatives who saw in feminism the orthodox bogies of “non-motherhood, free love, easy divorce, economic independence for all women, and other demoralizing and destructive theories.”

Social Gospelers themselves faced opposition from Protestant traditionalists emphasizing what they termed fundamental beliefs. Particularly strong among evangelical denominations with rural roots, these fundamentalists stressed personal salvation rather than social reform. “To attempt reform in the black depths of the great city,” said one, “would be as useless as trying to purify the ocean by pouring into it a few gallons of spring water.” Indeed, the urban and
The New Zealand Way

In its very name, the Progressive Era seems characteristically American, but its major developments were actually part of a worldwide phenomenon in which the peoples of many different nations promoted significant reforms, especially through the expansion of government responsibility and power. While Europeans provided an important range of reform ideas and models for Americans, it was often New Zealand, described by one muckraker as the “practical utopia of the South Seas,” that “blazed the world’s way” in social and economic reforms.

Small, rural, sparsely populated, only slightly industrialized, and still a colony of Great Britain, New Zealand might seem an unlikely candidate to lead progressive reform, but one American minister predicted in 1900 that “we fools Americans will go on for fifty or seventy-five years before we . . . undertake what they have already achieved in New Zealand.” New Zealanders were less driven by a desire to correct the evils of industrialization and urbanization—poverty, sweatshops, slums, labor exploitation, social conflict—than by a determination to prevent their emergence in the first place. As the charismatic Liberal leader Richard Seddon declared, “If we deal with [these problems] now, the curse of the older countries will never come to New Zealand.”

With the election of a Liberal government in 1891, New Zealand launched two decades of reform. It began the serious regulation of working conditions in 1891. In 1894 the General Assembly mandated regular factory inspections and established maximum hours, first for women and then for men, and prohibited child labor in factories. Other laws in the 1890s established minimum wages for women. The Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act of 1894 both encouraged unionization and required compulsory arbitration to deal with industrial disputes and assure social peace and progress. A model system of workers’ compensation was established in 1901.

New Zealand also pioneered in political and social reform. In 1893 it became the first country to establish woman suffrage in national elections. With one member of the parliament reasoning that “it is the duty of the State to make proper provision for the aged,” New Zealand initiated old age pensions in 1898. Early in the twentieth century it expanded state-funded, rather than contributory, pensions to cover widows with children, injured miners, and other groups. Beginning in 1905, it developed public housing programs, providing first rental housing for low-income families and then government loans for the purchase of homes. The Public Health Act of 1900 initiated a series of laws expanding government responsibility for proper sanitation, safe water, vaccinations, and the regulation of food and drugs.

New Zealand reformers urged the United States to follow the “New Zealand Way” and adopt these and other reforms, and many American progressives did look to that small country for guidance. “If a British colony dares to lead,” noted one progressive journalist, “surely it is not visionary to expect our Republic to fall in line.”

What economic, social, and political factors might explain why progressive reform emerged more slowly and less completely in the United States than in New Zealand?
Rockefeller's Colorado Fuel and Iron Company used armed guards and the state militia to shoot and burn striking workers and their families. The courts aided employers by issuing injunctions against strikes and prohibiting unions from using boycotts, one of their most effective weapons.

Progressives campaigning for government intervention and regulation also met stiff resistance. Many Americans objected to what they considered unwarranted interference in private economic matters. Again, the courts often supported these attitudes. In Lochner v. New York (1905), the Supreme Court even overturned a maximum-hours law on the grounds that it deprived employers and employees of their "freedom of contract." Progressives continually struggled against such opponents, and progressive achievements were limited by the persistence and influence of their adversaries.

Reforming Society
With their varied motives and objectives, progressives worked to transform society by improving living conditions, educational opportunities, family life, and social and industrial relations. (See Overview, Major Laws and Constitutional Amendments of the Progressive Era.) They sought what they called social justice, but their plans for social reform sometimes also smacked of social control. Organized women dominated the movement to reform society, but they were supported, depending on the goal, by Social Gospel ministers, social scientists, urban immigrants, labor unions, and even some conservatives eager to regulate personal behavior.

Settlement Houses and Urban Reform
The spearheads for social reform were settlement houses—community centers in urban immigrant neighborhoods. Reformers created 400 settlement houses, largely modeled after Hull House in Chicago, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams. Settlement houses often reflected the ideals of the Social Gospel. "A simple acceptance of Christ's message and methods," wrote Addams, "is what a settlement should stand for." Yet most were secular institutions, avoiding religion to gain the trust of Catholic and Jewish immigrants.

Most settlements were led and staffed primarily by middle-class young women, seeking to alleviate poverty and do useful professional work when most careers were closed to them. Settlement work did not immediately violate prescribed gender roles because it initially focused on the "woman's sphere"—family, education, domestic skills, and cultural "uplift." Thus settlement workers organized kindergartens and nurseries; taught classes in English, cooking, and personal hygiene; and held musical performances and poetry readings.

However, settlement workers soon saw that the root problem for immigrants was widespread poverty that required more than changes in individual behavior. Unlike earlier reformers, they regarded many of the evils of poverty as products of the social environment rather than of moral weakness. Slum dwellers, Addams sadly noted, suffered from "poisonous sewage, contaminated water, infant mortality, adulterated food, smoke-laden air, juvenile crime, and unwholesome crowding." Thus, settlement workers campaigned for stricter building codes to improve slums, better urban sanitation systems to enhance public health, public parks to revive the urban environment, and laws to protect women and children.

Their crusades for sanitation and housing reform demonstrated the impact that social reformers often had on urban life. Settlement worker Mary McDowell launched a campaign against the open garbage dumps and polluted sewers in Chicago. Drawing upon European innovations in waste disposal, organizing women's groups to hold cleanup campaigns, and using public pressure, McDowell became known as the "Garbage Lady" for her success in improving Chicago's massive environmental problems. Similarly, Lawrence Veiller was convinced by his work at the University Settlement in New York City that "the improvement of the homes of the people was the starting point for everything." Organizing pressure groups to promote tenement house reform, Veiller relied on settlement workers to investigate housing conditions, prepare public exhibits depicting rampant disease in congested slums, and agitate for improvements. Based on
**Major Laws and Constitutional Amendments of the Progressive Era**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legislation</th>
<th>Effect</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New York Tenement House Law (1901)</td>
<td>Established a model housing code for safety and sanitation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newlands Act (1902)</td>
<td>Provided for federal irrigation projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hepburn Act (1906)</td>
<td>Strengthened the Interstate Commerce Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pure Food and Drug Act (1906)</td>
<td>Regulated the production and sale of food and drug products</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meat Inspection Act (1906)</td>
<td>Authorized federal inspection of meat products</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sixteenth Amendment (1913)</td>
<td>Authorized a federal income tax</td>
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<tr>
<td>Seventeenth Amendment (1913)</td>
<td>Mandated the direct popular election of senators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Underwood-Simmons Tariff Act (1913)</td>
<td>Lowered tariff rates and levied the first regular federal income tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Reserve Act (1913)</td>
<td>Established the Federal Reserve System to supervise banking and provide a national currency</td>
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<tr>
<td>Federal Trade Commission Act (1914)</td>
<td>Established the FTC to oversee business activities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Harrison Act (1914)</td>
<td>Regulated the distribution and use of narcotics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Smith-Lever Act (1914)</td>
<td>Institutionalized the county agent system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keating-Owen Act (1916)</td>
<td>Indirectly prohibited child labor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eighteenth Amendment (1919)</td>
<td>Instituted prohibition</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nineteenth Amendment (1920)</td>
<td>Established woman suffrage</td>
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Their findings, Veiller drafted a new housing code limiting the size of tenements and requiring toilet facilities, ventilation, and fire protection. In 1901, the New York Tenement House Law became a model for other cities. To promote uniform building codes throughout the nation, the tireless Veiller founded the National Housing Association in 1910.

**Protective Legislation for Women and Children**

While settlement workers initially undertook private efforts to improve society, many reformers eventually concluded that only government intervention could achieve social justice. As Veiller insisted, it was "unquestionably the duty of the state" to enforce justice in the face of "greed on the part of those who desire to secure for themselves an undue profit."

The maiming and killing of children in industrial accidents made it "inevitable," Addams said, "that efforts to secure a child labor law should be our first venture into the field of state legislation." The National Child Labor Committee, organized in 1904, led the campaign to curtail child labor (see Figure 21-1). Reformers documented the problem with extensive

![Figure 21-1 Child Labor, 1870-1930](image)

Nearly 2 million children worked in factories and fields in 1900, twice as many as in 1870. Progressives' efforts to curtail child labor through laws for compulsory education and a minimum working age encountered resistance, and change came slowly.

Data Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census.
investigations and also benefited from the public outrage stirred by Mother Jones's "children crusade" and by socialist John Spargo's muck-raking book *The Bitter Cry of the Children* (1906). In 1900, most states had no minimum working age; by 1914, every state but one had such a law. Effective regulation, however, required national action, for many state laws were weak or poorly enforced.

Stiff resistance came from manufacturers who used child labor, conservatives who opposed government action as an intrusion into family life, and some poor parents who needed their children's income. But finally, Congress in 1912 established the Children's Bureau to investigate the welfare of children. Julia Lathrop, from Hull House, directed the bureau, the first government agency headed and staffed almost entirely by women. Lathrop and the bureau lobbied Congress and in 1916 saw the passage of the Keating-Owen Act, prohibiting the interstate shipment of goods manufactured by children. The law was weaker than the ones in many states and did not cover most child workers. Even so, the Supreme Court declared the measure unconstitutional.

Social reformers also lobbied for laws regulating the wages, hours, and working conditions of women and succeeded in having states from New York to Oregon pass maximum-hours legislation. After the Supreme Court upheld such laws in *Muller v. Oregon* (1908), thirty-nine states enacted new or stronger laws on women's maximum hours between 1909 and 1917. Eight midwestern and western states authorized commissions to set minimum wages for women, but few other states followed.

Protective legislation for women posed a troubling issue for reformers. In California, for example, middle-class clubwomen favored protective legislation on the grounds of women's presumed weakness. They wanted to preserve "California's potential motherhood." More radical progressives, as in the socialist-led Women's Trade Union League of Los Angeles, supported such legislation to help secure economic independence and equality in the labor market for women, increase the economic strength of the working class, and serve as a precedent for laws improving conditions for all workers.

Progressive Era lawmakers adopted the first viewpoint. They limited protective legislation to measures reflecting the belief that women needed paternalist protection, even by excluding them from certain occupations. Laws establishing a minimum wage for women, moreover, usually set a wage level below subsistence rates. Rather than assuring women's economic independence, then, protective legislation in practice reinforced women's subordinate place in the labor force.

Protective legislation for male workers scarcely existed. Both lawmakers and judges rebuffed demands for the protection of all workers while approving reforms that endorsed inequality. Only in very dangerous industries did male workers gain much protection, due primarily to the
relentless efforts of labor unions. The Western Federation of Miners persuaded several states that the extraordinary occupational hazards of mining—cave-ins, explosions, poisonous gases, silicosis and other diseases—required laws regulating hours and conditions of work.

Social justice reformers forged the beginnings of the welfare state in further legislation. Prompted by both humanitarian and paternalistic urgings, many states began in 1910 to provide “mothers’ pensions” to indigent widows with dependent children. Twenty-one states, led by Wisconsin in 1911, enacted workers’ compensation programs, ending the custom of holding workers themselves liable for injuries on the job.

Compared to the social insurance programs in Western Europe, however, these were feeble responses to the social consequences of industrialization. Proposals for health insurance, unemployment insurance, and old-age pension programs went nowhere. Business groups and other conservative interests curbed the movement toward state responsibility for social welfare.

**Reshaping Public Education**

Concerns about child labor overlapped with increasing attention to the public schools. The rapid influx of immigrants, as well as the demands of the new corporate workplace, generated interest in education not only as a means of advancement but also as a tool for assimilation and the training of future workers. And some intellectuals predicted that schools themselves could promote social progress and reform. The philosopher John Dewey sketched his plans for progressive education in *The School and Society* (1899).

Between 1880 and 1920, compulsory school attendance laws, kindergartens, age-graded elementary schools, professional training for teachers, vocational education, parent-teacher associations, and school nurses became standard elements in American education. School reformers believed these measures to be both educationally sound and important for countering slum environments. As Jacob Riis contended, the kindergartner would “rediscover the natural feelings that the tenement had smothered.” Others supported the kindergarten as “the earliest opportunity to catch the little Russian, the little Italian, the little German, Pole, Syrian, and the rest and begin to make good American citizens of them.” Further socialization came through vocational courses intended to instill discipline in poor students and prepare them to become productive adults.

Public education in the South lagged behind the North. Northern philanthropy and southern reformers brought some improvements after 1900, as per capita expenditures for education doubled, school terms were extended, and high schools spread across the region. But the South flitted away its limited resources on a segregated educational system that shortchanged both races. Black southerners particularly suffered, for the new programs increased the disparity in funding for white and black schools. South Carolina spent 12 times as much per white pupil as per black pupil. Booker T. Washington complained in 1906 that the educational reforms meant “almost nothing so far as the Negro schools are concerned.” As a northern critic observed, “To devise a school system which shall save the whites and not the blacks is a task of such delicacy that a few surviving reactionaries are willing to let both perish together.”

Racism also underlay important changes in the schooling of Native Americans. The earlier belief that education would promote equality and facilitate assimilation gave way to a conviction that Indians were inferior and fit merely for manual labor. Educators now rejected the notion of a common school education for Indian children in favor of manual training that would enable Indians to fill menial jobs and whites to “turn their attention to more intellectual employments.” Educators also denounced the practice of integrating Indian children into previously all-white classrooms, a policy begun in 1891. The superintendent of the Chilocco, Oklahoma, school believed that the new commitment to practical vocational education “solved the Indian problem,” but critics noted that limiting Indian children to a rudimentary and segregated education merely doomed them to the margins of American society.

**Challenging Gender Restrictions**

Most reformers held fairly conservative, moralistic views about sexuality and gender roles, but a small group of influential women sharply challenged conventional ideas about the social role of women. In critiquing women’s subordinate status in society and articulating the case for full female equality, these women began self-consciously to refer to themselves as “feminists.” A group of writers, journalists, and labor leaders led in arguing that women’s submergence in domesticity had to give way to opportunities for their personal freedom and self-development.

*In Women and Economics* (1898) and subsequent writings, Charlotte Perkins Gilman maintained that a communally organized society, with cooperative kitchens, nurseries, laundries, and housekeeping run by specialists, would free women from domestic drudgery and enable them to fulfill productive roles in the larger society while being happier wives and better mothers. Economic independence would permit women to “become humanly developed, civilized, and socialized.”

Emma Goldman, a Russian immigrant, was more of an activist in seeking women’s emancipation. A charismatic speaker (and celebrated anarchist), she delivered lectures attacking marriage as legalized prostitution rather than a partnership of independent...
equals and advocating birth control as a means to willing and
"healthy motherhood and happy child-life."

Margaret Sanger succeeded where Goldman could not in
establishing the modern birth control movement. A public-
health nurse and an IWW organizer, she soon made the
struggle for reproductive rights her personal crusade. Sanger
saw in New York's immigrant neighborhoods the plight of
poor women worn out from repeated pregnancies or injured
or dead from self-induced knitting-needle abortions. Despite
federal and state laws against contraceptives, Sanger began
promoting birth control as a way to avert such tragedies. In
1914, Sanger published a magazine, *Woman Rebel*, in which she
argued that "a woman's body belongs to herself alone. It does
not belong to the United States of America or any other gov-
ernment on the face of the earth." Prohibiting contraceptives
meant "enforced motherhood," Sanger declared. "Women
cannot be on an equal footing with men until they have full
and complete control over their reproductive function."

Sanger's crusade attracted support from many women's
and labor groups, but it also infuriated those who regarded
birth control as a threat to the family and morality. Indicted
for distributing information about contraception, Sanger
fled to Europe. Other women took up the cause, forming the
National Birth Control League in 1915 to campaign for
the repeal of laws restricting access to contraceptive in-
formation and devices. They had little immediate success, but
their cause would triumph in later generations.

**Reforming Country Life**

Although most progressives focused on the city, others
sought to reform rural life, both to modernize its social and
economic conditions and to integrate it more fully into the
larger society. They worked to improve rural health and san-
itation, to replace inefficient one-room schools with modern
consolidated ones under professional control, and to
extend new roads and communication services into the
countryside. To further these goals, President Theodore
Roosevelt created the Country Life Commission in 1908.
The country lifes had a broad program for social and eco-
nomic change, involving expanded government functions,
activist government agencies staffed by experts, and the
professionalization of rural social services.

Agricultural scientists, government officials, and many
business interests also sought to promote efficient, sci-
entific, and commercial agriculture. A key innovation was the
county-agent system: the U.S. Department of Agriculture
and business groups placed an agent in each county to teach
farmers new techniques and to encourage changes in the
rural social values that had previously spawned the Populist
radicalism that most progressives decried. Farmers, it was
hoped, would acquire materialistic values and learn "econ-
omy, order, . . . patriotism, and a score of other wholesome
lessons," as one progressive put it in 1910. The Smith-Lever
Act (1914) provided federal subsidies for county agents
throughout the country.

Few farmers, however, welcomed these efforts. As one
Illinois county agent said in 1915, "Farmers, as a whole, re-
sent exceedingly those forces which are at work with mis-
ionary intent trying to uplift them." School consolidation
meant the loss of community control of education; good
roads would raise taxes and chiefly benefit urban business
interests. Besides, most farmers believed that their prob-
lems stemmed not from rural life, but from industrial soci-
ety and its nefarious trusts, banks, and middlemen. Rural
Americans did not want their lives revolutionized.

Even so, rural people were drawn into the larger urban-
industrial society during the Progressive Era. Government
agencies, agricultural colleges, and railroads and banks
steadily tied farmers to urban markets. Telephones and rural
free delivery of mail lessened countryside isolation but
quicken the spread of city values. Improved roads and the
coming of the automobile eliminated many rural villages
and linked farm families directly with towns and cities.
Consolidated schools wiped out the social center of rural
neighborhoods and carried children out of their communi-
ties, eventually encouraging an ever-growing migration to the
city.

**Moral Crusades and Social Control**

Moral reform movements, although often appearing mis-
guided or unduly coercive today, generally reflected the
progressive hope to protect people in a debilitating envi-
ronment. In practice, however, these efforts to shape soci-
ety tended toward social control. Moreover, these efforts
often meshed with the restrictive attitudes that conserva-
tive Americans held about race, religion, immigration, and
morality. The result was widespread attempts to restrict
certain groups and control behavior.

**Controlling immigrants.** Many Americans wanted to
limit immigration for racist reasons. Nativist agitation in
California prompted the federal government to secure
restrictions on Japanese immigration in 1907. Californians,
including local progressives, also hoped to curtail the
migration of Mexicans. A Stanford University researcher
condemned Mexicans as an "undesirable class," and in 1916
the Los Angeles County supervisors urged the federal
government to deport Mexican immigrants.

Nationally, public debate focused on restricting the flow
of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Some
labor leaders believed that immigration held down wages
and impeded unionization; many sociologists thought it cre-
ated serious social problems; other Americans disliked the
newcomers on religious, cultural, or ethnic grounds. Many
backed their prejudice with a distorted interpretation of
Darwinism, labeling the Slavic and Mediterranean peoples
"inferior races." As early as 1894, nativists had organized the
Immigration Restriction League, which lobbied for a literacy
test for admission, sure that it would "bear most heavily
upon the Italians, Russians, Poles, Hungarians, Greeks, and
Asiatics, and very lightly or not at all upon English-speaking
immigrants or Germans, Scandinavians, and French." Congress enacted a literacy law in 1917.

Other nativists demanded the "Americanization" of immigrants already in the country. The Daughters of the American Revolution sought to inculcate loyalty, patriotism, and conservative values. Settlement workers and Social Gospelers promoted a gentler kind of Americanization through English classes and home mission campaigns, but they too attempted to transfer their own values to the newcomers. The most prominent advocate of Americanization was a stereotypical progressive, Frances Kellor. She studied social work at the University of Chicago, worked in New York settlement houses, wrote a muckraking exposé of employment agencies that exploited women, and became director of the New York Bureau of Immigration. In 1915, she helped organize the National Americanization Committee and increasingly emphasized destroying immigrants' old-country ties and imposing an American culture.

Prohibition. Closely linked to progressives' worries about immigrants was their campaign for prohibition. This movement engaged many of the progressives' basic impulses. Social workers saw liquor as a cause of crime, poverty, and family violence; employers blamed it for causing industrial accidents and inefficiency; Social Gospel ministers condemned the "spirit born of hell" because it impaired moral judgment and behavior. But also important was native-born Americans' fear of new immigrants—"the dangerous classes, who are readily dominated by the saloon." Many immigrants, in fact, viewed liquor and the neighborhood saloon as vital parts of daily life, and so prohibition became a focus of nativist hostility, cultural conflict, and Americanization pressures. In the South, racism also figured prominently. Alexander McKelvey, the southern secretary for the National Child Labor Committee, endorsed prohibition as a way to maintain social order and white supremacy. McKelvey himself drank, but he helped organize the North Carolina Anti-Saloon League to deny alcohol to African Americans, whom he considered naturally "criminal and degenerate."

Protestant fundamentalists also stoutly supported prohibition, working through the Anti-Saloon League, founded in 1893. Their nativism and anti-urban bias surfaced in demands for prohibition to prevent the nation's cities from lapsing into "raging mania, disorder, and anarchy." With most urban Catholics and Jews opposing prohibition—the Central Conference of American Rabbis denounced it as "born of fanaticism"—the Anti-Saloon League justified imposing its reform on city populations against their will: "Our nation can only be saved by turning the pure stream of country sentiment . . . to flush out the cesspools of cities and so save civilization from pollution."

With these varied motivations, prohibitionists campaigned for local and state laws against the manufacture and sale of alcohol. Beginning in 1907, they proved increasingly successful, especially in the South, Midwest, and Far West. By 1917, 26 states had prohibition laws. Congress then approved the Eighteenth Amendment, which made prohibition the law of the land by 1920.

Less controversial were drives to control or prohibit narcotics and cigarettes. Patent (over-the-counter) medicines commonly contained opium, heroin, and cocaine (popularly used for hay fever), and physicians known as "dope doctors" openly dispensed drugs to paying customers. Fears that addiction was spreading in "the fallen and lower classes"—and particularly among black people and immigrants—prompted Congress in 1914 to pass the Harrison Act, prohibiting the distribution and use of narcotics for other than medicinal purposes. The Anti-Cigarette League of America, organized in 1899 and having 300,000 members by 1901, led the charge against cigarettes. Aided by educators and physicians worried about the effect of cigarette smoking on mental and physical health and by business leaders concerned with industrial productivity and efficiency, these activists were encouraged when national organizations of Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians all condemned smoking in 1909. They persuaded many states to prohibit the manufacture, sale, or use of cigarettes, but such restrictive laws were rarely enforced and often repealed within a few years.

Suppressing prostitution. Reformers also sought to suppress the "social evil" of prostitution. Like crowded slums, sweatshops, and child labor, the "vice districts" where prostitution flourished were seen as part of the exploitation and disorder in the industrial cities. Women's low wages as factory workers and domestic servants explained some of the problem, as a muckraking article entitled "The Daughters of the Poor" pointed out. But nativism spurred public concern, as when New York officials insisted that most prostitutes and brothel owners, some of whom "have been seducers of defenseless women all their lives," were foreign-born.

The response to prostitution was typical of progressivism: investigation and exposure, a reliance upon experts—boards of health, medical groups, clergy—for recommendations, and enactment of new laws. The New York City Committee of Fifteen, organized in 1900, investigated prostitution in response to complaints of clergymen and concerns about links among vice districts, urban political machines, and corrupt business interests. Its report dismissed as ineffective the European attempts to regulate prostitution. The progressive solution emerged in state and municipal action abolishing the "red light" districts previously tolerated and in a federal law, the Mann Act of 1910, prohibiting the interstate transport of women "for immoral purposes."

California provided other examples of progressives' interest in social control and moral reform. The state assembly, described by the San Francisco Chronicle as "a legislature of progressive cranks," prohibited gambling, card-playing, and prizefighting. Los Angeles— influenced by the aptly
named Morals Efficiency League—banned premarital sex and introduced censorship of art. One critic in 1913 complained that the reformers’ “frenzy of virtue” made “Puritanism . . . the inflexible doctrine of Los Angeles.”

**For Whites Only?**

Racism permeated the Progressive Era. In the South, progressivism was built on black disfranchisement and segregation. Like most white southerners, progressives believed that racial control was necessary for social order and that it enabled reformers to address other social problems. Such reformers also invoked racism to gain popular support for their objectives. In Georgia, for instance, child labor reformers warned that while white children worked in the Piedmont textile mills, black children were going to school: child labor laws and compulsory school attendance laws were necessary to maintain white supremacy.

Governors Hoke Smith of Georgia and James Vardaman, “the White Chief,” of Mississippi typified the link between racism and reform in the South. These men supported progressive reforms but also viciously attacked black rights. Their racist demagoguery incited antiblack violence throughout the South. Antiblack race riots, like the one stirred up in Atlanta by Smith’s election in 1906, and lynching—defended on the floor of the U.S. Senate by a southern progressive—were part of the system of racial control that made the era a terrible time for African Americans.

Even in the North, race relations deteriorated. Civil rights laws went unenforced, restaurants and hotels excluded black customers, and schools were segregated. A reporter in Pennsylvania found that “this disposition to discriminate against Negroes has greatly increased within the past decade.” antiblack race riots exploded in New York in 1900 and in Springfield, Illinois—Abraham Lincoln’s hometown—in 1908.

**Black activism.** Although most white progressives promoted or accepted racial discrimination, and most black southerners had to adapt to it, black progressive activism was growing. Even in the South, some African Americans struggled to improve conditions. In Atlanta, for example, black women created progressive organizations and established settlement houses, kindergartens, and daycare centers. With public parks reserved for white people, the Gate City Day Nursery Association built and supervised a playground on the campus of Atlanta Baptist College. The women of the Neighborhood Union, organized in 1908, even challenged the discriminatory policies of Atlanta’s board of education, demanding equal facilities and appropriations for the city’s black schools. They had only limited success, but their efforts demonstrated a persisting commitment to reform society.

In the North, African Americans more openly criticized discrimination and rejected Booker T. Washington’s philosophy of accommodation. Ida Wells-Barnett, the crusading journalist who had fled the South for Chicago (see Chapter 17), became nationally prominent for her militant protests. She fought fiercely against racial injustices, especially school segregation, agitated for woman suffrage, and organized kindergartens and settlement houses for Chicago’s black migrants.

Still more important was W.E.B. Du Bois, who campaigned tirelessly against all forms of racial discrimination. In 1905, Du Bois and other black activists met in Niagara Falls, Canada, to make plans to promote political and economic equality. In 1910, this Niagara Movement joined with a small group of white reformers, including Jane Addams, to organize the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The NAACP sought to overthrow segregation and establish equal justice and educational opportunities. As its director of publicity and research, Du Bois launched an influential magazine, *The Crisis*, to shape public opinion. “Agitate,” he counseled, “protest, reveal the truth, and refuse to be silenced.” By 1918, the NAACP had 44,000 members in 165 branches. Two generations later, it would successfully challenge the racial discrimination that most early-twentieth-century white progressives either supported or tolerated.

![Image of Flanner House](image_url)

The Flanner House, a black settlement house in Indianapolis, provided the black community with many essential services, including health care. In addition to this baby clinic, pictured in 1918, it established a tuberculosis clinic at a time when the city’s public hospitals refused to treat black citizens afflicted with the disease.
Reforming Politics and Government

Progressives of all kinds worked to reform politics and government. But their political activism was motivated by different concerns, and they sometimes pursued competing objectives. Many wanted to change procedures and institutions to promote greater democracy and responsibility. Others hoped to improve the efficiency of government, eliminate corruption, or increase their own influence. All justified their objectives as necessary to adapt the political system to the nation's new needs.

Woman Suffrage

One of the most important achievements of the era was woman suffrage. The movement had begun in the mid-nineteenth century, but suffragists had been frustrated by the prevailing belief that women's proper sphere was the home and the family. Males dominated the public sphere, including voting. Woman suffrage, especially when championed as a step toward women's equality, seemed to challenge the natural order of society, and it generated much opposition, not only among men but among traditionalist-minded women as well.

Most women progressives viewed suffrage as the key issue of the period. Already taking active leadership in broad areas of public affairs—especially by confronting and publicizing social problems and then lobbying legislators and other officials to adopt their proposed solutions—they thought it ridiculous to be barred from the ballot box. But most of all, the vote meant power, both to convince politicians to take seriously their demands for social reforms and to participate fully in electoral as in other forms of politics, thereby advancing the status of women. (See American Views, The Need for Woman Suffrage.)

In the early twentieth century, suffragists began to outflank their traditional opposition. Under a new generation of leaders, such as Carrie Chapman Catt and Harriot Stanton Blatch, they adopted activist tactics, including parades, mass meetings, and “suffrage tours” by automobile. They also organized by political districts and attracted workingwomen and labor unions. By 1917, the National American Woman Suffrage Association had over 2 million members.

Carrying ballot boxes on a stretcher to ridicule American pretensions to a healthy democracy without woman suffrage, these activists marched in a dramatic parade in New York City in 1915. Combining such tactics with traditional appeals to patriotism and women’s moral purity, women suffragists eventually achieved the greatest democratic reform of the Progressive Era.

Some suffrage leaders adopted new arguments to gain more support. Rather than insisting on the justice of woman suffrage or emphasizing equal rights, they spoke of the special moral and maternal instincts women could bring to politics if allowed to vote. The suffrage movement now appeared less a radical, disruptive force than a vehicle for extending traditional female benevolence and service to society. Many suffragists, particularly among working-class groups, remained committed to the larger possibilities they saw in suffrage, but the new image of the movement increased public support by appealing to conventional views of women. Noted one Nebraska undergraduate, women students no longer feared “antagonizing the men or losing invitations to parties by being suffragists.”

Gradually, the suffrage movement began to prevail (see Map 21–1). In 1910, Washington became the first state since the mid-1890s to approve woman suffrage, followed by California in 1911 and Arizona, Kansas, and Oregon in 1912. Suffragists also mounted actions to revive interest in a federal constitutional amendment to grant women the vote, and women sent petitions and organized pilgrimages to Washington from across the country. By 1919, thirty-nine states had established full or partial woman suffrage, and Congress finally approved an amendment. Ratified by the states in 1920, the Nineteenth Amendment marked a critical advance in political democracy.
MAP 21–1 Woman Suffrage in the United States before the Ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment

Beginning with Wyoming in 1869, woman suffrage slowly gained acceptance in the West, but women in the South and much of the East got the ballot only when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920.

Electoral Reform

Other electoral reforms changed the election process and the meaning of political participation. The so-called Australian ballot adopted by most states during the 1890s provided for secret voting, freeing voters from intimidation and discouraging vote buying and other corruption. It also replaced the individual party tickets with an official ballot listing all candidates and distributed by public officials. The Australian ballot led to quiet, orderly elections. One Cincinnati editor, recalling the “howling mobs” and chaos at the polls in previous elections, declared, “The political bummer and thug has been relegated to the background ... while good citizenship ... has come to the front.”

Government responsibility for the ballot soon led to public regulation of other parts of the electoral process previously controlled by parties. Beginning with Mississippi in 1902, nearly every state provided for direct primaries to remove nominations from the boss-ridden caucus and convention system. Many states also reformed campaign practices.

These reforms weakened the influence of political parties. Their decreasing ability to mobilize voters was reflected in a steady decline in voter participation, from 79 percent in 1896 to 49 percent in 1920 (see Figure 20–1). These developments had ominous implications, for parties and voting had traditionally linked ordinary Americans to their government. As parties slowly contracted, nonpartisan organizations and pressure groups, promoting narrower objectives, gained influence. Thus the National Association of Manufacturers (1895) and the United States Chamber of Commerce (1912) lobbied for business interests; the National Farmers Union (1902), for commercial agriculture; the American Federation of Teachers (1916), for professional educators. Many of these special-interest groups represented the same middle- and upper-class interests that had led the attack on parties. Their organized lobbying would steadily give them greater influence over government and contribute to the declining popular belief in the value of voting or participation in politics.

Disenfranchisement more obviously undermined American democracy. In the South, Democrats—progressive and conservative alike—eliminated not only black voters but also many poor white voters from the electorate through
poll taxes, literacy tests, and other restrictions. Republicans in the North adopted educational or literacy tests in ten states, enacted strict registration laws, and gradually abolished the right of aliens to vote. These restrictions reflected both the progressives’ anti-immigrant prejudices and their obsessions with social control and with purifying politics and “improving” the electorate. Such electoral reforms reduced the political power of ethnic and working-class Americans, often stripping them of their political rights and means of influence.

Municipal Reform
Antiparty attitudes also affected progressives’ efforts to reform municipal government, which they regarded as inefficient and corrupt, at least partly because of the power of urban political machines. Muckrakers had exposed crooked alliances between city bosses and business leaders that resulted in wasteful or inadequate municipal services. In some cities, urban reformers attempted to break these alliances and improve conditions for those suffering most from municipal misrule. For example, in Toledo, Ohio, Samuel “Golden Rule” Jones won enough working-class votes to be elected mayor four times despite the hostility of both major parties. Serving from 1897 to 1904, Jones opened public playgrounds and kindergartens, established the eight-hour day for city workers, and improved public services. Influenced by the Social Gospel, he also provided free lodging for the homeless and gave his own salary to the poor. Other reforming mayors fought municipal corruption, limited the political influence of corporations, and championed public ownership of utilities.

More elitist progressives changed the structure of urban government by replacing ward elections, which could be controlled by the neighborhood-based city machine, with at-large elections. To win citywide elections required greater resources and therefore helped swell middle-class influence at the expense of the working class. So did nonpartisan elections, which reformers introduced to weaken party loyalties.

Urban reformers developed two other structural innovations: the city commission and the city manager. Both attempted to institutionalize efficient, businesslike government staffed by professional administrators. By 1920, hundreds of cities had adopted one of the new plans, which business groups often promoted. In Des Moines, for example, the president of the Commercial Club declared that “the professional politician must be ousted and in his place capable businessmen chosen to conduct the affairs of the city.” Again, reform often shifted political power from ethnic and working-class voters, represented however imperfectly by partisan elections, to smaller groups with greater resources.

Progressive State Government
Progressives also reshaped state government. Some tried to democratize the legislative process, regarding the legislature—the most important branch of state government in the nineteenth century—as ineffective and even corrupt, dominated by party bosses and corporate influences. The Missouri legislature reportedly “enacted such laws as the corporations paid for, and such others as were necessary to fool the people.” Populists had first raised such charges in the 1890s and proposed two novel solutions. The initiative enabled reformers to propose legislation directly to the electorate, bypassing an unresponsive legislature; the referendum permitted voters to approve or reject legislative measures. South Dakota Populists established the first system of “direct legislation” in 1898, and progressives adopted these innovations in 20 other states between 1902 and 1915.

Conservative opponents and procedural difficulties, however, often blocked these reforms or turned them against progressives. In the state of Washington in 1914, an initiative to establish an eight-hour workday was defeated by an electorate alarmed by conservative propaganda, and organized labor had to fight seven referendum measures that business interests promoted.

Other innovations also expanded the popular role in state government. The Seventeenth Amendment, ratified in 1913, provided for the election of U.S. senators directly by popular vote instead of by state legislatures. Beginning with Oregon in 1910, ten states adopted the recall, enabling voters to remove unsatisfactory public officials from office.

As state legislatures and party machines were curbed, dynamic governors such as Robert La Follette in Wisconsin, Charles Evans Hughes in New York, and Hiram Johnson in California pushed progressive programs into law. Elected governor in 1900, “Fighting Bob” La Follette turned Wisconsin into “the laboratory of democracy.” Overcoming fierce opposition from “stalwart” Republicans, La Follette established direct primaries, railroad regulation, the first state income tax, workers’ compensation, and other important measures before being elected to the U.S. Senate in 1906. La Follette also stressed efficiency and expertise. The Legislative Reference Bureau that he created to advise on public policy was staffed by university professors. He used regulatory commissions to oversee railroads, banks, and other interests. Most states followed suit, and expert commissions became an important feature of state government, gradually gaining authority at the expense of elected local officials.

“Experts” were presumed to be disinterested and therefore committed to the general welfare. In practice, however, regulators were subject to pressures from competing interest groups, and some commissions became captives of the very industries they were supposed to control. This irony was matched by the contradiction between the expansion of democracy through the initiative and referendum and the increasing reliance on nonelected professional experts to set and implement public policy. Such inconsistencies emphasize the complex mixture of ideas, objectives, and groups that were reshaping politics and government.
Theodore Roosevelt and the Progressive Presidency

When an anarchist assassinated William McKinley in 1901, Theodore Roosevelt entered the White House, and the progressive movement gained its most prominent leader. The son of a wealthy New York family, Roosevelt had pursued a career in Republican politics, serving as a New York legislator, U.S. civil service commissioner, and assistant secretary of the navy. After his exploits in the Spanish-American War (see chapter 22), he was elected governor of New York in 1898 and vice president in 1900. His public life was marked by an active private life, in which he both wrote works of history and obsessively pursued what he called the “strenuous life”: boxing, wrestling, hunting, rowing, even ranching and chasing rustlers in Dakota Territory.

Roosevelt’s frenetic activity, aggressive personality, and penchant for self-promotion worried some Americans. Mark Twain fretted that “Mr. Roosevelt is the Tom Sawyer of the political world of the twentieth century; always showing off; always hunting for a chance to show off; in his frenzied imagination the Great Republic is a vast Barnum circus with him for a clown and the whole world for audience.” But Roosevelt’s flamboyance and ambitions made him the most popular politician of the time, and enabled him to dramatize the issues of progressivism and to become the first modern president.

TR and the Modern Presidency

Roosevelt rejected the limited role of Gilded Age presidents. He believed that the president could do anything to meet national needs that the Constitution did not specifically prohibit. “Under this interpretation of executive power,” he later recalled, “I did and caused to be done many things not previously done. . . . I did not usurp power, but I did greatly broaden the use of executive power.” Indeed, the expansion of government power and its consolidation in the executive branch were among his most significant accomplishments.

Rather than defer to Congress, Roosevelt exerted legislative leadership. He spelled out his policy goals in more than 400 messages to Congress, sent drafts of bills to Capitol Hill, and intervened to win passage of “his” measures. Some members of Congress resented his “executive arrogance” and “dictatorship.” Roosevelt generally avoided direct challenges to the conservative Old Guard Republicans who controlled Congress, but his activities helped shift the balance of power within the national government.

Roosevelt also reorganized the executive branch. He believed in efficiency and expertise, which he attempted to institutionalize in special commissions and administrative procedures. To promote rational policymaking and public management, he staffed the expanding federal bureaucracy with able professionals. Here, too, he provoked opposition. The president, complained one Republican, was “trying to concentrate all power in Washington . . . and to govern the people by commissions and bureaus.”

Finally, Roosevelt encouraged the development of a personal presidency by exploiting the public’s interest in their exuberant young president. He established the first White House press room and skillfully handled the mass media. His endless and well-reported activities, from playing with his children in the White House to wrestling, hiking, and horseback riding with various notables, made him a celebrity, known as TR or Teddy. The publicity not only kept TR in the spotlight but also enabled him to mold public opinion.

Roosevelt and Labor

One sign of TR’s vigorous new approach to the presidency was his handling of a coal strike in 1902. Members of the United Mine Workers Union walked off their jobs, demanding higher wages, an eight-hour day, and recognition of their union. The mine owners closed the mines and waited for the union to collapse. But led by John Mitchell, the strikers held their ranks. The prospect of a freezing winter frightened consumers. Management’s stubborn arrogance
contrasted with the workers' orderly conduct and willingness to negotiate and hardened public opinion against the owners.

Although his legal advisers told him that the government had no authority to intervene, Roosevelt invited both the owners and the union leaders to the White House and declared that the national interest made government action necessary. Mitchell agreed to negotiate with the owners or to accept an arbitration commission appointed by the president. The owners, however, refused even to speak to the miners and demanded that Roosevelt use the army to break the union, as Cleveland had done in the Pullman strike in 1894.

Roosevelt was not a champion of labor, and he favored shooting the Pullman strikers. But as president, he believed his role was to mediate social conflict for the public good. Furious with the owners' "arrogant stupidity" and "insulting" attitude toward the presidency, Roosevelt announced that he would use the army to seize and operate the mines, not to crush the union. Questioned about the constitutionality of such action, Roosevelt bellowed, "To hell with the Constitution when the people want coal." Reluctantly, the owners accepted the arbitration commission they had previously rejected. The commission gave the miners a 10 percent wage increase and a nine-hour day, but not union recognition, and permitted the owners to raise coal prices by 10 percent. Roosevelt described his intervention as simply giving both labor and management a "square deal." It also set important precedents for an active government role in labor disputes and a strong president acting as a steward of the public.

Managing Natural Resources

Federal land policy had helped create farms and develop transportation, but it had also ceded to speculators and business interests much of the nation's forests, mineral deposits, water power sites, and grazing lands. Reckless exploitation of these resources alarmed a new generation that believed the public welfare required the conservation of natural resources through efficient and scientific management. Conservationists achieved early victories in the Forest Reserve Act (1891) and the Forest Management Act (1897), which authorized the federal government to withdraw timberlands from development and to regulate grazing, lumbering, and hydroelectric sites in the forests (see Map 21-2).

Roosevelt built on these beginnings and on his friendship with Gifford Pinchot to make conservation a major focus of his presidency. Pinchot had been trained in French and German scientific forestry practices. Appointed in 1898 to head the new Division of Forestry (renamed the Forest Service in 1905), he brought rational management and regulation to resource development. With his advice, TR used presidential authority to triple the size of the forest reserves to 150 million acres, set aside another 80 million acres valuable for minerals and petroleum, and establish dozens of wildlife refuges. In 1908, Roosevelt held a White House conference of state and federal officials that led to the creation of the National Conservation Commission, 41 state conservation commissions, and widespread public support for the conservation movement.

Not everyone, of course, agreed with TR's conservationist policies. Some favored preservation, hoping to set aside land as permanent wilderness, whereas Roosevelt favored a scientific and efficient rather than uncontrolled use of resources. Pinchot declared, "Wilderness is waste." Preservationists won some victories, saving a stand of California's giant redwoods and helping create the National Park Service in 1916, but more Americans favored the utilitarian emphasis of the early conservationists.

Other interests opposed conservation completely. While some of the larger timber and mineral companies supported conservation as a way to guarantee long-run profits, smaller western entrepreneurs often cared only about quick returns. Many westerners, moreover, resented having easterners make key decisions about western growth and saw conservation as a perpetuation of this colonial subservience. Many ranchers refused to pay federal grazing fees. Colorado arsonists set forest fires to protest the creation of forest reserves.

But westerners were happy to take federal money for expensive irrigation projects that private capital would not underwrite. They favored the 1902 National Reclamation Act, which established what became the Bureau of Reclamation. Its engineers were to construct dams, reservoirs, and irrigation canals, and the government was to sell the irrigated lands in tracts no larger than 160 acres. With massive dams and networks of irrigation canals, it reclaimed fertile valleys from the desert, but by not enforcing the 160-acre limitation it helped create powerful corporate farms in the West.

Westerners also welcomed Roosevelt's conservationist emphasis on rational development when it restricted Indian control of land and resources. He favored policies breaking up many reservations to open the land to whites for "efficient" development and diverting Indian waters to growing cities like Phoenix. Tribal protests were ignored.

Corporate Regulation

Nothing symbolized Roosevelt's active presidency better than his popular reputation as a "trust buster." TR regarded the formation of large business combinations favorably, but he realized he could not ignore the public anxiety about corporate power. Business leaders and Old Guard conservatives opposed any government intervention in the large trusts, but Roosevelt knew better. "You have no conception of the revolt that would be caused if I did nothing," he said privately. To satisfy popular clamor, ensure social stability, and still retain the economic advantages of big modern corporations, TR proposed to "develop an orderly system, and such a system can only come through the gradually exercised right of efficient
government control.” Rather than invoking “the foolish antitrust law,” he favored government regulation to prevent corporate abuses and defend the public interest. “Misconduct,” not size, was the issue.

But Roosevelt did file lawsuits against some “bad trusts,” including one against the Northern Securities Company, a holding company organized by J. P. Morgan to control the railroad network of the Northwest. For TR, this suit was an assertion of government power that reassured a worried public and encouraged corporate responsibility. In 1904, the Supreme Court ordered the dissolution of the Northern Securities Company. Ultimately, Roosevelt brought 44 antitrust suits against business combinations, but except for a few like Standard Oil, he avoided the giant firms. Many of the cases had inconclusive outcomes, but Roosevelt was more interested in establishing a regulatory role for government than in breaking up big businesses.

Elected president in his own right in 1904 over the colorless and conservative Democratic candidate, Judge Alton B. Parker, Roosevelt responded to the growing popular demand for reform by pushing further toward a regulatory government. He proposed legislation “to work out methods of controlling the big corporations without paralyzing the energies of the business community.” In 1906, Congress passed the Hepburn Act, the Pure Food and Drug Act, and the Meat Inspection Act. All three were compromises between reformers seeking serious government control of the industries involved and political defenders and lobbyists of the industries themselves.

The Hepburn Act authorized the Interstate Commerce Commission to set maximum railroad rates. Although a weaker law than many progressives had wanted, it marked the first time the federal government gained the power to set rules for a private enterprise. The two other laws aimed...
at consumer protection in food and drugs. In part, this legislation reflected public demand, but many business leaders also supported government regulation, convinced that it would expand their markets by certifying the quality of their products and drive their smaller competitors out of business. Thus the laws extended government supervision and regulation over business to protect the public health and safety, but they also served some corporate purposes.

Despite the compromises and weaknesses in the three laws, TR contended that they marked “a noteworthy advance in the policy of securing federal supervision and control over corporations.” In 1907 and 1908, he pushed for an eight-hour workday, stock market regulation, and inheritance and income taxes. Republican conservatives in Congress blocked such reforms, and tensions increased between the progressive and conservative wings of the party. Old Guard Republicans thought Roosevelt had extended government powers dangerously, but in fact his accomplishments had been relatively modest because of his need to compromise in Congress. As La Follette noted, Roosevelt’s “cannonading filled the air with noise and smoke, which confused and obscured the line of action, but, when the battle cloud drifted by and the quiet was restored, it was always a matter of surprise that so little had really been accomplished.”

Taft and the Insurgents
TR handpicked his successor as president: a loyal lieutenant, William Howard Taft. Taft had been a federal judge, governor-general of the Philippines, and secretary of war. Later he would serve as chief justice of the United States. But if Roosevelt thought that Taft would be a successful president, continuing his policies and holding the Republican Party together, he was wrong. Taft’s election in 1908, over Democrat William Jennings Bryan in his third presidential campaign, led to a Republican political disaster.

Taft did preside over important progressive achievements. His administration pursued a more active and successful antitrust program than Roosevelt’s. He supported the Mann-Elkins Act (1910), which extended the ICC’s jurisdiction to telephone and telegraph companies. Taft set aside more public forest lands and oil reserves than Roosevelt had. He also supported a constitutional amendment authorizing an income tax, which went into effect in 1913 under the Sixteenth Amendment. One of the most important accomplishments of the Progressive Era, the income tax would provide the means for the government to expand its activities and responsibilities.

Nevertheless, Taft soon alienated progressives and floundered into a political morass. His problems were twofold. First, the Republicans were divided. Midwestern reform Republicans, led by La Follette, clashed with conservative Republicans, led by Senator Nelson Aldrich of Rhode Island. Second, Taft was politically inept. Even his wife complained of his “unfortunate shortcoming of not knowing much and of caring less about the way the game of politics is played.” He was unable to mediate between the two Republican factions, and the party split apart.

Reformers wanted to restrict the power of the speaker of the House, “Uncle Joe” Cannon, a reactionary who systematically blocked progressive measures and loudly declared, “I am goddamned tired of listening to all this babble of reform.” After seeming to promise support, Taft backed down when conservatives threatened to defeat important legislation. The insurgents in Congress eventually restricted the speaker’s powers, but they never forgave what they saw as Taft’s betrayal. The tariff also alienated progressives from Taft. He had campaigned in 1908 for a lower tariff to curb inflation, but when they introduced tariff reform legislation, the president failed to support them, and Aldrich’s Senate committee added 847 amendments, many of which raised tariff rates. Taft justified his inaction as avoiding presidential interference with congressional business, but this position clashed with TR’s example and the reformers’ expectations. Progressives concluded that Taft had sided with the Old Guard against real change.

This perception solidified when Taft stumbled into a controversy over conservation. Gifford Pinchot had become embroiled in a complex struggle with Richard Ballinger, Taft’s secretary of the interior. Ballinger, who was closely tied to western mining and lumbering interests, favored private development of public lands. When Pinchot challenged Ballinger’s role in a questionable sale of public coal lands in Alaska to a J. P. Morgan syndicate, Taft upheld Ballinger and fired Pinchot. Progressives concluded that Taft had repudiated Roosevelt’s conservation policies.

The progressives determined to replace Taft, whom they now saw as an obstacle to reform. In 1911, the National Progressive League organized to champion La Follette for the Republican nomination in 1912. Roosevelt rejected an appeal for support, convinced that a challenge to the incumbent president was both doomed and divisive. Besides, his own position was closer to Taft’s than to what he called “the La Follette type of fool radicalism.” But Taft’s political blunders increasingly angered Roosevelt. Condemning Taft as “disloyal to our past friendship,” TR began to campaign for the Republican nomination himself. In 13 state primaries, he won 238 delegates, to only 46 for Taft. But most states did not then have primaries; as a result, Taft was able to dominate the Republican convention and win renomination. Roosevelt’s forces formed a third party—the Progressive Party—and nominated the former president. The Republican split almost guaranteed victory for the Democratic nominee, Woodrow Wilson.

Woodrow Wilson and Progressive Reform
The pressures for reform called forth many new leaders. The one who would preside over progressivism’s culmination, and ultimately its collapse, was Woodrow Wilson.
Elected president in 1912 and 1916, he mediated among differing progressive views to achieve a strong reform program, enlarge the power of the executive branch, and make the White House the center of national politics.

The Election of 1912
Despite the prominence of Roosevelt and La Follette, progressivism was not simply a Republican phenomenon. In Congress, Democrats more consistently supported reform measures than did Republicans, and the Democratic leader William Jennings Bryan surpassed Roosevelt as a persistent advocate of significant reform. As the Republicans quarreled during Taft’s administration, Democrats pushed progressive remedies and achieved major victories in the state and congressional elections of 1910. To improve the party’s chances in 1912, Bryan announced that he would step aside. The Democratic spotlight shifted to the governor of New Jersey, Woodrow Wilson.

Wilson combined public eloquence with a cold personality; he balanced a self-righteousness that led to stubborn inflexibility with an intense ambition that permitted the most expedient compromises. Wilson first entered public life as a conservative, steeped in the limited-government traditions of his native South. As president of Princeton University, beginning in 1902, he became a prominent representative of middle-class respectability and conservative causes. In 1910, New Jersey’s Democratic bosses selected him for governor to head off the progressives. But once in office, Wilson championed popular reforms and immediately began to campaign as a progressive for the party’s 1912 presidential nomination.

Wilson’s progressivism differed from that of Roosevelt in 1912. TR emphasized a strong government to promote economic and social order. He defended big business as inevitable and healthy provided that government control ensured that it would benefit the entire nation. Roosevelt called this program the New Nationalism, reflecting his belief in a powerful state and a national interest. He also supported demands for social welfare, including workers’ compensation and the abolition of child labor.

Wilson was horrified by Roosevelt’s vision. His New Freedom program rejected what he called TR’s “regulated monopoly.” Wilson wanted “regulated competition,” with the government’s role limited to breaking up monopolies through antitrust action and preventing artificial barriers like tariffs from blocking free enterprise. Wilson opposed social welfare legislation as paternalistic, reaching beyond the proper scope of the federal government, which he hoped to minimize. (This position, shot back the alarmed Roosevelt, meant the repeal of “every law for the promotion of social and industrial justice.”)

Roosevelt’s endorsement of social legislation attracted many women into political action. As Jane Addams observed, “their long concern for the human wreckage of industry has come to be considered politics.” The Progressive Party also endorsed woman suffrage, accepted women as convention delegates, and pledged to give women equal representation on party committees. The New York Times exaggerated in claiming that the 1912 campaign had become “feminized,” but certainly women activists welcomed the opportunity of participating “in party affairs before the vote is won” and thereby “answering forcibly many of the objections to the vote” for women.

Despite his personal popularity, however, TR was unable to add progressive Democrats to the Republicans who followed him into the Progressive Party, and thus was doomed to defeat. Other reform voters embraced the Socialist candidate, Eugene V. Debs, who captured 900,000 votes—6 percent of the total. Taft played little role in the campaign. “I might as well give up as far as being a candidate,” he lamented. “There are so many people in the country who don’t like me.”

Wilson won an easy electoral college victory, though he received only 42 percent of the popular vote and fewer popular votes than Bryan had won in any of his three campaigns (see Map 21–3). Roosevelt came in second, Taft

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**Map 21–3 The Election of 1912**
The split within the Republican Party enabled Woodrow Wilson to carry most states and become president even though he won only a minority of the popular vote.
The Need for Woman Suffrage

The movement for woman suffrage was one of the most important components of progressivism, and it gained increasing numbers of adherents, who created new organizations, adopted new tactics, and crafted new arguments for the reform. The task remained the same: persuading first legislative committees and then electorates to approve a fundamental change in the political system. In 1912 Caroline A. Lowe, of Kansas City, Missouri, delivered the following remarks to a hearing of a joint committee formed by the Judiciary Committee and the Woman Suffrage Committee of the U.S. Senate.

Gentlemen of the committee, it is as a wage earner and on behalf of the 7,000,000 wage-earning women in the United States that I wish to speak.

I entered the ranks of the wage earners when 18 years of age. Since then I have earned every cent of the cost of my own maintenance, and for several years was a poten ter in the support of my widowed mother.

The need of the ballot for the wage-earning women is a vital one. No plea can be made that we have the protection of the home or are represented by our fathers and brothers. We need the ballot that we may broaden our horizon and assume our share in the solution of the problems that seriously affect our daily lives....

We need the ballot for the purpose of self-protection.... Does the young woman cashier in Marshall Field's need any voice in making the law that sets the hours of labor that shall constitute a day's work?.... Has the young woman whose scalp was torn from her head at the Lawrence mill any need of a law demanding that safety appliances be placed upon all dangerous machinery? And what of the working girls who, through unemployment, are denied the opportunity to sell the labor of their hands and are driven to the sale of their virtue?

....We wage earners know it to be almost universal that the men in the industries receive twice the wage granted to us, although we may be doing the same work and should have the same pay. We women work side by side with our brothers. We are children of the same parents, reared in the same homes, educated in the same schools, ride to and fro on the same early morning and late evening streetcars, work together the same number of hours in the same shops, and we have equal need of food, clothing, and shelter. But at 21 years of age our brothers are given a powerful weapon for self-defense, a larger means for growth and self-expression.

We working women, even because we are women and find our sex not a source of strength but a source of weakness and offering a greater opportunity for exploitation, are denied this weapon.

Gentlemen of the committee, is there any justice underlying such a condition? If our brother workingmen are granted the ballot with which to protect themselves, do you not think that the working women should be granted this same right?

What of the working girl and her employer? Why is the ballot given to him while it is denied to us? Is it for the protection of his property, that he may have a voice in the governing of his wealth, of his stocks and bonds and merchandise?

The wealth of the working woman is of far greater value to the State. From nature's raw products the working class can readily replace all of the material wealth owned by the employing class, but the wealth of the working woman is the wealth of flesh and blood, of all her physical, mental, and spiritual powers. It is the wealth, not only of today, but that of future generations, that is being bartered away so cheaply. Have we no right to a voice in the disposal of our wealth, the greatest wealth that the world possesses—the priceless wealth of its womanhood?

Is it not the cruelest injustice that the man whose material wealth is a source of strength and protection to him and of power over us should be given the additional advantage of an even greater weapon which he can use to perpetuate our condition of helpless subjection?
... Mr. Chairman and gentlemen of the committee, the time is ripe for the extension of the franchise to women. We do not come before you to beg you to grant us a favor; we come presenting to you a glorious opportunity to place yourselves abreast of the current of this great evolutionary movement. You can refuse to accept this opportunity, and you may, for a moment, delay the movement, but only as the old woman who, with her tiny broom, endeavored to sweep back the incoming tide from the sea.

If today, taking your places as men of affairs in the world's progress, you step out in unison with the eternal upward trend toward true democracy, you will support the suffrage amendment now before your committee.


implementing the New Freedom

As president, Wilson built on Roosevelt's precedent to strengthen executive authority. He proposed a full legislative program and worked forcefully to secure its approval. He held regular conferences with Democratic leaders and had a private telephone line installed between the Capitol and the White House to keep tabs on congressional actions. When necessary, he appealed to the public for support, ruthlessly used patronage, or compromised with conservatives. With such methods and a solid Democratic majority, Wilson gained approval of important laws.

Wilson turned first to the traditional Democratic goal of reducing the high protective tariff, the symbol of special privileges for industry. He forced through the Underwood-Simmons Tariff Act of 1913, the first substantial reduction in duties since before the Civil War. The act also levied the first income tax under the recently ratified Sixteenth Amendment. Conservatives condemned the “revolutionary” tax, but it was designed simply to compensate for lower tariff rates. The top tax rate paid by the wealthiest was a mere 7 percent.

Wilson next reformed the nation's banking and currency system, which was inadequate for a modernizing economy. A panic in 1907 and a subsequent congressional investigation had dramatized the need for a more flexible and decentralized financial system. Wilson skillfully maneuvered a compromise measure through Congress, balancing the demands of agrarian progressives for government control with the bankers' desires for private control. The Federal Reserve Act of 1913 created 12 regional Federal Reserve banks that, although privately controlled, were to be supervised by the Federal Reserve Board, appointed by the president. The law also provided for a flexible national currency and improved access to credit. Serious problems remained, but the new system promoted the progressive goals of order and efficiency and fulfilled Wilson's New Freedom principle of introducing limited government regulation while preserving private business control.

Wilson's third objective was new legislation to break up monopolies. Initially, he supported the Clayton antitrust bill, which prohibited unfair trade practices and sharply restricted holding companies. But when business leaders and other progressives strenuously objected, Wilson reversed himself. Opting for continuous federal regulation rather than for the dissolution of trusts, Wilson endorsed the creation of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to oversee business activity and prevent illegal restrictions on competition.

The Federal Trade Commission Act of 1914 dismayed many of Wilson's early supporters because it embraced the New Nationalism's emphasis on positive regulation. Roosevelt's 1912 platform had proposed a federal trade commission; Wilson now accepted what he had earlier denounced as a partnership between trusts and the government that the trusts would dominate. Indeed, Wilson's conservative appointments to the FTC ensured that the agency would not seriously interfere with business, and by the 1920s, the FTC had become virtually a junior partner of the business community.

The fate of the Clayton antitrust bill after Wilson withdrew his support reflected his new attitude toward big business. Congressional conservatives gutted the bill with crippling amendments before permitting it to become law in 1914. As one senator complained, "When the Clayton bill was first written, it was a raging lion with a mouth full of teeth. It has degenerated to a tabby cat with soft gums, a plaintive meow, and an anemic appearance. It is a sort of legislative apology to the trusts, delivered hat in hand, and accompanied by assurances that no discourtesy is intended."

These measures indicate the limited nature of Wilson's vision of reform. In fact, he now announced that no further reforms were necessary—astonishing many progressives whose objectives had been completely ignored. Wilson refused to support woman suffrage and helped kill legislation
The Expansion of Reform

Wilson had won in 1912 only because the Republicans had split. By 1916, Roosevelt had returned to the GOP, and Wilson realized that he had to attract some of TR's former followers. Wilson therefore abandoned his opposition to social and economic reforms and promoted measures he had previously condemned. But he had also grown in the White House and now recognized that some problems could be resolved only by positive federal action.

To assist farmers, Wilson in 1916 convinced Congress to pass the Federal Farm Loan Act. This law, which Wilson himself had earlier rejected twice, provided farmers with federally financed long-term agricultural credits. The Warehouse Act of 1916 improved short-term agricultural credit. The Highway Act of 1916 provided funds to construct and improve rural roads through the adoption of the dollar-matching principle by which the federal government would expand its power over state activities in the twentieth century.

Wilson and the Democratic Congress also reached out to labor. Wilson signed the Keating-Owen Act prohibiting the interstate shipment of products made by child labor. In 1902, Wilson had denounced Roosevelt's intervention in the coal strike, but in 1916 he broke a labor-management impasse and averted a railroad strike by helping pass the Adamson Act establishing an eight-hour day for railroad workers. Wilson also pushed the Kern-McGillcuddy Act, which achieved the progressive goal of a workers' compensation system for federal employees. Together, these laws marked an important advance toward government regulation of the labor market.

Wilson also promoted activist government when he nominated Louis Brandeis to the Supreme Court. Known as "the people's lawyer," Brandeis had successfully defended protective labor legislation before the conservative judiciary. The nomination outraged conservatives, including William Howard Taft and the American Bar Association. Brandeis was the first Jew nominated to the Court, and anti-Semitism motivated some of his opponents. Wilson overcame a vicious campaign against Brandeis and secured his confirmation.

By these actions, Wilson brought progressivism to a culmination of sorts and consolidated reformers behind him for a second term. Less than a decade earlier, Wilson the private citizen had assailed government regulation and abolishing child labor and expanding credits to farmers. He demonstrated his indifference to issues of social justice by supporting the introduction of racial segregation within the government itself. Government offices, shops, restrooms, and restaurants were all segregated; employees who complained were fired. Federal officials in the South discharged black employees. One Georgia official promised that there would be no more government jobs for African Americans: "A Negro's place is in the cornfield."
The Environmental Movement

Many of the issues that concern environmentalists today were first raised by the conservationists and preservationists of the Progressive Era. Led by Theodore Roosevelt, conservationists favored the planned and regulated management of America's natural resources for the public benefit. In contrast, preservationists—like John Muir, who founded the Sierra Club in 1892—sought to protect wilderness from any development whatsoever. Opposing both were those who championed the uncontrolled development of public lands.

Decades later, public concern over polluted rivers, oil spills, and urban smog gave birth to the environmental movement, which drew on the legacy of both the conservation and preservation movements but had wider interests and broader support than either. Beginning in the 1970s, Congress passed laws to protect endangered species, reduce pollution, limit the use of pesticides, and control hazardous waste. The Environmental Protection Agency became the largest federal regulatory agency.

Again, however, as during the Progressive Era, efforts to protect the environment encountered opposition from proponents of unrestricted development, especially in the West. In the Sagebrush Rebellion in the 1980s, some westerners condemned “outside” federal regulation and tried to seize control of public lands for private exploitation. One oil company dismissed catastrophic oil spills as merely “Mother Earth letting some oil come out.” And four Republican presidents from the West—Californians Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan and Texans George Bush and George W. Bush, all closely tied to oil and real estate interests—sought in varying degrees to curtail environmental policies, agencies, and budgets, even to deny the existence of global warming, and to oppose environmental protection as inconsistent with economic growth. This repudiation of Theodore Roosevelt’s conservationism reflected the shift of the party’s base to the sunbelt. As one presidential adviser said, “Conservation is not in the Republican ethic.”

Congress, the courts, and the public, however, generally resisted efforts to weaken environmental policy. Debate is sure to continue over the cost and effectiveness of specific policies, but Americans are increasingly inclined to stand with Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir in looking to the federal government for effective action to resolve environmental problems.

How do differing economic and political attitudes underlie the conflicting stances of Americans toward environmental issues?

Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir here on a 1909 camping trip in Yosemite. They championed public responsibility for the nation's scenic and other natural resources.

From Then to Now Online


social legislation; by 1916, he had guided an unprecedented expansion of federal power. His own personal and political journey symbolized the development of progressivism.

Conclusion
In the early twentieth century, progressive reformers responded to the tensions of industrial and urban development by moving to change society and government. Rejecting the earlier emphasis on individualism and laissez-faire, they organized to promote social change and an interventionist state. Programs and laws to protect women, children, and injured workers testified to their compassion; the creation of new agencies and political techniques indicated their interest in order and efficiency; campaigns to end corruption, whether perceived in urban political machines, corporate influence, drunkenness, or “inferior” immigrants, illustrated their self-assured vision of the public good.

Progressivism had its ironies and paradoxes. It called for democratic reforms—and did achieve woman suffrage, direct legislation, and popular election of senators—but helped disfranchise black southerners and northern immigrants. It advocated social justice but often enforced social control. It demanded responsive government but helped create bureaucracies largely removed from popular control. It endorsed the regulation of business in the public interest but forged regulatory laws and commissions that tended to aid business. Some of these seeming contradictions reflected the persistence of traditional attitudes and the need to accommodate conservative opponents; others revealed the progressives’ own limitations in vision, concern, or nerve.

Nonetheless, both the successes and the failures of progressivism revealed that the nature of politics and government had changed significantly. Americans had come to accept that government action could resolve social and economic problems, and the role and power of government expanded accordingly. The emergence of an activist presidency, capable of developing programs, mobilizing public opinion, directing Congress, and taking forceful action, epitomized this key development.

These important features would be crucial when the nation fought World War I, which brought new challenges and dangers to the United States. The Great War would expose many of the limitations of progressivism and the naïveté of the progressives’ optimism.

Review Questions
1. How and why did the presidency change during the Progressive Era?
2. How did the progressive concern for efficiency affect social reform efforts, public education, government administration, and rural life?
3. How and why did the relationship between business and government change during this time?
4. Why did social reform and social control often intermingle in the Progressive Era? Can such objectives be separate?
5. What factors, old and new, stimulated the reform movements of progressivism?
6. How did the role of women change during the Progressive Era? How did the changes affect progressivism?
7. Why did the demand for woman suffrage provoke such determined support and such bitter opposition?

Key Terms
Australian ballot (p. 614)
Bureau of Reclamation (p. 617)
Conservation (p. 617)
Eighteenth Amendment (p. 611)
Federal Reserve Act (p. 622)
Federal Trade Commission (FTC) (p. 622)
Fundamentalists (p. 604)
Initiative (p. 615)
Muckraking (p. 602)
New Freedom (p. 620)
New Nationalism (p. 620)
Niagara Movement (p. 612)
Nineteenth Amendment (p. 613)
Preservation (p. 617)
Progressive Era (p. 598)
Prohibition (p. 611)
Recall (p. 615)
Referendum (p. 615)
Seventeenth Amendment (p. 615)
Sixteenth Amendment (p. 619)
Social Gospel movement (p. 601)
Underwood-Simmons Tariff Act (p. 622)
Wobblies (p. 603)